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My Magical Career at Court:
Living the Dream After My Nightmare Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild!


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My Magical Career at Court: Living the Dream After My Nightmare Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild! Volume 1 [Complete]

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I believe in you, my beloved magic.

Prologue: An Unexpected Dismissal

"Noelle Springfield, we don't need a good-for-nothing like you at our workshop. *You're fired*."

Everything turned white before me.

I should do something...but I can't make the words come out.

How could this have happened?

We were at the height of an obvious staff shortage, and I had been working my fingers to the bone. How many days had I worked without a single holiday? Somewhere in the three-figure range by now. There was no way I could count all the days that had gone by.

I'd done a dizzying amount of overtime hours, and still hadn't been paid for any of it—plus the pay was as low as it could possibly get. I'd watched as one coworker after another worked themselves sick, then left the job with all signs of life drained from their eyes. Still, I'd stuck with it, knowing there were barely any magic-related jobs in the countryside.

I've adored magic since I was a child. It was my dream to get a job working with magic.

For me, the Mages' Guild was my precious place of work, something I could never bear to lose. That's why I worked twice—no, three times as hard as everyone else, trying my very best to have my efforts recognized. And yet all I got was the following: "Good grief. To think that in three years of working here, the only things you've managed to produce are crystal balls anyone could make! You should consider how I feel, having such a waste of space working here."

"I know how to make more complicated things too, if you'll just give me the chance. I can do it," I protested.

"No way," the guild chief spat. "After all, women can't make proper magical items."

Women working with magic had become more of a norm in the royal capital, but the fact was, rural areas were still stuck in the past. Those old ways of thinking were particularly deep-rooted in the western region, where I lived.

“You even lied about graduating from a prestigious academy of magic in the capital. What a disgrace.”

“That wasn’t a lie! I really did—”

“You’re still trying to fool us? Big talk from somebody so incompetent,” said the guild chief, beginning to smirk sadistically. “You’re talentless. Quit magic and find a different job.”

“Living sure isn’t easy...”

A few days after I was kicked out of the workshop, I was at an employment agency staring at job advertisements. I breathed a sigh.

I don’t care what horrible terms I have to accept. I just want a job where I can use magic.

But having started looking for employment, I was faced with a stark reality: there were hardly any magic-related jobs available in a remote frontier town like mine.

Holding onto the tiniest sliver of hope, I pleaded with an old man from the Potion Brewers’ Guild to be allowed a job interview. He gave me an apologetic look.

“No good. The mayor’s son says he’ll stop us from working in this town if we hire you,” he said.

Of course, the mayor’s son was the very same person who’d fired me.

The chief of the Mages’ Guild failed his test at the local academy of magic back in the day. I’d been too clueless to realize it, but I suppose somebody like me—a girl insisting to have graduated from a prestigious academy—was in his bad books from day one. It was no wonder that he always refused to give me anything besides chores and simple tasks.

Even now, he was using his position to prevent others from giving me any

kind of magic-related job in this town.

Why would he go out of his way to do that? Life is cruel... The world is cruel!

I decided to drown out my aimless misery with a ton of food. I went to a place run by the town's Adventurers' Guild called Big Belly Cafeteria, a site where droves of glutton come in search of glory.

As I passed under the curtain into the cafeteria, I was greeted with, "Welcome, young lady. What'll it be?"

"One Big Belly Meal, please."

"Coming right up."

The chef skilfully began to cook while customers gossiped about me at a nearby table.

"Wow, that girl's dead meat," I heard one of them say.

"Does that kid really think she can fit a Big Belly Meal into that tiny body?"

Kid? I'll have you know I've been a fully-fledged adult for three years, and I graduated from an academy of magic!

Well, I am *short, but I don't want people seeing me as a kid, and that's why I'm wearing four layers of padding on my chest!*

Damn it. You all think you can say whatever you want, huh? Just you watch...

Twenty minutes later, I'd cleaned my plate of every last morsel. The other customers stared at me in astonishment.

"No way..."

"That girl's stomach is something else..."

Heh. You see that?

Back when I was a student, I defeated an older boy—the captain of a sports club—to claim the title of biggest eater in the academy. When it came to appetite, there probably wasn't anyone who could rival me.

The customers' surprised reactions helped clear my head. Just then I heard a chuckle from behind me.

“You haven’t changed at all.”

I turned around at the familiar voice, and once I saw who it was, I couldn’t help myself breaking into a smile. “Luke!”

“It’s been a while, Noelle.”

The person behind me was Luke Waldstein—my dear old friend, the one who was by my side at the academy. And here he was at long last.

Chapter 1: A Reunion with a Friend, and a Surprise Request

I met Luke nine years earlier.

I first saw him at the magic academy's entrance ceremony. I was there, ready to begin six years of study.

Luke, the highest-scoring candidate in the entrance exam and now the representative for the new students, spoke from the stage. With his serious air, it was hard to imagine that he and I were both twelve years old.

"As we are all fortunate enough to have been accepted into this academy, with all of its history and traditions..."

He was the eldest son of Duke Waldstein and altogether an ideal, faultless model student. He wasn't the kind of person a commoner like me would expect to associate with.

But right after our first test, I saw a side of him I never could have imagined.

"What on earth have you done? To think that a commoner like you could best me!" he yelled at me, having brought me behind the schoolhouse. This was not the same boy I'd seen before.

The real Luke Waldstein was a sore loser with a terrible attitude who used his image as a model student to disguise his arrogance. That was just who he was.

Meanwhile, in those days I had no sense of etiquette.

"Oh, so you think I'm just a commoner? My mom raised me all by herself and worked like crazy so I could come here! I'm proud of my family! I don't give a damn if you're a duke's kid or whatever. I'll wipe the floor with you a hundred—no, a thousand times over!"

I strived to put everything into my studies so that I really could outclass him. I already loved magic, and even if I didn't, I would've been studying all day every day, but I started to really feel motivated to work hard.

Luke Waldstein was a formidable opponent. Our battle of wits continued, each of us taking turns with every test to get the best marks. I couldn't stand that conceited posh boy!

It was around our third year when our relationship began to change.

I approached him when I was struggling. "Hey, you're the last person I'd want to ask for help, but there's something here I just can't figure out."

Luke took an impatient tone, but he gave me a thorough explanation all the same. "Didn't I tell you to remember it properly the first time? It's been five times now."

That was when I realized he loved magic too.

I saw more than an arrogant guy. Inside of him was also a good-natured type who couldn't turn down a request for help.

Oh, I guess he's not so bad, I thought.

Thanks to our shared interest in magic, after that we became friends in no time at all. We studied together in the library every day, and any time a test rolled around, we battled it out to the best of our ability.

Looking back on it, those really were the days.

After graduating, I returned to my hometown to care for my unwell mother. I'd heard that Luke made it through a gruelling exam to become a royal court magician.

He looked like he'd really done well for himself in the three years since we had last met.

"You've really grown up, Luke. It's strange to think you used to be that snarky little kid."

"Look who's talking."

I'd missed the way we bantered, and his exasperated expression too.

"Well, I guess I had to get knocked down a few pegs before I could grow up," he said.

"Oh, really? I guess things were tough. Royal court magicians are all big shots,

after all.”

“Well, I haven’t actually tasted defeat since graduation.”

“Still a sore loser, huh?”

“I’m not making it up. It’s the truth,” Luke protested.

Some things never change, I thought, feeling pleased.

He turned serious. “So, how has your mother been?”

“Oh, well, she...” I trailed off as I cast my eyes downward.

“Oh no.”

“Wait, it isn’t like that!” I blurted, waving my hand. “It’s the opposite actually. She’s doing *so* well now. It’s like being on the verge of death made her unlock a powerful new form. She comes to me every day trying to set me up with somebody. It’s a bit of a pain really.”

I really wanted to focus on magic, not romance or marriage, but my mother had other ideas. “Your job isn’t working out. You need to find somebody to marry!” she said day after day. Even at home I couldn’t relax.

Out in the countryside, most people got married around 15, so I was really pushing it...

But then again, being around magic was all I needed to be happy, so it wasn’t like I was wishing I were married.

“Then it’s really lucky that I came here as fast as I could,” Luke muttered.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“It’s nothing,” Luke said, shaking his head. “By the way, I don’t suppose you heard about the prodigy who became the youngest magician to ever be promoted to the adamantite class?”

“Ah, only vaguely. I’ve been too busy. I heard that it was the talk of the town in the capital.”

“That’s good. In that case, I can keep this short.” Luke nodded and continued. “See, that prodigy was me.”

“Luke, I get that you want to look like a big shot, but you’ll just eat your words in the long run. Don’t lie.”

Saying nothing, Luke shot me a cold look. He pulled a pocket watch out from his coat pocket and placed it on the table.

“What’s that?”

“We’re given a gold watch like this to prove that we’re court magicians. See how it’s inlaid with adamantite? And take a look at the name engraved on the back.”

“Luke Waldstein... No way.”

“I wouldn’t tell such a ridiculous lie,” he said simply.

I was befuddled. “No... No, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

The court magician everyone was talking about in the capital was my old friend.

This was the type of situation where I should probably have offered congratulations. So why couldn’t I really bring myself to smile?

“That’s amazing. Congrats.”

“What’s wrong?” Luke asked.

“Huh?”

“You’ve got this look on your face. You’re an open book,” he said, looking at me seriously. “Tell me.”

I wanted to play it off like there was no problem, but the words just wouldn’t come out.

I stared at the grain of the wooden table. I could hear my heart cry out. I already knew that if I lied, it would just make matters worse.

Accepting that, I decided to tell him everything. “Well, my job didn’t work out so great.”

I told Luke about how I’d been made to do chores and work that anybody could do—every day without a single holiday. How I’d been treated like I was useless, and then fired. How I wanted to work with magic, but there was

nowhere in this town that I could get a job.

“I can’t help comparing the two of us, and I’m so jealous of what you have. Sorry you have to put up with someone like me.”

“It’s fine. With all you’ve been through, that’s valid. But hearing about somebody so clueless of your skills sends me straight past surprise into murderous rage.”

“Thanks for saying that.”

“These aren’t empty words either. I’m telling you how I genuinely feel,” said Luke. “But just this once, I guess I feel grateful that he was that clueless.”

“Why?”

“When you reach the adamantite class, you get to nominate one person to work for you as an apprentice. There isn’t anybody I’d want to choose though. I can’t rely on anybody to have my back when I’m trying to become the greatest magician in all the land as quickly as possible.”

“You sure didn’t stop being a blowhard.”

I found myself appreciating yet again what an impressive opponent I used to compete with.

“With that in mind, I thought that if I must choose someone as an apprentice, then I want it to be the one person I’ve never been able to truly defeat.”

“Is there someone like that?”

“Yes. You.”

“Huh?” I responded, bewildered.

“I never did really beat you, so I want your aid in helping me in becoming this country’s greatest magician.”

There was no way I could ever have expected such an invitation.

Luke went into the details of the terms of employment while I listened in stunned amazement.

“The pay should be something like this,” he explained.

“C-Can I really make that much?”

“You’re guaranteed two days off every week, and you get thirty days of paid leave per year.”

“What? I thought paid leave was an urban legend...”

“Oh, and you can use the royal court’s Grand Library as much as you like.”

“I can?!”

That was one way to get my attention. Entering the royal court’s Grand Library, open only to a select few, was the dream of anybody with a passion for magic.

I’d heard about the library’s vast collection. It was full of books not widely published, from the grimoires of the great sages of antiquity to the prophetic writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I thought I’d go my whole life without ever making it there!

“What do you say?” Luke asked. “I don’t think the conditions are so bad.”

“Uh, y-yeah. It sounds too good to be true.”

I felt like I was dreaming. The full reality of the situation just wasn’t sinking in.

But what warmed me inside most of all was the joy I felt at being wanted.

“We don’t need a good-for-nothing like you.”

“Regrettably, we have decided not to move forward with your application at this time.”

“Sorry, the mayor’s son won’t like us hiring you.”

Wherever I went, I was unneeded. All of these rejections made me doubt my value as a magician.

I was like the dog nobody wanted to buy, forlornly curled up in a corner, but now I had been chosen.

It made me happier than I could describe. Luke probably wouldn’t understand.

“Thank you so much for the invitation,” I said. “I’ll do whatever I can. Just say

the word.”

“All I need is for you to do what you always do. You’re someone I can count on.”

In any case, if I was to work as a royal court magician, that would mean moving to the capital.

When I first brought up the idea of moving, my mother was opposed to the idea, but she changed her tune as soon as she laid eyes on Luke coming to introduce himself.

“Is he really a royal court magician...? And he’s the one they say was the youngest ever to be promoted?” She paused, staring at him vacantly, before turning to me. “Noelle, come here for a second.”

“What is it, Mom?”

“What’s your relationship to this young man?”

“We were friends at the academy.”

“Great! This is your golden opportunity!” she whispered excitedly, just quietly enough that Luke couldn’t hear. “You have a chance to marry into money! Your future is secured! This is the happy ending for your life!”

“No, that isn’t possible. He’s the son of a duke, you know. He can’t marry a commoner like me.”

“Social rules are nothing compared to the power of love!”

“Hold on, hold on! We’re only friends.”

We had spent so much time together, but now that I thought about it, I’d never so much as considered seeing Luke in a romantic way. The other girls were always swooning over him, considering his pleasant, princely appearance and model student status, but not me.

Despite all of that, I couldn’t remember him ever going out with anyone.

Could he have had his eye on someone?

“This is perfect! You have to make him yours!”

I gave some noncommittal answer to get her off my back—not that I thought

there was any chance that I would have that kind of relationship with Luke.

My immediate focus was on working hard at magic to be able to make a living doing what I love.

Still, if it meant that my mother would agree to move to the capital, then that was an advantage in some way at least.

Luke arranged for a horse-drawn carriage to take us to the capital.

The townspeople were speechless when they saw Luke's family's luxurious carriage.

"My daughter is friends with the son of a duke," my mother bragged nonstop as people looked on in amazement. "He called on her to become a court magician. Not that it's a big deal or anything, tee hee!"

Surprised as they were, the townspeople were quite pleased.

Even the guild chief stood frozen, staring slack-jawed as the carriage went by.

Over the next few days, we moved into rented accommodations in the capital thanks to a referral from Luke.

At last, my first day of work as a royal court magician arrived.

"You need to win his heart, you understand?" my mother stressed upon me. "And if you can't persuade him, you need to overwhelm him! Love is war, you know?"

"Yeah, I told you it's not like that," I answered, letting her words go in one ear and out the other as I left the house.

After a twenty-minute walk, the royal palace came into view. Its utter splendor left me at a loss for words.

The garden was so huge, it was like an entire fenced-in neighborhood. A verdant lawn stretched out over one side of the garden, glittering in the sunlight, while golden statues of goddesses danced in fountains the size of lakes.

Wh-What is this place I've walked in on? Am I really allowed to work here?

"Excuse me," I said to a guard, feeling on edge. "This might seem hard to

believe, but apparently I'm supposed to be working here, but if I should leave, that's okay..."

"Do you have any proof of your employment?"

"I was told to show you this letter."

"I... I see!" the guard said, looking at the letter in shock. "You're the one. Go in and you'll find the training ground for the royal court magicians' division on your right. Master Marius and Master Luke will be waiting for you."

"Oh... Thank you."

I was allowed in, but that didn't calm me at all. I headed for the place the guard told me about.

The training ground was full of state-of-the-art equipment. Luke and a man with white hair were waiting there.

"Hmm, is this her?" the man asked. He appeared to be about fifty years old and was wearing a white robe. He gave me an appraising look.

"Good morning! It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance!" I greeted them enthusiastically, eager to start a good relationship with my superiors at work.

However, my bow was met with silence. The white-haired man simply stared at me with cold eyes.

Huh? Did that not go over well? I thought, perplexed.

Luke chuckled. "Morning. This is Marius, chief of HR. He's very particular, and apparently he wasn't too pleased that I invited you."

"Is that so strange? While I recognize your authority as an adamantite-class court magician, hiring an outsider with no qualifications is unheard of. And to suddenly select her as your apprentice is beyond imagination." Marius took an all-business tone. "If you can't demonstrate that your ability meets our expectations, I simply cannot allow you to work here."

What? What did he just say?

I was frozen for a moment before turning to Luke. "Does this mean that if I can't prove myself right now, I can't be a royal court magician?"

“Seems that way. But hey, it should be easy enough for you, right?”

“Easy enough?! You should’ve told me sooner!”

You said I’d get in without having to take any exams! I’m totally unprepared!

Seeing me in a panic, Luke covered his smile.

“This will be a test of your magical proficiency,” he said. “See the big wall there? It’s made from the same material as a measurement orb, and it calculates your power as a magician. Break a hole in that wall, and you pass. Simple, right?”

“It doesn’t sound simple *at all*.”

Even at a distance, I could see that the vast wall was tremendously hard.

You’d have to be an incredible magician to break a hole in that wall...

“If you want to be a royal court magician, you have to be able to do that much, right?” Luke said.

“Yeah...” I said, resigning myself to taking the test.

Only a handful of magicians in the kingdom get to be royal court magicians. The few who are hailed as geniuses put in their utmost effort to eventually reach this position.

Of course there will be huge obstacles to overcome. Maybe clearing this hurdle really is too hard for somebody like me who was worthless in a border town.

“A good-for-nothing like you could never—”

It was time to be free of my doubts.

I used the spell Multicast to maximise my magical power with Enhance and Mana Boost. I then simultaneously cast Spell Boost and Mana Charge, focused, and established my magic sequence.

Some people might think I can’t do it—actually, most people probably think that—but I want to believe. I want to believe I have the ability.

I’ve had to work constantly, and I’ve had no time for myself. I sacrificed sleep to have more time for studying magic.

I love magic more than anything.

Nobody can take the power of that love away from me, the love that grew more and more over time.

I want to believe in the time that I spent.

I want to believe it wasn't all for nothing.

I want to believe it meant something.

I can do this. I can absolutely do this.

I had no fear.

In my heart, I was calm.

Now, my beloved.

"Wind Blast!"

The next moment, a great cannonball of compressed wind erupted forth.



The world shook before my eyes. The ground beneath me shuddered.

I heard a roar like the earth itself was groaning as a powerful rush of wind

pelted my entire body. I instinctively shut my eyes, fear taking hold of me.

I don't think I slipped up. I'm pretty sure I managed to show what I'm capable of.

And that was precisely why I was afraid.

I was afraid that it wasn't enough.

God, please...

Cautiously, I opened my eyes.

Dust filled the air like a thick fog. The haze hung in the space between me and the wall, hiding it from view. The dust thinned out as the wind slowly blew it away, bit by bit.

Praying, I stared forward, and there it was: a hole in the wall, with training ground equipment peeking through from the other side.

"I did it!"

I really did it!

As I fully absorbed the happiness of the moment, I heard Luke's familiar chuckle.

"I'm amazed that you really broke it."

Huh? You mean you thought I was gonna flunk this? Then what was all that "It should be easy enough for you" nonsense?! I was so pleased to hear someone had faith in me too!

"So you didn't really think I could do it," I grumbled.

"Sorry about that. But see, I just didn't think you'd be able to blow a hole in a wall that most royal court magicians can't so much as leave a scratch on."

"Wha—" I turned to Marius in disbelief. Seeing him staring in amazement at the wall, I began to piece it all together. "Does that mean I could've passed the test without breaking it?"

"Yeah," Luke said. "It's a piece of equipment that scores you on your magical

ability, and you just have to reach the minimum passing mark. But you broke it."

"S-So is that a bad thing?"

"If nothing else, I expect everyone will be talking about this for the next week. Even the prince might know your name after this. From now on, you're a celebrity. Congratulations." Luke smirked at me.

I was totally at a loss. *The p-p-prince might know my name? What does that mean? Maybe I've made a huge mistake.*

"That's what I really hate about you, Luke."

"Well, you amuse me, and that's what I like about you," he laughed mischievously. "Anyway, since you're the one person I could never defeat, you would have to be good enough to do this. I'm pleased to have you on board as my apprentice, Noelle."

I held my head in my hands as the commotion of the assembled court magicians washed over me.

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In a remote town in the west of the kingdom, there was a mages' guild.

"You don't think there's any truth in the story that little liar girl is going to be a royal court magician?"

Work was over, and the guild chief was enjoying a drink at his home with the vice chief.

For these two, it was a daily occurrence to finish work early, spend the day's proceeds on expensive liquor, and drink it together. While they made the mages at the guild work late into the night, they'd leave early and put their feet up.

That was what the guild chief called efficiency. It was their right as the people in charge to do as they wished.

"Not a chance," the guild chief replied. "In three years of working here, that girl couldn't do anything harder than chores and making crystal balls. Anyway, what is the world coming to, with women thinking they can make a living from

magic? That's all I can say."

"You're quite right, sir. They don't understand a thing," the vice chief said, nodding. "But in that case, what was that carriage all about?"

"If we're just talking about hiring a nice carriage, any old pleb can manage that. I bet she was just trying to show off to get back at us."

"Of course. You're always so insightful. That makes sense."

"The fact of the matter is she's a talentless hack. She couldn't get another job around here, so she had no choice but to leave."

"Yes, she was always whining about the guild being pushed to its limits, saying they couldn't do all that work. And she would tell lies about using Heal and Spell Boost to get work done."

"There's no such thing as 'can't.' If we as mages give people like that an inch, they'll take a mile. Discipline is what really matters. Force them to work until they *can* do it, and they'll learn to stop thinking they can't."

"A wonderful policy, sir. And as a result, we've recorded record profits this month. We've made more than anybody else in the western region. Starting next month, that marquis who loves our crystal balls will be doing business with us too. We'll be busier than ever. Have you thought about hiring more staff?"

"No need. All that happened in letting that woman go was us losing deadweight. Business will move on as normal. If the staff can't do it, we'll just work them until they can. Low cost, high profits: that's the way to do business."

"You're absolutely right, sir."

The two men exchanged laughs as they sipped on premium liquor that no commoner could ever afford. They had no doubt in their minds that they were among life's winners, but there was something they had failed to realize.

They didn't know that the recently dismissed guild worker had been telling the truth all along.

The guild chief had kicked her out, believing her to be useless. In reality, she'd been aiding her colleagues with her magic, taking on a huge volume of work, and carrying the entire organization on her shoulders.

They didn’t know they had her to thank for their profit margin being so high compared to other mages’ guilds. Slowly but surely, the warning signs of bankruptcy were rearing their heads, but they had no clue.

Still blissfully unaware, they drank together until dawn.

Chapter 2: The Little Rookie Magician

The Kingdom of Ardenfeld, next to a wild frontier land inhabited by monsters, was known for some of the most advanced magic in the entire western continent. Its educational institutions for magic were among the best in the world.

More than ten percent of the population—several million people—used common or low-level magic in their normal lives. However, only around one in a hundred people became magicians and used magic professionally.

Even then, only a select few prodigies and elites could join the royal court magicians' division, where the barrier to entry was the highest in the world.

The passing rate for the entrance exam was well below one percent. It was the dream workplace for every magician.

I'd dreamed of it too, ever since I was a child.

I could remember writing "I'm gonna be a royal court magician!" in my elementary school yearbook. Such a position had seemed so distant, like the brightest stars in the sky. I'd wanted to get closer, to reach out and touch it.

Now that I was among those brightest stars, receiving a pocket watch with my name engraved on its surface, I couldn't stop myself from beaming.

"Wow! It's real!" I cried. "Look, Luke, it's really real!"

"Of course it's real. Nobody's going to give you a fake."

I could hardly believe this was my own pocket watch, a sign of identification that I was a royal court magician.

"I've always dreamed of holding this in my hands. I can't believe this day has really come!"

I never thought I'd achieve my old dream, but here I am!

Luke watched me lovingly clutch the porcelain-inlaid watch tight to my chest.

"Aren't you a bit overexcited, considering it's only porcelain?"

“*Only* porcelain? This is something only people with great ability—”

“Never mind ability. I’m talking about understanding where you are. Just because you’ve come this far doesn’t mean you should feel satisfied. What comes next is the real challenge.”

“I mean, yeah, but...”

There were ten ranks of court magician:

First rank: Magus

Second rank: Adamantite class

Third rank: Mithril class

Fourth rank: Gold class

Fifth rank: Silver class

Sixth rank: Bronze class

Seventh rank: Ruby class

Eighth rank: Emerald class

Ninth rank: Obsidian class

Tenth rank: Porcelain class

As your rank increased, so did your pay and seniority within the organization. I was of the lowest rank, so of course I had farther to go. It was precisely that ambitious mentality that enabled Luke to rise so quickly through the ranks.

“It really is incredible that you’re the youngest-ever adamantite-class magician.”

“That’s not all—I have my sights set on the top rank. I want to set a new record.”

“Where did that confidence come from?”

“I’m not sure if it’s confidence so much as it’s perfectionism. I won’t let anybody stop me.”

“You take it that far, huh?”

Only seven magicians in the entire kingdom currently possessed the rank of magus.

As the highest position in the world of magic, that rank guaranteed a place in the history books. Luke’s ambition knew no bounds.

I trembled in fear once again, seeing how much my old friend had grown. Luke grinned at me.

“Anyway, you’re here as my apprentice. That means you can’t be satisfied with porcelain class. Got it?”

He was right. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work as an adamantite-class magician’s apprentice.

“I’ll give it m-my best shot,” I said.

“Well, I think it should be easy enough for you anyway.”

“That is so not true.”

“I know you better than you know yourself.”

You’re seriously saying that? Oh, Luke, I’m not so sure you really know anything at all. I’m just a lowly magician who couldn’t even make it at a mages’ guild in the sticks.

I mean, I did work and study quite a bit harder than most people, so I guess I kinda made it—or so I like to think.

“By the way, I was surprised to see you working at a mages’ guild,” Luke continued. “Wasn’t enchantment always the thing you were worst at?”

“Seriously... I was terrible at it! It was the only subject I ever failed...”

“I remember the teacher calling you ‘God of Destruction’ because you’d apply too much magic and blow the item to pieces.”

“I liked that, actually. That name made me sound tough.”

“You did?” Luke laughed. “Anyway, why did you take a job doing something you were so bad at?”

“I figured I’d develop more as a magician by focusing on my weaknesses. After going to a prestigious academy, I was the type to try and make myself stand out.”

I was into the idea that I would earn recognition for my hard work in the countryside. Wanting to contribute at least a little bit to my workplace, I would make suggestions for how to improve things, and I took on overdue tasks.

In hindsight, I don’t like to remember the way I would use buzzwords to make myself look smarter.

“But in the end,” I continued, “all I ever got to do was make low-grade magical items, my biggest weakness. All it takes for me to break them is a moment of distraction, so I was on edge all the time. But I got a lot of practice, so I think I’m not so bad at it anymore.”

“I see,” Luke replied in a hushed tone, with his hand in front of his mouth. “So that’s why that guild has been doing so well lately.”

“Hmm? Sorry, I couldn’t really hear you.”

“Don’t worry about it. In any case, I can see why your magical ability has improved since your student days.”

“You think so? It’s nice of you to say that.”

It was encouraging to hear, especially after doing nothing but tedious tasks that I was never good at over and over again. Then again, because I was forced into a position of being so busy, I got a lot better than before at support and healing magic.

People really change, huh.

When I first met Luke, he was sarcastic and would never compliment anybody. But now, his opinion of me was so high that it almost felt like I was being overappreciated. He had high expectations for me.

I supposed I had no confidence left after the world chewed me up and spat me out.

He commended me because he wanted me to be confident. Above all else, it was that concern for me that I appreciated. I didn’t want nothing but praise

anyway.

There was certainly no guarantee that I would succeed in the tough environment of the royal court magicians' division.

Even so, I had to have faith that I could do it.

I have to remember how I used to be unbeatable. I felt like I could fly! If Luke wants to be the kingdom's greatest magician, I need to be strong enough to keep up with him too. You can do it, Noelle!

As I unconsciously clenched my fist, I heard a voice.

"Hey, Luke, I've been looking for you. Oh, is that pipsqueak the newbie I've been hearing about?"

A large man was standing there. He wore the same uniform as Luke. His pocket watch dangled as he spoke, revealing its inlay of lapis lazuli: the stone of the magus.

"I never thought anyone other than me would break that wall in their entrance exam. Let's have ourselves a chat, little lady."

From a single glance, I knew that this man was out of the ordinary. His honed physique was like steel, and I could tell that his magical power was on an entirely different level from mine.

This was the first time I'd found myself face-to-face with such an elite magician, ranked far above any of my teachers at the academy. But even more importantly, I already recognized him and knew his name.

This man was Gawain Stark. As one of only seven magicians in the kingdom with the rank of magus, he was at the very apex of the magical community in Ardenfeld. So renowned was he for his mastery of fire-type magic, he was also known by another name: the Hellfire Magician.

I'm starstruck! The great magician I've admired for so long is standing right in front of me!

"E-Excuse me! C-Can I have your autograph?" I spluttered.

"Hmm? No problem. What would you like me to sign?"

Damn it!

I didn't have anything quite suitable. For a moment, I was all in a flutter. "Um, then, can you sign here on my uniform?"



“Stop that,” Luke said, seizing me by the scruff of the neck. “Do you think anybody has ever written on the robes of a royal court magician? And on your

first day too!”

“Lay off!” I objected. “If I miss this chance, I might never see him again.”

“You really love magic, don’t you?” Luke sighed in exasperation. “But he’s our boss. That means whether you like it or not, you’ll be seeing a lot more of him.”

“F-For real?”

That seemed obvious once Luke mentioned it, but it hadn’t sunk in yet. I couldn’t believe it.

I guess I’m really here—in this wonderful place.

“Looks like you’ve brought in another odd one, Luke,” Gawain said. “But still, I couldn’t help wondering what would happen when you said you were getting someone from outside to be your apprentice.”

“I told you, didn’t I?” Luke replied. “I said I was getting somebody I could never truly defeat.”

“Well, realistically I didn’t take that to mean someone this strong was really coming. I figured we already had the best people working here.”

“She can be a bit stupid and absent-minded.”

“Who’re you calling stupid?!” I shouted, getting defensive quickly.

I have beauty and brains! Not only am I a quick-witted intellectual, but I’m smoking hot too! Don’t you call me stupid!

“I get it,” Gawain said. “You must be good friends.”

“Indeed. For an untrusting person like me, she’s the only one I can really be myself around.”

What a thing to say with a straight face. Ugh. Ugh! Come on, you’re embarrassing me! I clutched at my face, straining from my internal discomfort.

Gawain ignored me, going on, “So, if she’s your apprentice, that must mean she’s part of my unit.”

“Correct. She’ll be in the third unit with me.”

“Then I suppose you won’t mind if I kick off the initiation.”

Huh? What's that?

Luke spotted my puzzled expression. "As you can see, he's a big, brash jock. He does this every time a rookie comes in. It's a hazing ritual they call the Baptism of Hell or the Sixty Seconds of Blood."

"What? I really *sincerely* don't like the sound of that."

"You have a magic duel with Captain Gawain. You pass if you can make it sixty seconds without being knocked out, and you win a prize too. Having said that, you'll be sad to hear that hardly anyone passes."

I heard a stir among some nearby court magicians who had overheard us talking.

"Hey, looks like Captain Gawain is gonna give the ol' Sixty Seconds of Blood to that newbie everyone's talking about."

"On her first day? She'll be traumatized."

"He's so cruel... Even if she is the monster who blew apart the wall, she's still a little runt."

"She looks like a child to me."

A child? A runt?!

"He'll really knock her down a few pegs to make sure she doesn't get overexcited."

"Just a few pegs? Against Gawain, she'll be obliterated without a trace left behind."

"Captain, stop! A day-one newbie doesn't stand a chance. She's gonna get slaughtered..."

Huh? Did they say he's going to kill me? Am I gonna die?

As I stood in silence, the other court magicians came over and surrounded me.

"It's all right, rookie. Don't be upset if you don't pass. Relax. He knocked lumps out of all of us too. Most people don't get past ten seconds."

"I didn't even make it to three! But that's just how it is. It's not worth losing

confidence over.”

“Right. It was cool when you busted open the wall. So whatever happens, there’s no need to feel bad. Don’t get upset.”

It sure doesn’t sound *all right. And we’re talking about me here—I couldn’t even make it at a mages’ guild in the sticks, and now I’m competing with Gawain, a magus, one of the best of the best...*

Am I really gonna die here?

As I stood there frozen, eyes wide in fright, Luke chuckled.

“Give it your best shot. I’ve got high hopes for you.”

Gawain brought me to a training ground, different from the one where I’d had my entrance exam. Naturally, my old academy couldn’t compare to the lavishly equipped facilities here at the heart of the nation’s magical world.

“Whoa, you’re really putting her through the wringer, Captain?” called one of the several robed court magicians who had gathered around the perimeter of the training ground.

“You’re pretty excited about this, huh? But it’s not really work, is it?”

“Let us have ten minutes! Think of it like a smoke break. Please just give us ten minutes to watch!”

As court nobles increasingly joined in too, my eyes began to water.

Why...? Are you that eager to see me beaten to a pulp?

In spite of my predicament, Luke seemed to be having a good time. *Damn you*, I thought bitterly, glaring his way.

All of a sudden, a question popped into my head. “Hey, Luke. You told me that hardly anyone passes, but how was it for you?”

“I passed. He treated me to an expensive steak as my reward.”

“I should’ve known the so-called prodigy passed...”

We’d competed side by side back in the day, but I felt rather inferior now, seeing how impressive he’d become.

“You don’t need to be so scared,” Luke said. “We used to have duels together all the time, right?”

“But that was when we were students. I haven’t had one since graduation.”

“That’s experience though, isn’t it? You don’t need to bite off more than you can chew; just put all of your current power into it.” He narrowed his sapphire eyes. “It’ll be fine. You can do this.”

He caught me by surprise.

I had let myself become all nervous again. What was I supposed to do if I expected to lose before even starting?

But Luke believed in me. That meant I needed to believe in myself. I could do this.

I...can do this.

Deep down I prayed as I entered the middle of the training ground and faced Gawain.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Then here we go!”

It was time for the Baptism of Hell.

“Flare Blast!”

Gawain moved too fast for me to see his ritual gesture. He deployed a summoning circle, and a ball of flames leaped from it like a meteorite.

In the blink of an eye, Gawain’s first assault was bearing down on me. Silently using Multicast like that was an extremely difficult technique for the average magician. I was faced with an intense fire-type spell, one that would result in an instant knockout if it so much as grazed me.

Just in the nick of time, I cast Magic Barrier.

“Ngh!” I grunted as I failed to completely block his attack. It blew me backwards.

Gawain immediately came in hot pursuit, letting off a series of fire attacks.

Never mind casting support magic; I barely had a moment to think. I worked with all my might to react just in time, narrowly avoiding his knockout hits.

Even so, the assault was so intense that it began to wear down my physical and magical strength. Like a leaf tossed about in a storm, I was helplessly forced backwards.

He and I were on totally different levels; he was far beyond me. It made perfect sense that most people failed this test. The thought of anyone coping with such frightening power for sixty seconds was madness.

“Spell Boost!” I shouted.

The fact that I could go on using support magic in the face of such a brutal assault was all because it had become my strong point thanks to that dreadful work environment. To meet deadlines, I would keep on using support magic even when I was totally worn out. That’s how it went, time and time again.

I was confident this magic sequence was something I could pull off perfectly even when I couldn’t tell what was going on, and that piqued his curiosity.

“Ohhh...?”

But I also knew that against someone as skilled as Gawain, my perseverance didn’t give me much of an advantage.

“Spell Boost!”

As his movements became faster, I cast more and more overlapping support spells.

“Enhance! Mana Boost! Mana Charge!”

We were both stacking the same spells one on top of the other, but as Gawain continued raising the bar, his firepower went beyond what an ordinary magician could handle.

It didn’t seem like something humans could do to one another. The attacks had the intensity of a natural disaster. They came thick and fast, giving me no chance to catch my breath.

Huh?

But what surprised me was that my body could react to Gawain's attacks. It was all I could do to just barely keep up, but I was still standing.

I see. I know this way of doing battle.

I knew somebody else who would silently use Multicast, just like Gawain.

I lost so many times. It was tough, and I hated to lose, but I kept on going for another duel, and another more times than I could count against my friend and rival.

"It'll be fine. You can do this."

I believed him.

Luke had given me the solution. After all those times where we struggled against each other with all our might, he gave me strength and courage.

I could see. I could react.

And I could dodge.

Not only did I dodge, but I also countered. My spell grazed Gawain's left shoulder.

"I didn't think you'd get this far," he said, smiling excitedly. "I suppose there's no need for me to go easy on you. Let's get serious."

Before me was an enormous wall, and nobody thought that I'd be able to scale it. Yet that reminded me of a time many years ago.

"Oh, so you think I'm just a commoner? My mom raised me all by herself and worked like crazy so I could come here! I'm proud of my family! I don't give a damn if you're a duke's kid or whatever. I'll wipe the floor with you a hundred—no, a thousand times over!"

My heart was pounding—but why?

I don't have a good reason, but I feel like I really can do this. Just like when I used to feel like I could fly.

Watch me, Luke.

I couldn't even make it at a mages' guild in the sticks. They treated me like I was useless. When I had nowhere to go, you found me. I had nothing, but you still had faith in me.

I'll show you that you didn't misjudge me.

I came all this way, and now I'll go for sixty seconds without defeat. You'll see.

As a smile began to form on my lips, I thought I could hear a familiar laugh in the distance.

◇ ◇ ◇

The Sixty Seconds of Blood was the initiation ceremony for new recruits to Captain Gawain's unit of the royal court magicians' division. Among the people who worked at the court, it was infamous. Naturally, any instance of this initiation was of interest to court magicians, but royal knights and other personnel from all around the court had also heard the rumors, and they would come and watch.

This time, the gallery was unusually packed: a lot of people had heard about the monstrous rookie who blew apart the wall in the entrance exam, and they wanted to see her power for themselves. The chance to witness a girl like that facing off in a duel against the magus Gawain Stark made this into a staggeringly high-profile event.

Some people in the gallery were placing bets on the outcome. Guessing the number of seconds a challenger would last was a well-established part of the Sixty Seconds of Blood. It was something that emerged organically among the people who came to watch before spreading around the court and ultimately becoming the main draw for many of the spectators.

Among them was Oliver Hampton.

The standard pre-match advice suggested the smart move was to bet a number under ten seconds. People had different ways of explaining why, but

everyone agreed.

One person had said, “It’s understandable to try and win big by betting on her lasting more than ten seconds, but that would be unwise. It’s been two years since someone lasted that long, and this year, even the top of the class lasted only nine seconds.”

“Sure, it’s out of the ordinary to be strong enough to blow a big hole in that wall, but ten seconds is still too much to ask of a girl without any qualifications or court experience.”

Oliver gulped. There were some remarkable individuals among the rapt audience members.

There was the so-called Silver Magician—the magus Chris Sherlock.

There was also Eric Rashford, leader of the order of royal knights. He was known as the Undefeated Master of the Blade.

And between them was His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld, who had come to observe the duel.

Everyone was thinking the same thing: *Surely not... Even His Royal Highness is here?*

Most audience members had noticed Prince Michael’s presence and were closely watching his every last move.

By the time the duel began, the atmosphere in the training ground was strange. It was quite unlike a typical initiation.

Oliver felt sorry for the rookie, Noelle. He didn’t see why such a huge crowd should come to watch her.

The ceremony was nominally the third unit’s entrance exam, but in practice, it existed to teach humility to new recruits who were used to being lauded as star students—and Gawain was not one to give anybody an easy ride.

Surely, this poor rookie would be helpless to stop him from smashing her to pieces and dragging her around the training ground floor.

There are some kind people in the third unit who can help her out afterward, but being humiliated in front of a crowd like this is going to destroy her self-

esteem, Oliver thought. *I hope she comes out of this okay...*

Oliver wasn't the only one: all the people crowding the venue were thinking the same thing. And yet...

What's this?

Oliver couldn't believe his own eyes.

She's moving differently... It's like she's a new person entirely...

It was as if she was using magic to accelerate her perception of time. Each attack and counterattack came too quickly to follow. The explosive noise of spells colliding assaulted the viewers' eardrums.

Even an emerald-class magician like Oliver couldn't keep up with the two duelists' movements.

Two things occurred to him. Firstly, in all the time Gawain had thrashed rookies with his overwhelming strength, he had never appeared to reveal his true power until now. Secondly, this rookie was standing her ground in the face of Gawain's true power, going toe to toe with him as if she were his equal.

"Who on earth is this person?" Oliver asked aloud, in spite of himself.

He was speaking to somebody that most would be afraid to address. One piercing look from the young man's sapphire eyes could make a person see that they had made a huge mistake.

He was the future head of the Waldstein family, and truly their greatest son.

He was an utterly abnormal prodigy, having made it through the Sixty Seconds of Blood as a newcomer, before rising through the ranks to become an adamantite-class magician in just three years. Despite being Oliver's junior in years, Luke Waldstein was his superior. He responded to Oliver's question like it was nothing.

"She's a real monster. When we were students, she was the only one I couldn't overtake, right till the end. But since she's a bit stupid and absent-minded, she was living in obscurity out in the middle of nowhere, and that's

where I found her. Anyway, if she's going to be by my side, I need her to be that good."

"That good"? What a thing to say so casua—

Oliver's mouth went dry.

He still couldn't quite accept what he was seeing, but there was one thing that he understood: at this moment, he was bearing witness to something incredible.

He watched intently, holding his breath along with everyone else in the gallery.

◇ ◇ ◇

Spell Boost accelerated time for the target. My duel with Gawain was going on under that expanded perception of time.

I was giving it everything just to keep up. I couldn't lose focus for even the tiniest of moments. If I missed my shot by just one second, the equilibrium I'd carefully maintained would crumble in an instant, and I would be thrown to the floor of the training ground.

But as nervous as I was to be locked in battle with an opponent stronger than me, it was no worse than when I faced Luke in the old days.

I can't even remember how many times Luke clobbered me with that obnoxious strength of his. It always annoyed me so much that whenever he beat me, I'd learn from it and make sure to beat him just as badly the next time.

That innumerable stream of one duel after another made me stronger. I wasn't alone. Luke's power helped me in this duel, but in the midst of it all, one thing was clear.

I understood how this would go.

I can't win.

I was up against a professional duelist. There was a massive difference in our experience battling as magicians. I was going to be the first to run out of strength, but what could I do about it?

I want to win! I screamed on the inside, determined not to lose.

The truth is, when we were students, I wasn't concerned about Luke being a prodigy or whatever. Nonetheless, I didn't want to lose, so I desperately committed myself to getting better and better.

Even though I couldn't make it out in the real world, I was giving this my all to shut Luke up, just like the old days. But this was too much.

Sorry, but I might not make it to sixty seconds. Forgive me.

I'm looking for something even bigger instead.

I'm gonna push forward. I'm gonna close the gap.

I needed to be at point-blank range to get a hit in, so I had to put all of my power into my counterattack.

He's a magus. He's at the pinnacle of the magical community—and I'm gonna beat him!

I gave up on surviving for sixty seconds and started going for the knockout win instead.

Gawain couldn't help but smile, seeing that a rookie was recklessly pushing forward to try and defeat him despite their vast difference in rank.

At that point, the battle became more complex. Summoning circles filled the area. Gawain's hellfire and my raging wind collided, shaking the ground with a tremendous noise.

The cloud of dust cloaking the training ground cleared.

My spell wasn't enough to touch Gawain. However, his didn't reach me either.

"Fascinating," Gawain said with a laugh. "Thank you for that. It's been a while since somebody held on when I went all out."

“I should be thanking you. I feel much better, like the way I felt long ago.”

“Oh? That’s good to hear.” Gawain nodded. “Now, let’s move on to round—”

“The sixty seconds are up,” an icy cold voice suddenly cut in.

“Hey, this is where the fun begins!” Gawain complained.

“Should a magus really be having fun, duelling against a newcomer?”

The speaker was tall and slender, with silver hair. He gave the impression of a beautiful bird.

I knew who he was: the Silver Magician, Chris Sherlock. Like Gawain, he was one of the magi.

“Come on now,” Gawain complained. “Just a little longer.”

“If we break the rules of unit leaders, what example does that set for our junior officers? His Royal Highness the Crown Prince is here, and we don’t want the royal court magicians’ division to fall in his estimation. We must demonstrate our respect of moderation and etique—”

“Yeah, I get it,” Gawain responded, embarrassed. “You can stop now.” Then he looked at me, towering over me with his height. “You pass.”

It was only then that it finally occurred to me that I had passed the test.

I did it! I really passed!

I never thought that I’d actually last for sixty seconds.

The spectators were looking on in disbelief.

Aha! Did you see that, Luke?

Smiling broadly with delight at my success, I smugly turned towards Luke in the crowd.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Were you watching? I passed!” I bragged excitedly after the battle.

“I saw,” Luke said with a chuckle. “Incredible as always.”

“I know, right? I’m better at this than I thought!”

I'd thought all hope was lost at the beginning, but I was beaming now that I had passed the initiation. Knowing that Luke had passed earlier had spurred me on. On some level, I probably couldn't bear to lose to him, so nothing made me happier than proving that I could match him.

"But I must say, I did find it easier," Luke teased.

"No way. I did so much better!"

"You didn't get to see my test, though. I was there for both yours and mine, so I know best."

"I don't need to see to know," I answered, petulant. "There's no way I'd lose to you."

Our back and forth reminded me of times I held dear.

"What's with that look on your face?" Gawain interrupted, appearing from behind me. He was watching Luke.

"It's nothing," Luke replied.

"Nah, that's nothing like the fake, empty smile you normally have. It's as if you're staring at someone you had a crush on as a student, but you never did anything about it because you were scared of ruining the relationship, and you've regretted it ever since."

"Captain, if you don't stop talking right now, I'll have to kill you, sir."

Gawain teased Luke, seeing how his usual indifferent demeanor had changed. It was sort of reassuring to see them bickering like close work friends.

"Hey, you," Gawain said, turning to me. "Noelle, right? You survived the sixty seconds, so now I'll get you whatever you like. What do you want to eat?"

Whatever I like?! I can ask for anything?!

"Meat! Meat, please!"

For a relatively poor commoner like me, premium meat was the dream.

As a royal court magician with the rank of magus, Gawain must have been a big earner, so I thought it was fair enough that I should push the boat out a little.

It is a reward, after all.

"Sure thing. I'll take you to the nicest place in the capital."

So generous! What a great boss!

I followed after Gawain, buzzing with anticipation.

"Hey, who said you could come?" Gawain said to Luke.

"You see, Noelle is my apprentice."

"Is it just me, or are you angling for a free meal?"

"It's just you," Luke said, slyly joining us en route to the restaurant.

Clever as always, I thought, impressed.

As we arrived at the upscale restaurant, I found it all discernibly grand. Most of the time, I would be nervous just to approach the storefront of a place like this, but today I timidly crossed the threshold.

Truly, the world of high society stood on the other side of this door. Even the air seemed expensive as I stepped inside.

"Order whatever you like," Gawain said. "Eat to your heart's content."

"Really?!" I gasped.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Captain," Luke butted in.

"Hmm? Why is that?" asked Gawain.

"Noelle can eat a *lot* when she gets that look in her eyes."

"Yeah, but it'll just be a lot relative to her size. Whatever; I don't mind. I have the money to pay for two of my subordinates to feast."

Calm and collected as he was at that time, it took just half an hour for Gawain to be staring blankly into space, his eyes glazed over.

"More, please!" I called.

"You...aren't done yet?"

"I always have room for meat!"

Gawain had nothing more to say.

As we left the restaurant, I was happily patting my enlarged stomach while Gawain handled the bill.

“Really? H-Half a month’s worth of food in one sitting?”

“Chin up, sir,” Luke said.

“Well, do you think I could ask you to pay for your part?”

“It was very kind of you to take me out, Captain.”

I couldn’t hear the details very well, but it was nice to see the two of them getting along.

Anyway, who would’ve thought I’d get to take my time over lunch?

On most days at my old job, I was too busy to even take a lunch break, so I really appreciated getting to spend time eating.

Ah, this is nice! It’s so refreshing to work for a non-*exploitative company.*

Just as there wasn’t a cloud in the sky blocking the sun, nothing could overtake my happiness, knowing this was the first day of my magical new career.

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On his return to the barracks, Gawain stopped in his tracks as he heard a voice: “What did you think?”

The voice came from totally out of sight, but it hadn’t taken Gawain off guard, as he had already noticed somebody was there. He knew that voice. It belonged to the master of ice-type magic, the Silver Magician himself—Chris Sherlock.

“There’s definitely nothing normal about her,” Gawain answered. “She suppresses her magical ability so well that it seems she was mistaken for a below-average magician, but she’s out of this world. Her power level and precision are already top-notch. There aren’t even many among the royal court magicians at her level.”

“I thought so too,” Chris agreed. “Your initiation is supposed to just be training, but how many others could do such a good job of keeping up with your full power? The *most* interesting part was that as the battle went on, her

movements only became sharper and sharper. In the middle of the duel, she exhibited unusual speed. Of course, I'm sure that on some level, you were deliberately trying to draw that out of her."

"Still, I wouldn't have expected her to keep up for so long. I quickly forgot about testing her and found myself enjoying the duel."

She was the second person to make it all the way through the Sixty Seconds of Blood in the entire time since Gawain had become captain of the third unit. Not only that, but it was the second time that anyone had ever broken the wall in their entrance exam.

It left a powerful impression on the two magi. They had witnessed the extraordinary sight of a new recruit achieving both feats on her first day.

Gawain, master of fire-type magic and in a league of his own even among the magi, was the first to break the wall. Noelle had stepped up and taken on the challenge right in front of him without breaking a sweat. It was incredible.

"At my full power, I can obliterate an opponent," he said. "But she did more than just endure; she even put herself at risk to try and win the battle."

"She may be an outsider, but she put herself in an unusually harsh environment and put everything on the line in her devotion to magic. That's the kind of magic power she has."

"That brutal environment must have made her tough." Gawain grinned broadly. "I don't quite know the details, but it's really something."

"I wouldn't be surprised to see immediate results from her. I saw that His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Michael took an interest as well."

"The prince...?"

"Indeed. I hear he was impressed. He must have seen something in her."

"Wow, this is a big responsibility. I'd better train her well."

"Please see to it that you do," Chris said with a nod. "It is certainly intriguing. Who knows what we'll see from her next?"

◆ ◆ ◆

In a remote town in the west of the kingdom, there was a mages' guild.

The afternoon had already begun, and the guild chief had just returned from the previous night's merrymaking.

"Listen up," he said jovially. "The marquis introduced me to someone. Who do you think it was?"

"I can't possibly imagine," the vice chief replied. "Who?"

"It was Archduke Arthur Oswald," the guild chief boasted. "The owner of Oswald and Company."

"Th-*That* Oswald?!"

It stood to reason that the vice chief should be so surprised. As the owner of the biggest company in the kingdom and renowned for his business acumen, Archduke Arthur Oswald was the best of the best among the Ardenfeld nobility.

The guild chief had some noble blood himself, being the son of a minor baron with jurisdiction over a frontier area. Nevertheless, the archduke was a far more influential person than he was used to corresponding with.

"B-But why?" the vice chief asked, his voice quivering in disbelief.

"Sounds like he was keen on the crystal balls we make. He told me, 'I've never seen such high-quality products. I'd love for us to do business.'"

"Well, I never! Us, working with Oswald and Company?!"

Oswald and Company was known for dealing only with top-class partners. Knowing how selective the best merchants could be, it was the greatest honor for the Mages' Guild to be chosen to work with them.

"If we go into business with Oswald and Company," the vice chief went on, "our guild would be known throughout the kingdom—no, the world!"

"We'll probably want to bring in some more staff after all. But supposing his lordship the archduke really likes what we do, then if all goes well, I could be made a viscount, or even a count!"

"Just imagine that... Truly, a masterful plan."

"Leave it to me and I'll make short work of it," the guild chief gloated.

The vice chief smirked too, as the prospect of professional success appeared closer than ever.

“In any case,” the vice chief said, “his lordship mustn’t be very observant. Those crystal balls were the work of that useless girl who couldn’t do anything else.”

“People like him just act like they know what they’re talking about, but they don’t really understand a thing. If we just dress the merchandise up a bit, we can get what we want out of him. Piece of cake.”

“Bravo, sir. Of course, those at the top don’t understand.”

“Obviously,” the guild chief replied, laughing smugly. “I’ll take today off. Say I’m at a business meeting, like usual.”

“Certainly.”

The vice chief knew all too well that when the guild chief said he was at a “business meeting,” he was really going home to drink like a fish.

He didn’t see anything wrong with that though. As far as he was concerned, it was their prerogative as higher-ups to use their earnings as they saw fit, and as such, he too would often take a break and choose not to go to the workshop.

Maybe I’ll take today off too, he thought. *It’s important to take a breather before a big job.*

He would understand later that he probably should have gone into the workshop.

Despite a lack of workplace experience, he had gotten the job due to his connections, and out of fear of losing face, he neglected the workshop. He couldn’t see how he had fostered a workplace culture of slacking and passing the buck onto subordinates.

He also hadn’t noticed that there were employees who had been missing for days, or the fact that there was a growing pile of unfinished work in the back of the guild. The pile sat there, taking pride of place in the workshop, untouched by anybody.

Chapter 3: The Red Rose Ball

The royal court magicians' division was one of the most important organizations in the entire kingdom. Due to its broad purview, one's role in the division varied greatly depending on where one was assigned.

Generally speaking, duties were divided as follows: the first unit administered magic in the kingdom, performing bureaucratic duties for Parliament. The second unit oversaw magical law, while the third unit was responsible for security in the royal palace and the capital. The fourth unit specialized in healing magic and relief operations. Potions were under the fifth unit's jurisdiction, and the sixth unit was involved with magical items.

I was assigned to the third unit with Luke. We had the important task of maintaining safety in the court and the capital, alongside the order of royal knights.

A few days had passed since I started the job. There was a lot for me to learn at my new workplace, and I expected to be bombarded with work like I was at my old job, but I was pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong.

It was something of an off season for the third unit: while activity from monsters was low, many members of the third unit were tasked with helping out other units. That meant that my early days at the job involved training and study in preparation for any security emergencies in the palace. For somebody like me who adored learning more about magic, getting paid to study was a real blessing.

On top of that, the palace itself—my place of work—was incredible.

The celebrated Crimson Palace was a wondrous place that could stun anybody into silence the moment they saw it. Just walking through the grounds, I couldn't help but find myself utterly spellbound. Sculpted gold candlesticks held amber flames, flickering in the breeze that blew through the high-ceiling hallways and around the shimmering crystal chandeliers, wafting the gentle aroma of red roses and yellow daffodils.

So amazing! I thought as the days went by. *So beautiful!*

Perhaps that was to be expected when working in the grandest palace in all the land. Then again, I was deathly scared to touch anything, knowing there would be hell to pay—literally—if I were to foolishly break something and end up in debt. Any time I found myself getting too close to the gorgeous furnishings, I would leap a safe distance away as Luke laughed at me.

My new work environment was so amazing; it was almost *too* nice. It made me feel a little uneasy.

Am I really allowed to work here? I wondered yet again.

After all, even at a mages' guild in the sticks, they saw me as a burden who couldn't do anything right.

Maybe I had something going for me in terms of dueling and magical power, but I didn't have a clue about anything else. I must have been an unbearable sight from the perspective of the first-rate elites who made up the royal court magicians' division. I could just hear them now: *"You really can't do this? You needn't bother coming back in tomorrow."*

No! I can't take something like that! I'll do whatever it takes to hang on to my nice new job!

With that in mind, I put Operation: Odd Job into action.

I would clean up the barracks, replenish supplies, water plants, and replace any magical lamps that began to flicker. It was part of my cunning plan to gain sympathy by taking the initiative to get easy chores done, and thus protect myself from being fired.

"Hey," one of my superiors said one day. "Can somebody fix this magicom?"

Internally, I was clenching my fist triumphantly upon hearing her request.

All according to plan! I knew something like this would happen, so I made sure I'd be available!

"All done!" I announced later, holding out a box containing the magical communication devices.

"Huh?" she responded, peering at the receivers in the box. "Which one did

you fix?”

“Just all the ones in the box! Let me know if there are any others you need me to fix.”

She intently looked over all the receivers in the box, remaining silent for a moment.

“No, that’s all right... This is everything,” she said eventually. She stared at me. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

I was so glad to hear her say that.

I’d never been thanked at my old job. It wasn’t so strange, since everyone was always exhausted and lacked the energy to say anything, but that made me all the happier to receive someone’s gratitude now.

All right, I’ll keep on showing off my abilities, and they’ll soon see I’m a valuable employee!

And with that, I continued to throw myself into odd jobs at work.

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Letitia Lisette-Stone was the lieutenant of the third unit.

Known as the Iron Lady, she was the third woman to be promoted to the adamantite class, and she was the apprentice to Captain Gawain Stark. She was a stern person who wouldn’t back down against anybody if she believed she was in the right. Her brilliance was admired throughout the royal court magicians’ division.

She backed up Captain Gawain, and in her pragmatic way, she kept the third unit running.

However, even she was perplexed by the arrival of a new magician, brought in by Luke Waldstein, the third unit’s third-in-command. She learned this newcomer was named Noelle Springfield.

“Wow!” Noelle cried after first meeting Letitia. “She’s so cool and mature!”

Letitia clearly remembered the way that Noelle looked up at her with glistening eyes. At first glance, Noelle seemed like a child, but she was really a

hard worker.

Letitia took to her immediately. *It isn't easy to come in from elsewhere and adapt to the tough environment of the royal court magicians' division*, she thought. *It might take some time, but I'll watch over her as she grows.*

However, she could never have imagined what would really happen: Noelle worked much too fast. She would take on tasks that other young court magicians spent hours over, and she'd finish them off single-handedly in a quick manner.

Letitia could see that a major contributing factor to Noelle's speed was her use of Spell Boost, a support spell, but that wasn't the most impressive part. Most frightening of all was Noelle's acceleration rate and stamina.

She was so fast that even Gawain, a magus, seemed to barely have the upper hand. In terms of raw speed, she was clearly among the top performers—maybe even among the fastest in the kingdom.

But on top of that, Noelle talked about continuously using Spell Boost—a spell that even the adamantite-class Letitia could only maintain for up to ten minutes—for as long as eight hours.

"At first, my limit was five minutes. But I couldn't get my work finished without it, so every day I cast it again and again. I passed out around seven times, but then I started to be able to use it longer and longer," Noelle had explained.

"The day I used Spell Boost for eight hours, I really felt like I was gonna die," she said another time. "Usually, I could get pretty much everything done if I used it for about five hours, but that day, I discovered some more work that my supervisor forgot to mention. It was a real mad rush... I have no memory of the last hour."

It was a horrific story. Noelle's old workplace didn't sound fit for human life. What brutal environment had she walked into, where staff were forced to cast high-level support magic for several hours at a time?

I don't suppose she could follow in the footsteps of the great sages of antiquity? Letitia pondered. *It is conceivable. In any case, that amount of*

practice is quite astounding.

Anyone with the least bit of magical knowledge and good sense would think that kind of workload and intensity was too much to handle. Not only had somebody actually given their staff that much work, but this girl had taken on that challenge.

As somebody who was born into a long line of magicians and raised strictly from a young age, Letitia understood all too well that Noelle had overcome unthinkable struggles to get this far.

I need to treat her well. After putting herself in such a perverse environment, she must have been left wounded and fragile. It's a miracle that she made it here without breaking down.

If the girl was a little scatterbrained from time to time, it was most likely an aftereffect of everything she had been through. More importantly, she was clearly considerate and modest. Despite possessing such impressive power, she was taking it upon herself to do chores that nobody else wanted to do.

She was no ordinary rookie. She already had the talent and power needed to be among the very best of magicians.

I should report back to the captain. We need to look after this girl so she doesn't overstretch herself, Letitia thought, standing behind Noelle and watching her devote herself to chores where nobody else could see. *I wonder if she could become the very first female magus?*

◇ ◇ ◇

It was lunchtime at work, and I was gushing to Luke about how much I admired my new superior.

"Oh yeah, also! Letitia is so nice! Even when I told her about something pretty normal, she called it extraordinary in that serious tone of hers! From the moment I saw her, I thought she was so cool, just the way I wanna be, and I was so right! What a kind, lovely person she is!"

At first, I'd just admired her for her looks, but as I got to know her, I was impressed by her personality too. She came across as capable and mature.

I was a nobody who'd lost her job out in the boonies, so I was sure there'd be nothing for a royal court magician to praise about me, even if we were working together. She was clearly a wonderful person to speak so kindly to me of all people.

"Why are you setting your sights on somebody in a totally different position, when I'm right here?" Luke sighed as I rambled on restlessly.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"It's nothing," Luke said, peevishly looking out the window.

As I watched him, I thought of a conversation I'd had with my mother.

"Work is great!" I'd told her, so pleased to be somewhere more relaxed than my old workplace. "I even get magic training on the job. It's so much fun."

"That's all well and good," she'd prattled on, not really listening to me, "but what really matters is that you get together with that young man and marry into his family! Oh, I know—you studied magical potions at the academy, didn't you? Why not brew him up a love potion? It's a foolproof plan!"

Making a love potion and feeding it to somebody was clearly a criminal act, despite my mother hand waving away that fact.

As I shrugged wearily, Luke cut in through my thoughts.

"By the way," he said, bringing me back to the present, "did you know the royal family is throwing a ball in the palace next week? It's called the Red Rose Ball."

"Of course. It's super famous."

I knew all about that ball. I didn't see how anybody who was born and raised in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld could be unaware of it.

"The Red Rose Ball is a tradition that goes back over a hundred years," I continued. "Generation after generation of crown princes have met their future queens at the ball. Every little girl dreams of attending."

"Wow, I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd be interested in that kind of thing, Noelle."

“Rude. I was a little girl with dreams too, once upon a time.”

“I thought you were the type to dream about being a court magician, not a princess,” Luke remarked.

“Well, that was my number one choice, of course. Princess was number two.”

I remembered how my penny-pinching mother never bought me toys, so instead I would be enraptured by the romantic stories I borrowed from my friends.

It sometimes made me a little sad as a child not to have the things that everyone else got, but because my mother carefully saved up that money, she could then spend it all on my ambition to go to an academy of magic. Whatever sadness I felt, gratitude eclipsed it a thousand times over.

Because she was born and raised in the countryside, my mother was of the traditional opinion that girls should grow up to take care of the house and get married. What a pain.

“Anyway, yeah, I guess they *do* hold the Red Rose Ball in the palace,” I said, appreciating once again what a wonderful place this was.

The grandest ball in the kingdom—the one that had captured my imagination so much as a child—was happening here! Since it was a major event where the next queen might be found, only a select few people in the kingdom could attend. Of course, the crown prince could only choose a marriage partner from a family of acceptable social standing; only the likes of important noble families’ daughters and nearby kingdoms’ princesses would even be present.

That just made it all the more exciting for little girls. For a commoner like me, it really was in the realm of dreams—a world of beauty and elegance.

It’s real! Wow! I thought, amazed.

“So, as my apprentice, you’re expected to be in attendance,” Luke said.

That didn’t make sense, though. I stood in stunned silence for about a minute before saying anything at all.

Eventually, all I could muster was a “Wha...?”

As an event hosted by the royal family, the Red Rose Ball required the best security personnel to be ready in the unlikely event of an emergency. Preparing for incidents was made even more difficult by the presence of so many guests from the kingdom beyond the court and from foreign lands. In order to protect the atmosphere of the ball, intimidating armed guards were to be kept to a minimum.

The solution to this challenge was to select a number of the best personnel from the order of royal knights and the royal court magicians' division for them to work undercover among the guests at the Red Rose Ball, prepared to react in an emergency situation.

"Even though more women work with magic nowadays, there still aren't many among the highest ranks," Luke explained. "There was talk at the meeting about wanting more female court magicians to participate, so I put in a good word for you."

"B-But I'm still only porcelain-class..."

"Since I'll be attending too, it's not so strange that you should be there, being my apprentice and all. Besides, after breaking through that wall and passing the Sixty Seconds of Blood, you're known throughout the royal court magicians' division."

"F-For real?"

Truthfully, as I walked around the palace, I'd had this funny feeling that eyes were turning my way.

"But I'm just a commoner from the countryside," I said. "Should I really be at a ball where all the other guests are from a special inner circle of nobles?"

"I can think of a lot of arguments against that. Anyway, I've made some plans to make sure you'll do fine."

"Like what...?"

"You sure you want to know?" Luke asked with a grin.

Compared with a simple girl like me, you sure are good at having something up your sleeve, Luke.

“Never mind,” I replied. “If you tell me, there’s a chance I’ll end up letting something slip.”

“That’s for the best. There’ll be no going back to your old life once you find out.”

“Um, sure...”

Eek. The secret world of the nobility is scary!

“Anyway, the reason I’m going to such lengths is because I feel that we need you and your ability at this ball,” Luke went on. “You’ve probably heard that there was a failed assassination attempt at a memorial service the other day when His Royal Majesty the Crown Prince was on a state visit?”

“Yeah, I saw an article. It was a real relief to hear that he made it out alive.”

“Many countries are in the midst of power struggles right now, so we can’t know for certain when something might happen. The best thing to do is to plan for any eventuality. And on top of that, it could be a big opportunity for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I can prevent an attack before it happens and apprehend the culprit, wouldn’t it bring me closer to becoming the youngest-ever magus?”

“Good grief. You’re too much.” I sighed. “Are ranks and titles that important to you? That way of thinking can’t be good for your heart.”

“I don’t necessarily care for ranks or titles, but there’s one thing that’s really important to me—something I want more than anything.”

“More than *anything*?”

“That’s right. And I can only have it if I become the greatest magician in the kingdom. I need that power to be able to push through and overcome people’s expectations and my social standing.”

“W-Wow. That sounds like a big deal.”

I guess there really is something important, but what could it be? Some kind of legendary sword that only the kingdom’s strongest magician can wield?

“I’m surprised, Luke,” I said. “You’re smart and talented, so I’d think you could

easily get whatever you want."

"That might be true for most things, but life is complicated. There's just one thing that really matters to me, and if I had it, there's nothing else I would need. It's so important that I'd be willing to lose everything for it, and yet it's the one thing I can't have. That's what I want."

Is there really something that important, something you could lose everything else for and have it be worth it? Honestly, that's pretty moving.

I feel the same way about magic. It's something I can never give up on. For all your schemes and meanness, you've got a surprisingly pure heart, Luke.

But what on earth is it that you want?

"Wait, let me guess," I said.

I felt like I knew Luke pretty well after being around him all those years.

I can work this out, no problem, I thought, full of confidence, but unfortunately, I was struggling to think of anything that fit the bill.

"Is it something you found after you graduated?" I asked.

"No, it was while I was at the academy. Maybe in my sixth year, I think."

Sixth? That must be right around the time I knew you best. In that case, maybe I can get it... I'm so close... What would be so important to you...?

"Is it, like, a legendary magic sword that hardly anyone knows about?"

"That's exactly the sort of thing you'd say," Luke sighed.

"I give up! Tell me."

Luke narrowed his deep blue eyes and chuckled. "I can't tell you."

I was being hit with one mystery after another, but in any case, it looked like I was going to the Red Rose Ball. The palace ball I'd dreamed of as a little girl! I couldn't believe this was truly happening to a commoner like me!

I wonder what it'll be like... Maybe a prince from a faraway land will fall in love with me, like in a fairy tale.

I beamed, lost in my own fantasies, until something suddenly occurred to me.

“Hold on. If I’m going to a really high-class ball, does that mean I have to act refined and, like, dance and stuff?”

“Obviously. What else would you do?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know anything about those things.”

Luke smiled at me. “Shall we practice?”

From then on, I began a crash course in preparation for the ball under Luke’s tutelage. The first step was a test of my current ability to follow the appropriate rules of etiquette for the ball.

I failed miserably.

“Well, I figured this might happen,” Luke said with a sigh.

“What do you expect? Where I come from, we don’t learn this kind of stuff.”

“So far, I’ve only tested you on things you would’ve picked up at the academy.”

“Oh.”

“You’re really no use at anything that doesn’t interest you,” Luke said wearily as I averted my gaze. “Even at the academy, the teachers were appalled by your grades when it came to any kind of cultural education that wasn’t connected to magic.”

“I tried my best! But do you really think that I’m no good at stuff I’m not personally interested in?”

“Well, despite that,” Luke said, sidestepping her question, “your grades in magical subjects were about the same as mine, and they saw me as a child prodigy.”

“Go on,” I smirked. “Pile on the praise.”

“I’m not praising you. Take this seriously, Miss Noelle.”

“Yes, sir...”

I wrote out my notes and read them back, over and over, trying to drum Luke's lessons into my head. It was no fun trying to memorize something I didn't care about, but once I gave it a real shot, I found that I was more willing to work for it than I had been as a student. It probably had something to do with all the time I'd spend struggling with things I was bad at when I worked at the Mages' Guild.

I now understood that if you kept on persevering with something, you'd get the hang of it. That gave me the strength not to give up, even when I was struggling.

I guess you never know what'll help you out in life.

Luke was also a great teacher, of course. No matter how many times I messed up, he stuck with me without complaint.

You've really changed, I mused, smiling to myself.

Thanks to Luke's teaching and my own efforts, my knowledge of etiquette rules gradually improved a little, but dancing remained a problem.

"What was that? You were flopping like a fish out of water," Luke commented, watching me fumble over my feet.

"Huh? By my standards, my form was the very height of sophistication and elegance."

"Look at yourself in the mirror."

Ugh, what is it now, Professor Luke?

I moved in front of a mirror and struck what was, to my mind, a perfect pose. The startling sight in the mirror had me lost for words.

"Wh-What?" I stammered. "Have I looked this awkward the whole time?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Luke sighed.

"But I've always been so athletic! I was the undisputed champion of climbing trees and getting into fights!"

"I know. That was your most distinctive attribute."

"I beat up so many bullies that they called me the Deadliest Hands in the

West!”

“Yes, you’re quite unique.” Luke shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. “I think this comes down to your musical and artistic sense. Those are weak points for you, right?”

“Ah.”

Whether it was music, painting or singing, I was hopeless when it came to the arts. But of course, they didn’t interest me, so I didn’t want to make an effort—and since I wasn’t any good, I just didn’t do it.

“Well, leave it to me,” Luke said. “I’m prepared to at least raise your level to the minimum required to actually dance.”

And thus began a battle between the great teacher Luke and the unteachable dance student—me.

Luke tried as hard as he could to help me, but I was so clumsy at it that I shocked even myself. By the time we reached the end of the day right before the Red Rose Ball, I still couldn’t waltz well enough.

“I’ll stay here and practice some more,” I told Luke. “You can go home.”

“No, you need to go home too. Tomorrow is the day of the ball, and it’s essential that you’re fully alert.”

“But with the way things are, I might mess up my steps.”

“It’s fine. I’ll patch things up.”

“But maybe I’ll get it so wrong that it can’t be explained away! Maybe I’ll embarrass you!”

“Don’t worry. Even if you fail completely, I’ll remember it fondly,” Luke said with a smile. “Now, go home. See your mother and eat dinner.”

Even at work, Luke really looked after me well. I was in a much better work environment than my old job, and I was grateful for it. I knew how much he had done for me; I’d seen the dance textbook Luke was using. I’d stolen a glance at it when he wasn’t around.

It was bursting with slips of paper inside, each one covered in notes on how to teach me.

Luke had prepared so diligently for my sake. I'd never seen him working on this during work hours or on breaks, so he must have been preparing it all at home at the end of the day. It didn't seem right for me to do nothing while he did so much for me.

"Hey, where are you going?" my mother called to me after dinner.

"I have to go out for some practice."

I found a quiet corner of town to review the dance steps. I had been looking forward to a beautiful view, knowing that a full moon was coming the following night, but a thick blanket of clouds blocked out the light.

Under the moonless sky, I practiced my steps alone, wanting to perform a waltz that would live up to the efforts Luke had made for me.

The Red Rose Ball began in the evening and went on into the night, so my work hours for that day didn't start until the afternoon. I slept in until noon to recover my strength, then ate breakfast and went to the court to get dressed up in the barracks with the other court magicians attending the ball.

The chief maid at the court applied my makeup, her face giving away no emotion.

"I'll take care of this," she said. "I'm under orders from Master Luke to make you 'more beautiful than anyone else.'"

When she was finished, I looked at myself in the mirror.

"Wh-Who is that...?" I breathed, seeing a great beauty looking back.

Is that...me?

The makeup for people at court is really something else...

The chief maid smiled as she saw me staring silently into the mirror. "Now, let's get you dressed, shall we?"

I wasn't the type of girl to take much interest in clothes or cosmetics, since my brain was ninety-percent focused on magic. I was in no position to give much of an opinion to the battle-hardened chief maid. I just followed her to the dressing area as requested.

As she was measuring me, the chief maid paused.

"What have we here?" she said, giving my chest a suspicious look.

"I figured bigger is better if I'm wearing a dress!" I responded, puffing out my chest like never before. "I came prepared with plenty of padding!"

I am *attending the biggest ball in the kingdom after all! Of course I wanna show up looking hot, sexy, and all grown up!*

"Please remove it," the chief maid said, unamused.

"But my sexy new image!"

"Indeed. Please remove it."

"Okay..." I muttered, reluctantly taking out the padding.

I was concerned about feeling inadequate without the padding, but the head maid picked out just the right dress. When I saw myself wearing it, I looked so much better than I had imagined.

Wow! I'm like a whole new person!

I twirled in front of the mirror and examined all the details, excited by how pretty I looked.

This is gonna blow Luke's mind.

Soon, I stood before Luke, pompously showing off my outfit. *Behold, my true form!*

"You look very nice," he remarked. "Personally, I prefer how you normally look, though."

For goodness' sake! No taste at all.

"Shouldn't a duke's son care a bit more about beauty?" I shot back.

"I don't need to hear that from you," Luke said sternly.

Rude!

So I thought, but I couldn't pretend *I* was very interested in beauty either. It wasn't something I put effort into.

The third unit had a meeting in which Captain Gawain gave us instructions for the Red Rose Ball.

"Your positions are all listed on this board," he explained.

According to Gawain, the third unit led security for the event. They had brought in support from other units too. Besides Luke, Letitia, and three other adamantite-class magicians, Gawain—being a magus—would also be in attendance.

"We don't know when something might come up. You need to be constantly prepared for action. Understood?" Gawain commanded, his arms crossed. "We aren't limited to protecting party guests. Their loved ones are awaiting their safe return, and those people are counting on us too. Don't forget that. Act with pride and preparedness. Got it?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" I responded enthusiastically, along with my superiors, after his speech ended.

"Don't worry yourself," Gawain said to me, slapping my shoulder. "This is your first big job. You'll have backup even if you slip up, and in the end, it'll be my responsibility if anything happens. Don't be scared; just give it your all. I'm in charge." Finally, he smiled and patted me on the back. "I have high expectations for you, Noelle Springfield."

I was so happy to hear him say that. It was warm and encouraging, nothing like the cold contempt of the Mages' Guild. It made me want to work hard to meet his expectations.

I marched purposefully towards the ballroom. The garden bloomed brightly with roses, and beyond it was the famed Crimson Palace, praised the world over for its boundless beauty.

The Red Rose Ball was about to begin.

The Red Rose Ball was, in part, an event for meeting with royalty and prominent aristocrats of neighboring nations. Under silver crystal chandeliers and surrounded by vases bursting with radiant red roses, nobles were deep in cordial conversation everywhere. There appeared to be complex procedures of who spoke to whom and the order in which people would greet others.

It was a world that seemed distant to a commoner like me, but even I could appreciate certain aspects.

The palace's ballroom floor was decorated too beautifully for words, from golden candlesticks designed in the image of goddesses, to vivid claret carpets. A procession of butlers carried food and wine to guests, while the elegant tones of the royal family's private orchestra emanated from a corner on the second floor.

"Allow me to introduce the princesses attending tonight's ball," a voice announced. "From the Duchy of Brandard, Princess Ciel. From the Holy Nation of Clares, Princess Daenaris. From the Empire of Neunzelle..."

Wow, there really are princesses here.

Hearing each of their names being read out, I was reminded again of what an incredible place this was. I could even see the Ardenfeld royal family chatting on their thrones at the back of the ballroom, where they could observe the entire dancefloor.

An attendant was guiding Prince Michael. "This way please, Your Royal Highness."

As the prince followed and came my way, everyone around him bowed their heads in unison. I was a little slow to notice, and I hastily bowed just as he walked right by me.

I was stunned to see him so close. It didn't feel real.

What's this feeling in the air? I'm just a nobody from the countryside. Am I really allowed to be here...?

But I couldn't ruminate on that. I had a job to do. Captain Gawain was counting on me; I had to carry out my security role to the best of my ability.

I cast my eyes around intently in search of any suspicious characters. However, once I started to doubt people, everyone seemed suspicious, so then nobody stood out.

"This is pretty tough," I said to Luke, who was standing beside me.

"I'll handle it. Nobody's expecting you to go that far."

Don't say that! I thought, offended. I resolved to make sure I found any suspicious individuals before Luke did. In my new job as a royal court magician, I still didn't want Luke to beat me.

I pictured myself grabbing a bad guy who had sneaked into the crowd.

"Nice work, Noelle!" Gawain would cheer. *"I knew you'd produce fast results. You're my most reliable officer! Millions of times better than Luke!"*

"Spectacular, Noelle. What an achievement!" I could hear Letitia chiming in. *"You're the strongest in the third unit. What about Luke, you say? He's quite impressive, but you must be billions of times better than him."*

I imagined Letitia and everyone else in the unit fussing over me. Luke was there too.

"S-Such a staggering defeat..." he would splutter. *"I called you my rival? No, not in a million years. I could never think to compete with your ability! You're a trillion times better than me."*

I could see him hanging his head and admitting defeat. Next, I saw the people of the world kneeling before me, the almighty world champion, singing me songs of praise and serving me wine from a glass fit for a demon king...

"Daydreaming again?" the real-life Luke butted in, rolling his eyes.

"Well, since you are my very good friend, I'll be nice and let you have half of the world. You should be grateful."

"Sure."

Oh, silly little Luke. Don't you see? My plan for world domination is coming along nicely.

The first step was for me to hurry up and find a bad guy.

However, within thirty minutes of watching all the various people around, I was feeling tired and dizzy as I nursed a headache.

I don't get it... I have no idea who to be wary of...

"It's only natural to struggle with something you're not used to," Luke said with a sigh.

All of a sudden, somebody else from the unit came over and whispered something in Luke's ear.

"Understood," he said. "Let's go, Noelle."

I followed him away from the dance floor.

"Did something happen?" I whispered.

"Just a shift change," Luke replied. "When the ball starts, we'll have to dance, so until then..."

"Oh, I see."

I supposed others would be keeping watch in our place while we weren't in a position to monitor the ballroom.

"For now, we can take a little break," Luke said.

"Then maybe I'll go to the bathroom."

Luke showed me toward one that was far away from the dance floor.

"Why do I need to go so far?" I asked.

"If you use a busy bathroom, people might see how badly you hold yourself."

"Oh..."

He was a bit too on the nose, but I couldn't really argue.

I went into the bathroom and relieved myself, all the while struggling to deal with wearing a long dress for the first time in many years. While I was looking in the mirror to check for anything that didn't look right, I suddenly noticed a familiar smell—a strong scent of citrus.

Bergamot? No, that's not quite right. It's the smell of a potion that uses bergamot.

Powdered bicorn horn, witchweed, mandrake root, magicite, bergamot orange—these were the ingredients for a shapeshifting potion.

I knew all about them. When I was a student, I learned how to make them during my phase of wanting to have an adult figure—as embarrassing as that is to admit now.

But why would I be smelling that here? I started thinking, when I suddenly had a realization.

I peered into the last stall. An overwhelming smell hit me right in the face. There was no mistaking it; somebody had used a shapeshifting potion here.

"Luke, come here!" I whispered frantically outside the bathroom.

"Huh? I can't go in there!"

"Somebody used a shapeshifting potion in here!"

Luke nodded seriously and followed me in to investigate the stall where the potion had been used. "They made it not long ago."

"I was thinking that too. The tricky part is working out what they changed into."

"One of the attendees, most likely." Luke stood before a locked closet, looked around, and then cast a spell. "Lightning."

A flash of light filled my vision, and the lock burst open.

"Huh?! Hold on, Luke!"

"There's no point in shapeshifting if the person you change into is still around. There's a strong likelihood that the culprit incapacitated their victim and left them somewhere around here."

The closet door opened. A white-haired, elderly butler fell out and tumbled onto the floor. Fortunately, he was still breathing. He must have only been put to sleep.

"This is an experienced butler. He commands real trust in the palace," Luke observed.

"But why would somebody choose to be him?"

“It must be because butlers carry the wine. If you put a slow-acting poison into a glass...”

“...You can safely kill your target,” I finished.

We looked each other in the eye. Nothing more needed to be said.

“Spell Boost!”

We hurtled back towards the dance floor.

Please... Please let us make it in time!

Spell Boost slowed down time as I ran.

Ugh, running is hard. These are getting in my way!

I removed my high heels and tore the hem of my dress, getting the front out of my way, so that I could run faster. This was not the time to worry about appearances: it was a matter of life and death.

Just like Gawain said, there were others outside who cared about the people attending the ball. They would be deeply hurt if something were to happen. I couldn’t allow an assassination to take place here.

“Noelle, you take the west side.”

“Got it!”

I hit the dance floor. Under accelerated time, I slipped through the crowds of people. The glamorously dressed attendees stared at me in amazement, but I didn’t have time to worry about that. I was looking for the culprit who’d assumed the identity of that butler.

The butler... Damn it, there are too many of them! Where could he be...?

I was still furiously scanning the throngs of guests coming and going, when I heard Luke calling in the distance.

“Noelle, above you!”

I looked up, as if his voice had forced my eyes upwards. There, above the dancefloor, in the back row of the gallery, I saw an old butler serving wine.

I wouldn't make it in time if I took the stairs.

Isn't there something I can—

A really stupid idea occurred to me. It was so ridiculous that I would surely be laughed at just for saying it, but I didn't have time to think. I just needed to throw everything I had into it. I could be horribly injured if it went wrong, but I was ready.

I'd been mistreated and cast aside before, leaving me feeling useless. This was my first big job since then.

"The reason I'm going to such lengths is because I feel that we need you and your ability at this ball."

Luke had recommended me in the face of objections. My dear friend had insisted that he wanted my help. And it wasn't just Luke.

"I have high expectations for you, Noelle Springfield."

I was also working for somebody who was counting on me—*me*, a rookie with no qualifications.

I leaped up in accelerated time, releasing as much magical power as I could through my feet.

"Wind Blast!"

Out shot a cannonball of wind. I followed it up immediately by casting Magic Barrier to contain the blast. The compressed air exploded, and with nowhere to go, it launched my body upward. My skirt billowed out softly as the gust lifted me into the air in an instant.

Everything around me appeared so slow that it was as if time had stopped. The guests gaped in amazement as I soared through the air, aided by the powerful wind behind me.

I watched in slow motion as a woman in front of me raised a glass of wine to her lips.

Damn it! There's no time!

“STOP!” I shouted with my entire chest.

The woman flinched in surprise and froze momentarily. As I continued to rush forward, I knocked the glass from her hand. Shattered glass showered the floor and the noise reverberated around the hall.

Using wind-type magic to adjust my position, I landed between the woman and her would-be attacker. I turned to the amazed people surrounding us.

“This man is an assassin disguised with a shapeshifting potion!” I declared.

After witnessing me suddenly flying up there, some nearby knights stood in wide-eyed astonishment for a moment, before eventually tightening their grip on their swords.

“You! Get away from Madam Andalucia!”

Yes! Get him!

At first, I was relieved to have such strong support, but then I realized something with a start: their swords were all pointed at me.

“What? Why me?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Because of your impertinence towards Madam Andalucia!”

This is bad. They’ve got it all wrong.

It finally occurred to me that since these knights were part of the foreign contingent accompanying the woman, they didn’t know that royal court magicians were attending the ball.

“N-No, it’s not like that!” I spluttered. “I’m a royal court ma—”

“Don’t be ridiculous! A runt like you couldn’t be a royal court magician!”

“Who are you calling ‘runt’?!”

As I racked my brain trying to deal with this new situation, I spotted the fake butler out of the corner of my eye, pulling a knife out from an inner pocket. For a moment, it seemed like he vanished; the speed at which he sprung forward seemed so unbelievable considering his appearance. He moved instantly towards Madam Andalucia—his target.

From the way he moved, I could tell that I wasn't dealing with any ordinary opponent. He was probably an exceptionally skilled assassin, the type of person who had honed his combat skills in the depths of the criminal underworld to an almost supernatural level.

But if speed was what I needed, I had that covered.

"Spell Boost!"

I immediately hurled myself between the knights at the butler. I could see the eyes in his wrinkled face open wide.

"Air Slash!"

Without a moment's delay, I pursued him with wind-type spells. He pulled back, avoiding my attacks. He then quickly straightened up and began pulling something from his inner pocket.

"Shadow Maker!"

Several dark shadows in the same shape as the butler appeared and instantly surrounded me.

The magical item he was using was something totally different from what I'd encountered in my more ordinary life. I thought it must be a dungeon relic: an item with tremendous power that could be found only very rarely in the depths of dungeons.

There were dozens of pitch-black shadows, and each one of them appeared to be on the same level as their master, the expert assassin. All at once, they attacked.

Just you try it.

"Air Raid Storm!" I cried.

Knives of wind spun around me. The ranged attack eliminated seven of the shadows. I doubt the assassin expected I would take out that many with a single attack. While their assault eased off for a moment, I quickly dealt with another four to my right.

My long skirt fluttered as I cast one spell after another. I whirled around as if I were dancing, continually protecting the targeted woman from the shadows'

attacks.

This was the job I'd been entrusted with. People had high expectations for me.

I won't let you get to her.

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The man was a top-class assassin, known throughout the underworld. He had never once failed to hit his target, and he had never once been defeated.

For somebody like him, it was most certainly a strange and unexpected state of affairs for a little girl in a dress to suddenly leap through the air to fight him. She had sent the glass of poisoned wine flying and seen through the disguise he had created with the shapeshifting potion.

"You! Get away from Madam Andalucia!" a nearby guard cried as he thrust his sword at the girl.

That was fortunate. It gave the man the perfect opportunity. In an instant, he moved to within a range close enough that the target had no chance of escape.

But the next moment, he was facing an attack the likes of which he'd never experienced.

What?! he thought.

The girl's movements were even faster than his own. He managed to dodge her attack, but an opponent with that kind of speed was uncharted territory even for somebody as seasoned as he was.

Who the hell is she...?

There was a lot he couldn't get his head around, but one thing was clear to him: this girl defied logic as he knew it.

There's nothing else for it.

He made the decision quickly. He was going to use the secret weapon he had prepared for such an emergency situation.

"Shadow Maker!"

Even in the world of powerful dungeon relics, there was a category on an

entirely different plane from the rest: the supreme relics. Supreme relics were truly unusual items that only entire cities, or even entire countries, could afford.

This relic was a ring with the ability to call up pitch-black shadows, each with the same power as the summoner. A maximum of seventy could be summoned at one time, but even if they were destroyed, they could be replaced infinitely. In a one-on-one fight, this ring's power was unstoppable.

It was seventy against one. Not only that, but the opponent would have to endlessly fight off an infinite supply of shadows.

The girl seemed like an accomplished magician, but she was powerless in the face of this ring. She would surely be helplessly overrun by this deluge of shadows until she was left sprawled on the ballroom floor—or so he thought.

Impossible... This is a supreme relic!

The girl and the shadows were in perfect balance: she reacted to the unstoppable flood of shadows by letting off ranged attacks at astounding speed. The shadows couldn't get close to her. She must have been immensely powerful to be able to pull this off. The man was no expert in magic, but from what he could see, she was at a level too high for him to even begin to work out.

What is this? What's going on...?

For the first time, he felt cold sweat run down the back of his neck.

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My fight against the constant rush of shadows was getting intense. There were just too many of them. No matter how many I destroyed, they kept on regenerating and swarming back towards me. Not only that, but each one of them had power equal to that of a master assassin.

I was giving it my all just to keep going. I'd somehow achieved a balance, and now I was struggling to maintain it.

The fundamental difference between us was the matter of fatigue. There was a limit to both my magical power and my ability to concentrate, but a person could use a dungeon relic for as long as they wanted. I was getting tired, and

the tide of this closely-fought battle was beginning to turn.

I can't let them get close, I thought, but I was gradually getting boxed in.

"Ngh!"

The shadows were getting closer. As they gained momentum, the never-ending swarm of shadows got harder to keep away. I knew that I was nearing my limit.

I need... I need to keep going!

No matter how I willed myself, the world kept reminding me of the cruel reality that there was no stopping the shadows.

No! I can't take this!

More of them approached me from behind. I turned around and unleashed more knives of wind on them. I took out two shadows, but it wasn't enough.

I saw the flash of daggers as the surviving shadows moved towards Madam Andalucia.

"Lightning Blitz!"

In an instant, a bright light burst to fill my vision. A bolt of lightning raced by, a roar of thunder shook the floor, and I smelled burning in the air.

That overwhelming speed and firepower had wiped away the shadows without a trace. The assassin recoiled, in awe.

Somebody was standing right behind me. I didn't need to turn around or to look to know who it was, because he had always been right by my side.

I knew Luke Waldstein's brilliance better than anyone.

"Sorry I took so long," he said.

"It's okay. You made it in time, so I don't mind."

I stood back-to-back with the old friend I'd always battled with at the academy. His presence spurred me on and encouraged me.

“I’ve got your back, but I still need your support,” he said.

“Got it. I’ll leave that side to you.”

Still standing back-to-back, the two of us faced the encroaching shadows and cast our spells in unison:

“Air Raid Storm!”

“Lightning Blitz!”

Our combined attacks unleashed a fierce wind and a peal of thunder.

The shadows couldn’t approach us any longer. Unable to even stay at the same distance, they were forced back. The speed of our two spells combined was too much for the regenerating shadows.

As confidence blossomed inside me, I couldn’t help but smile. No matter how many shadows there were, together we were so much stronger.

Seemingly realizing there was no chance of victory anymore, the fake butler turned tail and tried to run away with the shadows. However, I knew that although Luke and I had bought some time, next up was our incredible coworkers.

The next moment, a tongue of raging fire swept through the crowd of shadows.

“Well done. Fantastic job, Noelle Springfield,” Gawain said as he obliterated the shadows in an instant and moved towards the assassin.

“I’m glad to have you here,” Letitia added calmly, following in hot pursuit.

It didn’t take much longer to bring the incident to an end. It was a relief to finally see them neutralize the dungeon relic and apprehend the culprit.

“Well done,” Luke said with a smile. “I’m impressed.”

It was our first big job. It felt great to fight together, back-to-back. The two of us weren’t students anymore. Here we were, working hard as royal court magicians.

Yes! I did it! I thought, full of excitement. *I guess I’m pretty glad Luke came and helped me out though. Actually,* very *glad.*

I would've been too embarrassed to admit that out loud, so I'd keep that to myself.

"Hey, Luke," I said, instead holding out my hand and giving him a look.

Luke nodded and gave me a high five. Amid all the noise, the singular clap sound of our hands together was probably audible only to the two of us, but that just made me all the happier to have my dear friend here with me.

A few hours had passed since the defeat of the assassin at the ball.

"Thank you very much for what you did earlier," said the woman whom the assassin had targeted. "I don't know how to fully express my appreciation to you for saving me."

Her praise left me in shock. I couldn't help but be captivated by her elegant mannerisms and the beautiful way she carried herself as she walked over, clothed in a sophisticated dress and flanked by armed guards.

As it turned out, I had apparently rescued the queen of the nearby Empire of Neunzelle.

No way... She's the highest of high class. We're on totally different levels. Sh-Should I even be talking to her...?

"If there's anything that I can do for you, please just say the word," she continued. "I am forever in your debt."

Such effusive gratitude! I felt like swooning.

W-Well, I have to at least get through this without doing anything rude!

"Oh, not at all," I said eventually, having thought of the appropriate way to respond. "I just did what any royal court magician of Ardenfeld would do."

I-I just did what I needed to. I only h-hope I didn't do anything to bring shame on court magicians...

"You were amazing, miss!" the little crown prince of Neunzelle chimed in, making me feel like I hadn't done such a bad job.

But I regretted having tried so hard to be polite a little later, when Luke spoke

to me.

“You could’ve asked for anything, you know,” he said. “It’s not like there’s any rule saying a royal court magician can’t accept a reward.”

I could’ve got a reward...? I should have asked for a year’s supply of marbled beef!

Luke chuckled as he saw me drop my shoulders in disappointment. Irritated, I punched him in the upper arm.

Why didn’t you say something, you jerk?

Nevertheless, I was rewarded plenty in other ways. People piled praise on me for having saved a queen’s life.

“You really helped us out,” said the wonderful Letitia. “Truly, this is all thanks to you.”

“Letitia is so cool!” I raved afterwards, over the moon to be commended by my favorite superior. “She’s *so* amazing!”

“After everything I did right beside you, I really don’t get what’s so exciting about her,” Luke sulked.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“It’s nothing.”

As always, I didn’t quite get everything that Luke said.

In any case, here I was, getting to work using my beloved magic, alongside my old friend and my wonderful superiors. I’d already received so much. Asking for anything more would just be greedy.

Still, one thing that I did regret a little was that after all my hard work, I’d never had the opportunity to dance. After such a big incident, it was no longer realistic to keep the party going, so the Red Rose Ball came to a close early.

It was for the best that I got through the event without embarrassing Luke, but after everything, I would’ve liked to have a go at dancing. I had even practiced in secret so I could surprise Luke with my skills.

That weighed on me as I walked through the moonlit garden. As we were

involved in the incident, the order of royal knights had spent a lot of time interviewing us. By the time we finally got to leave, it was midnight.

It was silent, as if the palace itself had gone to sleep. Nobody was around.

The two of us were alone in the garden at midnight. It felt like we were the only people in the whole world.

I had an idea.

“Hey, wanna dance?” I asked.

“What makes you say that?”

“I just thought it would be nice to dance in the garden at midnight with no one else around.”

Luke said nothing. I thought he might be irritated by my stupid suggestion, but after a brief silence, he calmly replied, “Sure. If you want to.”

“Then let’s do it!” I skipped onto the lawn and turned back to Luke. “Bring it on!”

“Does setting the mood mean nothing to you?”

“What?”

“I guess not. I should’ve realized. My mistake. After all, this is exactly what I expected,” he sighed. He was scowling at first, but he broke into a gentle smile soon enough. “Let’s go.”

We faced each other. He took my hand and we began a quiet waltz. My steps were just as I had practiced them the night before.

“Hey, you’ve improved,” Luke said, his sapphire eyes sparkling.

Meanwhile, I frowned slightly. It frustrated me just to be led by him like this. At least a little bit, I wanted to stand on the same level as Luke and doggedly compete with him.

As the golden moonlight stroked the top of our heads, we continued to waltz alone in the garden.



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“There’s no sense in living if you can’t be the best.”

That's what my father always told me, probably since before I can even remember. Those words stuck with me, forever lingering close behind me like a shadow.

I needed to be the best for my father to deem me worthy. As his son, I was constantly plagued by that fear. I needed to excel above all others. I always reached for the top, as if something were chasing me down.

They called me a genius, but I didn't believe it. All I did to build myself up was to put in huge amounts of preparation and effort.

I was always number one. I became a minor celebrity with a reputation as a child genius. Many people envied me.

"Wow, Luke, you're really amazing! Damn, you're lucky to be so talented."

"You've got the family connections. You've got the looks. And most of all, you've got an inhuman talent for magic."

"I wish I could've been like you too."

All the adulation from others did a lot to ease the pressure.

"Good. I'm pleased," my father would say.

It made me happy to be praised by my father. He was a strict man, so I felt that I must be special. That made me desperate to keep on winning. After all, there was no sense in living if I couldn't be the best.

I went to a prestigious academy of magic in the royal capital, and I was top of the class. It was all smooth sailing; my perfect life was truly enviable.

But then came the day of my first test. On that day, I had the greatest shock I'd experienced in my life: in the test on forming magic sequences, I missed out on the top spot for the first time.

Everything went white as I was stricken by rage and fear. This was unacceptable for the eldest son of a duke.

"What on earth have you done? To think that a commoner like you could best me!" I yelled, forgetting all about how an ideal, faultless model student should behave.

And that’s how I met this peculiar girl of humble origins.

Looking back, I really couldn’t remember what I was thinking during that outburst. Perhaps I predicted that a girl like her would feel intimidated if a member of the Waldstein family pushed her around—or perhaps I wasn’t acting in a calculated manner at all and being entirely impulsive. Considering how I tend to be, though, I suspect it was the former.

However, I didn’t realize that she was by no means the type of person to be rattled by noble titles.

“Oh, so you think I’m just a commoner?” the girl retorted. “My mom raised me all by herself and worked like crazy so I could come here! I’m proud of my family! I don’t give a damn if you’re a duke’s kid or whatever. I’ll wipe the floor with you a hundred—no, a thousand times over!”

It seemed that I had just made matters worse, but all the same, I had no intention of backing down.

Bring it on, I thought, determined to step right up to the challenge and crush her.

I was confident that she had beaten me that one time through sheer luck. I thought I naturally had the upper hand. However, my expectations were confounded once again.

“Aha! See that, fancy pants?” the girl cackled. “At this rate, I’ll get you again next time, and it’ll be a clean sweep! You’d better prepare yourself for a beatdown!”

My blood was boiling, but less with anger towards the girl than with disappointment in my own failure.

I mustn’t let that foul, uncultured little girl get the best of me! I thought as I threw myself into studying as hard as I could for our next test.

The seasons passed, and before I knew it, my whole world had begun to revolve around her.

Three years went by, and I still hadn't managed to score the highest in every subject at once. For that matter, it wasn't unusual for her to beat me most of the time.

"I've never seen such an impressive student at your age!" my astounded teachers would tell me, but I always hungered for more.

There was no sense in living if I couldn't be the best. I had to win. Victory was an imperative.

But one day, something happened: we learned my father had been having an affair, and the news plunged my family into chaos. His nonstop selfish excuses hurt my mother. I felt utter contempt toward him. Was this really the same man I had been working so hard to impress?

That realization totally changed the way I looked at the world. I had worked myself to the bone up to this point, and it was all for naught. I felt like the most unfortunate person in the world. If all my efforts had been in vain, what point was there to life?

I was lost in those heavy thoughts one day when the girl came to me.

"Hey, you're the last person I'd want to ask for help, but there's something here I just can't figure out," she said.

I saw no reason to refuse, so I gave her my aid. One way or another, this led to her regularly coming to me for help. It was quite tedious though, so I didn't really give it my all.

"Hey," she said suddenly around that time. "You act all cool as a cucumber, but you're actually a hard worker, aren't you?"

"Huh? Where is this coming from?"

"Well, it's how you teach me. You really seem to understand what it's like for somebody who needs help. It makes me think that instead of naturally knowing everything from the beginning, you put in the work to learn it."

"That's on me, then. I should do better," I responded, taking her words as a rejection.

I had this idealized notion of myself as somebody who could easily become

the best. That was the version of me that my father dreamed of. If I struggled to become that ideal, then I was a failure. This girl saw things differently though.

"I like that about you," she went on. "If I'm going to compete with you as a rival, I'd much prefer to know that you're a real hard worker. It encourages me to do my very best too."

Even now, I still remembered that moment. The classroom was bathed in shafts of evening light, and the girl was grinning broadly at me with shining eyes.

"There may be tough times ahead, but stay strong," she said. "Let's work together, Luke Waldstein."

To be honest, what happened after that was the kind of trite story with which everyone was familiar.

I would follow her with my eyes the moment I spotted her coming over. I refused to believe what was going on. *Why does it have to be a commoner like her?* I told myself...or rather, I tried to tell myself that, but I couldn't.

By the time I knew what was happening, I was hopelessly in love. That was the kind of dull, clichéd situation I was in.

I was happy just to be around her. A tap on the shoulder and a "Hey, what's up?" was all it took to please me. However, I was embarrassed at the thought of her realizing how I felt, so I pretended it meant nothing at all.

Besides, I was a duke's son and she was a commoner. Nobody would accept the idea of us being married. I could tell her how I felt, but it would only ever end in tears. Even if she reciprocated, there would come a time when we would have to part.

The last thing I wanted was to hurt her with my own selfish behavior. I wanted her to be happy. That mattered much more to me than my own wishes. I had to give up on her, and I knew it.

What a fool I am for going this far, I thought later, as I pushed aside opposition to bring her in as my apprentice after being rapidly promoted to the adamantite class.

I created the opportunity for us to spend time together, hoping at least a little that she would take notice. I even laid the groundwork to make others see her as a suitable marriage partner for me, just in case she miraculously returned my feelings one day. But above all else, I did all of this because I thought that even if she didn't understand how I felt, just having her by my side as my friend would be enough to bring me lifelong happiness.

I truly am hopeless. In my heart of hearts, it was hard to deny that. *But it is what it is. I don't care how it happens; I just can't stop myself from wanting her in my life.*

She was the one thing I couldn't give up on.

"Bring it on!" she called to me that night in the garden, gracelessly asking me to dance.

She saw me as nothing more than a friend, and that's the way it had always been. I'd probably long since missed my chance to be seen as a potential love interest, so I knew there was a possibility that my love would forever be totally unrequited. Nevertheless, I found myself clinging to hope.

I hope that eventually a day will come when you see me the same way I see you, I thought as we danced in the light of the full moon.

I love you.

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One day, the guild chief and the vice guild chief were waiting to begin business negotiations with the marquis. The vice chief had just returned from the bathroom, where he had been obsessively checking his appearance in the mirror for the umpteenth time.

They couldn't afford to slip up; they'd been told this meeting would be attended by none other than Archduke Arthur Oswald, a leading light in the kingdom's nobility.

"Get a hold of yourself!" the guild chief snapped. "What are you so afraid of, you sniveling idiot?"

"My apologies, sir," the vice chief replied. "It's just that we're talking about

not only the marquis, but Archduke Oswald too...”

He had never even dreamed of having the chance to get involved with such a major noble in his entire life. The archduke had the power to change the vice chief’s life if he was interested in the guild’s products. On the other hand, he couldn’t even imagine the losses they would suffer if they caused any offense to the archduke.

We must make a success of these negotiations! he thought frantically. He took a deep breath and tried to relax.

“By the way, how did it come to pass that his lordship would be in attendance today?” he asked the guild chief.

Originally, the archduke hadn’t been scheduled to attend the meeting, until a sudden change of plans just a day earlier.

“Beats me,” the guild chief said. “But whatever you do, don’t push too hard. Think of what an advantage we have over everyone in the kingdom just by making this connection. Even if he says he doesn’t want to negotiate, just grin and bear it. Our top priority is not to ruin the relationship.”

“Understood, sir.”

Oswald and Company was known for dealing only with top-class partners. Even if they didn’t manage to strike a deal this time around, the company was interested in the Mages’ Guild, and that alone was sure to raise the profile of their products dramatically.

Oswald and Company *had* taken an interest. To the guild chief and the vice chief, victory was as good as theirs.

The two were still in the waiting room when they heard the sound of somebody entering from outside. They bowed deeply as the man came in.

“Sorry for the wait,” their guest said.

“Please, think nothing of it. We’re extremely grateful to you for taking the time to give us this opportunity to talk with you today.”

The meeting began. After some pleasantries, the marquis announced the start of negotiations, and the vice chief felt his heart leap into his throat.

“Is it officially confirmed that Oswald and Company will be selling our products?” he asked almost inaudibly.

Archduke Oswald nodded. “I keep hearing from our merchants that the crystal balls you make are something special. We held a meeting and decided we want to expedite a deal with you.”

“Thank you! Oh, thank you so much, your lordship!!”

For a mages’ guild in a western border town, this was a seismic development. After all, this was coming from a high-ranking noble who owned the biggest company in the kingdom.

We could really become the leading mages’ guild in the kingdom... To say our profits would double doesn’t even come close!

“With that in mind,” the archduke continued, “we would like to place an order for products as soon as possible. We’re thinking about these kinds of numbers, so when do you think you’d be able to deliver?”

“That volume would be no problem at all,” the guild chief answered. “We can get the products to you in two weeks.”

Oswald winced. “Are you really sure? It would be no easy matter to produce this much in just two weeks.”

“At our guild, we are uncompromising in our dedication to efficiency. We regularly produce this kind of volume.”

“Trust is our company’s top priority. We expect high quality and excellent service, and that means that merchandise absolutely must reach us in time for deadlines. We cannot allow any delays. I’d like you to bear that in mind. To ensure compliance with that basic rule, we also prefer to give workers plenty of time to complete work by the deadline. I don’t believe that overwork produces high-quality magical items,” the archduke said emphatically. “Now that I’ve made that clear, I’d like you to tell me a deadline you can definitely stick to. What will it be?”

“Two weeks will be fine,” the guild chief said, full of confidence. “There is no way that our guild could fail to produce this volume in time. I can assure you of that.”

“That sure went well,” the guild chief said on the way back from the meeting.

“Indeed. Better than I could have anticipated! Who would’ve thought we would make a deal already?” the vice chief agreed. “Then again, are you sure that deadline is all right? We made the call without consulting the mages.”

“Our job is to *get* work. Their job is to *make* it work. Am I right? Anyway, this volume of merchandise is a piece of cake. Remember that useless girl? Even she could bang this much out in a few days.”

“It’s true that as well as building our future relationship, this first job is about making a strong impression. What could be better than showing how quickly we can deliver the goods?”

“Exactly.” The guild chief nodded. “Now, go to the workshop and tell the staff, all right?”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

The guild chief and the vice chief went their separate ways, and the vice chief made his way to the workshop.

“Hey! Keeping busy?” he shouted.

The mages in the workshop seemed even more exhausted than usual: they had dark circles under their eyes and their movements were slow and sluggish. The vice chief hadn’t expected this, no matter how hard the employees had been working.

Did we cut down too much on staff numbers after all? he thought with a tinge of worry.

He went to the workshop supervisor to see how work was coming along.

“These are all at the third stage of production,” the supervisor reported, gesturing towards a pile of incomplete products. “The stuff that’s ready for delivery is in there at the back.”

The vice chief’s voice trembled with shock. “Is this it?”

The vice chief was speechless for a moment as he stared at the products before slamming his fist down on the desk.

“What the hell is this? Why haven’t you finished more of them?” he demanded, his angry tone echoing around the room. “And look at these crystal balls! This is in utter shambles! Who is responsible for this? Bring them to me now!”

The workshop supervisor called over one of the mages.

“I’m very sorry—” the mage began to mumble.

“‘Sorry’ won’t cut it this time!” the vice chief raged, his eyes bulging. “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you telling me you can’t even make a crystal ball? Imagine how it feels for me to have incompetent fools like you here! I never thought I’d meet somebody more useless than that lying little girl!”

“Excuse me, sir,” the supervisor interjected. “I don’t think he should be held responsible for this.”

“What?!” the vice chief spat, his voice shaking with fury. “Then who the hell *is* responsible?”

“That would be me—the workshop supervisor—and the people in charge of managing staff.”

“You’re damn right! It *is* your fault! We’re in this mess because you couldn’t manage the staff properly! So, what are you going to do about it?”

“I recognize that I had a part to play in this, but I want to point out that you bear some responsibility too, sir.”

“You’re sweeping your own failings under the rug and pinning this on me?!” the vice chief barked. “Good grief! I can’t believe how stupid you are! Even a child can admit when they can’t do something. It’s your job to use your head and come up with a way to get things done! Can you really not understand something as simple as that?”

As livid as the vice guild chief was, it was nothing compared to what came next.

“I’m telling you there’s nothing more we *can* do, all because *you* don’t know a damn thing!!”

The vice guild chief had never before been chastised so heatedly by a subordinate.

“E-Excuse me? Watch your mouth when you talk to your boss!” he spluttered.

“I have to say it, or else you just won’t get it. You higher-ups don’t seem to understand the workplace at all, and it’s your fault it’s all falling apart!”

“Y-You’re fired! How do you like that?”

“Fine. Do what you want. It doesn’t change the outcome anyway.”

“What?”

The workshop supervisor reached into a pocket and pulled out his resignation letter—but that wasn’t all. He produced a whole stack of envelopes, containing letters from every mage in the guild.

“Wh-What is this?”

“We’re leaving the Mages’ Guild. The original plan was to do this much sooner, but we waited because of that girl’s hard work.”

“What girl?”

“The little mage who you fired because you thought she was useless. She made an effort to take on overdue work, and she even used support and healing magic to help us meet deadlines. We didn’t stick around because we were scared of you. We’ve been here because that girl’s dedication inspired us.”

The vice chief couldn’t fathom what the supervisor was saying.

That talentless little liar was working that hard...? Impossible. That can’t be true...

He didn’t have time to think, though. He had to handle the huge volume of amassed work still to be done—and the impending deadline.

We hardly even have any of the crystal balls we’re supposed to deliver to the

marquis and Oswald and Company... There's no way I can let them leave!

Surrounded by his staff, the vice chief apologized to them for the first time. "I'm s-sorry. I realize we're partly responsible too. So now I'm asking you... Could you please at least finish the work that's here...?"

"Huh? That shouldn't be necessary. Didn't you always say that we were no good? If you and the chief are so great, you should have no trouble handling this without our help. Isn't that right?" The workshop supervisor and the mages smirked. "Thanks for everything. See you around."

This was an unthinkable state of affairs.

Having failed to prevent the staff from quitting en masse, the vice chief bolted to the guild chief's home.

"Please! Open up! It's terrible!"

"What's all this noise about?" the guild chief grumbled.

The vice chief told him all about the walkout.

"Wh-What...?" the guild chief stammered, dropping his wine glass. "How dare *they* of all people defy me... This is an outrage!"

"Whatever shall we do? The impact this will have on our business—"

"Get other mages' guilds to send over surplus staff. We'll just scrape together as many as we need. I don't care if they have experience or not; we'll take them as long as they're fit to work."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Soon, the vice chief was using his connections to get in touch with other guilds.

"Our workforce just suddenly up and left us. Can we ask you to send a few reinforcements?" he'd ask, but much to his chagrin, the other guilds' representatives threw their weight around, quite pleased with the positive impact on their own business.

Not a single guild was willing to honor their request.

“What can we do?” the vice chief asked the guild chief. “The deadline...”

“Stock up on finished articles from other guilds. We can just change the labels and sell them on the black market.”

“But won’t that cause other problems?”

“Not if nobody finds out. Even if we lose some deals, it won’t matter. We just need the contract with Archduke Oswald and the marquis.”

“You’re right, sir. If the crystal balls are the only things we need to make ourselves, we’ll manage.”

“Even that useless girl could do it. There’s no way it’ll cause us any trouble.”

The two of them got to work, but it didn’t come along as smoothly as they had imagined.

“How many minutes has it been?”

“Two hours, sir.”

“Two hours?! That’s all you’ve managed to do in that time?”

“My apologies. Making crystal balls is harder than I thought...” the vice chief said, hanging his head. “How many have you finished, sir?”

“Shut up and get back to work.”

The sun went down. It was the middle of the night, and they still weren’t finished.

“Do *not* go to sleep. Fall asleep and I’ll kill you,” the guild chief snapped. “We can’t afford to miss the deadline.”

“I understand. Just think of what would happen if we don’t get this done in time.”

They struggled on, working as hard as they could, but even after they got the hang of it, it still seemed like they were making no progress.

Strange, the vice chief thought. *If it takes this long just to make one, how on earth did we manage to produce so many in a day...?*

The guild chief had the same doubts. “Do you think that little girl really

managed to make so many crystal balls every day, all by herself?”

“I believe so.” The vice chief nodded. “She was the only one with that job.”

“Just her? Are you sure? She didn’t have anybody else helping her, right?”

“That’s correct. In fact, I heard people say that she even helped out others who were lagging behind with their work.”

As the guild chief fell silent, the vice chief remembered what the workshop supervisor had told him earlier:

“She made an effort to take on overdue work, and she even used support and healing magic to help us meet deadlines.”

“Support and healing magic, huh?” the guild chief said after being reminded. “Yeah, there was something about that, wasn’t there?”

“Yes. Still, I doubt it’s possible that a lowly mage out here in a border town could really use such high-level magic.”

“Sure, but I don’t think anybody could realistically complete this volume of work without magic like that. I mean, that little girl *did* say she’d been to a prestigious academy of magic.”

“She did. But nonsense like that isn’t worth taking seriously.”

“Supposing it was true though...”

“Surely not...” the vice chief said, his voice trembling. This was a possibility too hard to accept; normally he’d reject it out of hand. However, everything about the situation they were in seemed to point in that direction.

If she really had been carrying the organization on her shoulders like the other mages claimed, and if it was true that their manufacturing efficiency and profit margins were so high compared to other guilds thanks to her abilities...then they had made a terrible mistake.

The vice guild chief shrank back and slumped onto the floor. The guild chief slammed his fist loudly on the desk.

“Find her!” he shouted. “Do whatever it takes to find that girl, and bring her back here!”

Chapter 4: The Magical Potions Research Section

One morning, I woke up at the same time as always, got dressed and began preparing for work.

I put on the royal court magician's uniform I'd wanted to wear since I was a child, complete with the porcelain pocket watch. I grinned as I saw myself in the mirror and then headed for the door quietly, so as not to wake my mother. I put on my favorite boots and stepped out onto a brick road.

There was a cool breeze as glassy rays of sunlight drove away the last traces of the night. Marigolds and lilies of the valley swayed gently in flower beds.

There was a bakery that I'd recently been in the habit of dropping by on the way to work. The delicious smell of freshly baked bread brought a smile to my face while I picked out my breakfast.

"Early again, Noelle!" the baker said.

"Not at all. This is nothing compared to my old job."

How could I leave for work early if I didn't get to go home in the first place? Getting up this early didn't even begin to compare with those days.

"Just these, please," I said, handing over a tray loaded with baked goods.

"Three cream buns. Two jam buns," the baker began, breaking into a smile while counting up the items and working out the total bill. "Four melon breads. Seven croissants..."

Before long, I was making my way to the palace, cheeks bulging with freshly baked bread. I greeted the guards, passed the gorgeous gardens, and entered the main building of the royal court magicians' division.

Expecting to be the first to arrive as usual, I yelped and froze when I opened the door and saw somebody was there. The person glanced up from the book he was holding and smiled as his blue eyes caught mine.

“Morning, Noelle,” Luke said.

“Um, what if I told you I sometimes get confused when my shift starts?”

“I see. You *sometimes* get confused. Seems like this has been the case every day lately, but sure, sometimes.”

“Ah, s-see, I’m not so good at remembering details that don’t seem important.”

“Oh. Then I suppose you forgot how I told you to avoid insisting on working outside of your scheduled hours?”

I had no answer.

Yikes! Luke, you’re scary when you grill people.

“I’m sorry! It’s all just part of my strategy to do chores, gain sympathy, and not get fired!”

“I see. At least you’re honest.” Luke raised a cup of tea from the table and took a sip. “It’s good to be enthusiastic, but you also have to follow your superiors’ orders.”

“Yeah, but couldn’t you just let it slide, since it means I’m working hard?”

“Permission not granted. If you want to start work this early, you’ll have to finish equally early. And that includes today.”

Damn it! Now I have to deal with a workplace that’s too *non-exploitative!*

I frantically set about cleaning, still carrying out the same odd jobs I did every day.

“You don’t really have to do that,” Luke said, but I couldn’t help but feel like his outlook was a bit naïve. After all, even a mages’ guild in the sticks couldn’t see any use in me. How could I handle a job like this?

If I wanted to keep this job, I had no choice but to contribute enough that my coworkers would forget about my previous experience and see me as useful. Saving a queen from a nearby country was an achievement, but I still couldn’t rest on my laurels.

“Nothing gets through your skull, huh?” Luke sighed as I explained this all to

him.

In any case, I went ahead and used that time in the morning to do all the chores set for new recruits.

“Noelle, you’ve already finished everything again? I said we could do it together,” one of my superiors said, astonished to find that I’d done all of the work for today before people even arrived.

“It’s the least I can do!”

“Wow, you’re really quick. I’m impressed, Noelle.”

“Nah, it’s no big deal.”

I always found myself forcing a laugh when my superiors praised me. The third unit really was full of charmers; they would even come out with over-the-top reactions when I got work done. Of course, part of why I worked so hard on all these chores was to see those reactions.

“I should probably be telling you off for working too hard, but I guess I’m just so amazed that you’re doing such a perfect job,” a superior said with a chuckle. “Thanks a lot. I appreciate it.”

They would praise me, or even treat me to lunch as a reward. One way or another, I got a lot back from my superiors. And having come from a workplace where no amount of hard work would get me so much as a “thank you,” it just made me want to put in even more effort.

I wanted to work here with these people forever. Maybe that was too much to ask for, but I was sure it was possible. Just when I was brimming with confidence, my superior added:

“It’s a bit of a shame though. Today is probably going to be the last time you can help us out like this.”

“Huh? The l-last time?” I stammered, a chill running down my spine. “Am I being...fired?”

Did I do something? I fretted. *Could it really have been such a problem that I was working outside of my scheduled hours...?*

“Nah, of course not. It’s the other way round,” she said with a smile. “You’re

getting a promotion, Noelle. The captain wants you to come to his office."

A promotion.

I barely understood the meaning of the word. What even was there to increase? It couldn't be my rank as a court magician, could it?

"Starting today, you're an emerald-class magician."

"Uh... Wh-Wha...?" I was still lost in thought when Captain Gawain made his announcement. It shocked me so much that I couldn't speak coherently anymore.

"And here's your new pocket watch." He held out an emerald-inlaid watch to me. After a beat, he asked, "What are you looking around so frantically for?"

"Oh, I just have this feeling somebody's about to jump out and say this is all a joke..."

"Why would that happen? Who would do something that stupid?"

"But it's emerald. That's a two-rank increase."

"That's right. It *is* a two-rank increase. And that reflects what you've achieved."

"F-For real...?"

As your rank as a court magician increased, so did the difficulty of the job, while the number of magicians at each rank decreased. There were nearly one thousand royal court magicians in total, but more than half of them were porcelain or obsidian-class magicians. Just looking at it numerically, being promoted to the emerald class meant that I ranked among the top half of court magicians—and getting a promotion wasn't supposed to be easy.

Getting a special two-rank promotion is a pretty big deal...

I was still in total disbelief.

"It sounds like the Queen of Neunzelle was full of praise for you too," Gawain said. "She even called you a credit to all magicians."

"I-I'm very grateful..."

I didn't think I'd really done anything that special. But then again, maybe I'd made a surprisingly good impression when I turned down a reward out of fear of causing problems.

"I just did what any royal court magician of Ardenfeld would do."

I was just a plain commoner, but somehow these incredible things were happening to me.

"Everyone else in the unit seems to like you too," Gawain went on. "No problems with your attitude either. Congratulations on escaping the grunt life."

"Oh, but I actually like doing chores, so I'm totally happy to just continue as before."

"You can do as you wish within work hours. *Within* work hours, though, all right?"

"Ah..."

"Just so you're aware, I already know what's been happening. The lieutenant didn't fail to notice."

I'd thought I could get away with it, but I should've known nothing escapes Letitia.

"I love the enthusiasm, but don't take it too far," Gawain warned me. "We'll have to pay you overtime."

"That isn't necessary! After all, I insisted on doing the work."

"In this unit, we make it a matter of policy to give fair compensation to those who work hard. The people in charge who let you keep working have their responsibilities too. Now, here's a little something just from me to you. Take it."

He placed a white envelope onto the desk. I wondered what Gawain could possibly be giving me. Now that I thought about it, he had been treating me *awfully* well.

It couldn't be...

"Um, I'm working really hard to earn a decent living doing magic right now," I blurted out. "This isn't the time for love letters—"

“That’s not what it is!!”

Oh, it wasn’t? So what on earth was inside?

I picked up the envelope. It felt heavy. I opened it up to see five silver crowns.

“What’s this...?” I breathed.

“It’s a personal reward from me. I always do this for people who have done an excellent job.” He cracked a broad smile. “I expect more great things from you, Noelle Springfield.”

“Bo-nus, bo-nus, bo-nus!” I chanted, tenderly clutching the white envelope as I headed for Luke’s office.

Luke responded to my obvious showboating by producing an envelope from his own pocket.

“I already know,” he chuckled. “I got a bonus too.”

Grr... I thought it was just me!

However, on second thought, it made sense. My success was thanks to Luke’s support. Even so, old habits die hard.

“So how much did he give you?” I pried.

“Four silver crowns.”

“Aha! I got five! In your face!”

“In any case,” Luke continued, smirking at my triumphant stance, “I hear you got a two-rank promotion. That’s pretty impressive.”

“Heh. That’s right. Even you can see how great I am now!”

Of course, I understood it was a miraculous turn of events that just happened to work out, but I felt extra smug about this twist!

“Getting promoted to the emerald class so fast must be nearly unprecedented,” said Luke. “Pretty much nobody has done it faster than you. Just one person, I think.”

His praise made me smile, but he soon burst my bubble.

“Incidentally, that person would be me.”

I said nothing. *You jerk... How was I supposed to know you were waiting to reveal that?*

On the one hand, we were comparing the amount of money in our bonuses from Gawain; on the other hand, we were comparing the official record of who had been promoted fastest. Obviously, the latter was more significant. That’s why Luke was so nonchalant.

You’re acting all calm now, but I know you’re still a sore loser!

“Wow, Noelle!” Luke carried on, rubbing salt in the wound. “It’s so great that you’re number two, right after me!”

Damn it! Don’t provoke me! I balled up my fists.

“I’ll get you next time!” I snapped, thrusting my finger in his face. “I might not get promoted as quickly as you, but mark my words, I’ll get the better of you in some other way!”

I’ll wipe that smile off your face!

I opened up a grimoire I’d borrowed from the royal court’s Grand Library and immediately began studying like crazy.

◇ ◇ ◇

The sight of her buried in the grimoire brought a smile to my face. She probably didn’t know how dense the grimoire’s text was, having seemingly chosen it because the title sounded exciting and intellectual. There were probably only a few among the royal court magicians who could even understand its contents. However, as somebody who tended to be ignorant of the opinions of others, she didn’t know that. As always, her love of magic drove her forward.

Most people couldn’t help but worry about what others thought of them. Her genius lay in the fact that by being oblivious to other people’s views, she could assess everything she encountered and throw herself into it.

You really are smarter than me, I thought.

There was nobody I rated more highly than Noelle Springfield. That thought pushed me to concentrate my efforts to be able to keep competing with her.

It’s only when I outdo you in magic that I get to see myself reflected in your eyes.

Magic was what she loved the most. When I got the best of her, her competitive side came out, and it made me feel like we were closer.

“I won’t let you win next time!”

“Damn you, Luke...”

“Aha! I win!”

Just seeing her come over to pick a fight filled me with so much joy. I’d pay any price necessary for that happiness.

Your huge appetite, your short stature, your terrible singing voice, your tragic fashion sense—I love it all. You’re here with me, and that alone is enough to bring me peace.

I’m a part of your world. Nothing could make me happier.

◇ ◇ ◇

Gawain and Letitia were in Gawain’s office.

“Hey, Letitia. D’you mind lending me some cash?”

“What on earth did you spend it all on?” Letitia responded, shooting her boss a cold glance.



“Well, I bought that little newbie a fancy meal. The final bill blew me away—and that was just the start of it! Somebody else from the unit visited the capital

for the first time in a while, so I took another hit buying dinner for them. And then finally, I paid those personal bonuses and ended up with nothing left!"

"Why did you give them bonuses if you didn't have the money?"

"It's my responsibility as their superior to reward hard work."

"But what's the point if you go broke?" Letitia said, exasperated. "Don't you have any savings?"

"That's not how I live my life. Money's always burning a hole in my pocket."

"You're a lost cause."

"What can I say? My salary spends itself." Gawain shrugged. "I wouldn't be spending so much if it was all just for me."

Letitia knew that was true. When it came to his own needs, Gawain wasn't a reckless spender. He was the type to drink and gamble only in moderation. Paying for others was an entirely different story.

"That table is with us too!" he would announce, spotting a junior officer and paying for their meal without exception.

"Nice work today. Get yourself something nice," he would say, giving somebody a healthy sum to reward them for results at work.

"Hey, you're all welcome to drink as much as you like. It's on me!" he would call out jovially, willing to pay for it all himself no matter how big the group was.

Gawain was an old-school gentleman with a soft spot for his staff. He was the type to give generously, even if it meant having to borrow money himself.

It was quite preposterous to Letitia, the kind of frugal person who would carefully record every transaction down to the last penny.

How can you have no savings on that kind of salary...? Letitia thought. She fantasized about having enough savings to retire in comfort, but that was a long way off. She sighed.

"It's still over a week until payday, you know," she said.

"Right, and that's why I'm asking you. I don't really want to do this, but I knew you'd be mad if I stayed quiet and borrowed it from somewhere else."

“Of course I would. You must remember the story of the captain who failed to read the loan contract and ended up paying insane amounts of interest.”

“I don’t mind. It’s my own money.”

“And you must remember how that same captain nearly went bankrupt. Now, *who* was that again?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Pull yourself together, please. There are many in this unit whose lives turned around thanks to having you as their captain.”

Gawain’s third unit was remarkably tight-knit, even compared to the other units. Gawain had a kind-hearted nature; rather than criticize those who tried and failed, he would tell them, “Even if you slip up again, it’s fine. I’ll take responsibility.” It helped to build an environment where staff felt able to show off their abilities without fear of failure.

Letitia appreciated Gawain’s altruism. He had his share of problems, but she admired his ability to work for the good of others. It was because of her respect for him that she would scold him for considering borrowing the money from elsewhere, lend it to him herself, and help him with his finances.

“Don’t spend it all at once,” said Letitia, handing over the absolute minimum amount that Gawain would need until payday.

“Sorry. I appreciate it,” he replied. “Now, onto official business.”

“What is it?”

“I’m thinking about what to do with the little newbie. Since it’s our unit’s off season, how about we have her experience something new? I thought we could lend her to the Magical Potions Research Section.”

“That sounds good to me. She seems to be quite knowledgeable about potions.”

“Well, a surprise request came in. Can you guess who made the request?” Gawain said, becoming serious. “It was His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Michael.”

Just hearing the name was enough to make Letitia gulp. “You don’t mean...for

the King's Guard?"

"That's right."

The King's Guard was a special task force assigned as personal security for royals. It was open exclusively to the very best candidates from the order of royal knights and the royal court magicians' division. As a rule, only magicians of at least the mithril class were selected for the King's Guard. Ordinarily speaking, it was unthinkable that a new recruit would be called up when they were still barely in the door.

"But she's only an emerald-class magician," said Letitia.

"Actually, she was still porcelain when I received the request."

"She was selected at such a low rank...?"

"It sounded like His Royal Highness wanted to invite her to the King's Guard regardless of rank."

"But it's completely unprecedented! Surely this would cause problems."

"And apparently he's prepared for any problems. It just goes to show how highly the prince rates her."

It took some time for Letitia to fully accept the truth of what Gawain was telling her. The crown prince—somebody of greater status than nearly anyone else in the kingdom—had chosen to get personally involved with HR and push for this rookie to be invited to join the prestigious ranks of those under his command. This was utterly extraordinary. Based on everything she knew, it seemed like something that couldn't possibly happen.

Nobody in the royal court could refuse the crown prince. It would be fair to say that the decision was made the moment he made the request.

"So when will she be transferred?" Letitia asked, somewhat sad to bid farewell to the hardworking little magician who admired her so much.

"Oh, I said no."

"What?!" Letitia blurted out, after initially having no response at all. "Wait, this is all a joke, isn't it?"

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this. I’d be thrown in jail for lèse-majesté.”

“Isn’t it worse to turn him down?! We’re talking about a request from His Royal Highness here. You could be demoted for refusing him like this!”

“I don’t mind. It would be worse to be afraid of the consequences and fail to do what I think is right. She simply doesn’t have the experience necessary to join the King’s Guard. Right now, the best thing for her is to be in an environment where she can afford to make mistakes,” Gawain explained, as if it were only natural. He spotted the concerned look on Letitia’s face and grinned. “Don’t worry. I was honest with His Royal Highness about the situation, and he understood.”

Gawain wasn’t afraid to put himself at risk and take a hit for other people. He truly deserved Letitia’s admiration—though she made sure to keep that to herself, knowing well how word could get around.

“What would you have done if you’d got demoted when you’re already out of money?” Letitia asked.

“I never thought about it...” Gawain said, shuddering at the prospect. “Wow, that was a real close call.”

Letitia was unimpressed. “What on earth am I to do about you?”

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“Helping out at the Magical Potions Research Section?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Letitia replied. “As a result of the infection that went around recently in the northern region, it seems that the team is unusually short on staff this year. I think this could be beneficial for your future career too. Of course, I can ask somebody else if you would prefer not to do it.”

“I do want to! Please pick me!”

The Magical Potions Research Section, which was part of the royal court magicians’ division, was the leading light in magical potion studies. It was where the most famous potion brewers went to work on their daily research, using rare equipment and materials unavailable anywhere else. As somebody who

had studied potions as a student, I couldn't contain the excited pounding of my heart.

What kind of place could it really be? If I go and help them, maybe I'll get to talk to the people there. And with their facilities and technology, maybe I can even make a shapeshifting potion to turn me into a stylish grown-up!

My heart was already swelling with anticipation, but then I had a worrying realization. "A-Are you sure this is all right? What if I can't keep up with everyone else and I just get in their way?"

Everyone in the third unit complimented me on how quickly I worked, but I also knew that that was because they were nice people. After all, I was an abject failure at my last job, at a place nowhere near as awe-inspiring.

"It'll all be fine," Letitia said, smiling reassuringly. "If anyone can handle this, it's you. I guarantee it."

I felt emboldened. Letitia's kindness toward *me* of all people really showed how wonderful her heart was.

Even if I can't quite do the job as well as other people, I'll do fine as long as I give it my all. All right, let's do this!

Soon, it was my first day of helping out at the Magical Potions Research Section.

"Hello! My name is Noelle Springfield!" I greeted the assembled potion brewers enthusiastically. "Pleased to meet you all!"

I'd been nervous that I would be of no use to such experienced individuals, but as it turned out, there were plenty of simple tasks and chores to be done in the lab. That was my specialty. Ever since working at the Mages' Guild, I knew to observe my surroundings and anticipate what work would need to be done. In those days, all I'd been able to think about was helping my coworkers so we could meet deadlines, and I'd had no idea at the time that I'd hone skills from the job to use in the future.

"We're running out of magicite," somebody said. "Could somebody get some more from the stockroom?"

“I’m on it! I’ll have it replaced right away,” I said.

“Sorry I forgot to mention this, but I need the witchweed that came this morning to be processed as soon as—”

“I thought you might need it, so I already did it! Here you go!” came another quick reply from me.

“I ordered some extra astral leaf yesterday, but I don’t know when it’s coming. Can someone contact the supplier?”

“I checked earlier, and they said it should arrive around 4 p.m. I’ll be ready to bring it in once it gets here.”

It was quite a busy time in the lab, but I’d experienced constant chaos at the Mages’ Guild, so I could handle this amount of work comfortably.

Next up, they’ll be needing processed moongrass and black slime, so I’d better get on that now, I thought as I continued my zealous efforts to help.

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The Magical Potions Research Section was part of the fifth unit of the royal court magicians’ division. The organization was comprised of some of the land’s leading potion brewers, who possessed top-level knowledge and technology.

The section was experiencing its busiest period in recent years. The impact of an infection in the northern region resulted in an increased need for magical potions—more than in an average year. If it meant providing a remedy to even one more person, they would work day in day out to brew potions in cooperation with regional potion brewers’ guilds and companies. The lab was drained, and the work was piling up.

That was the day a new recruit in the third unit was dispatched to assist them.

“Hello! My name is Noelle Springfield! Pleased to meet you all!”

The brewers in the Magical Potions Research Section saw her as just one magician dispatched from another unit; she was one of many.

There probably isn’t much of a difference she can make on her own, they thought.

That was simply how the brewers saw magicians sent from other departments. Even though they were all royal court magicians, there was a significant difference in knowledge and ability between those who specialized in potions and devoted themselves to that career path and those who didn't. They appreciated assistants who could help them with simple tasks, but even then, the assistants couldn't usually do much without direct instruction.

Besides lacking knowledge, there were assistants who knew they were only there temporarily. In their minds, since it wasn't their main role, they didn't need to do any more than the bare minimum.

What a pain, the potion brewers would think, continuing to work hard and struggling to suppress their irritation at the unhelpful assistants. *Don't they know how much of our lives we give to this job?*

However, this new recruit totally changed that lazy image they held regarding all other magicians.

"We're running out of magicite. Could somebody get some more from the stockroom?"

"I'm on it! I'll have it replaced right away."

"Huh? You're already bringing it...?"

The efforts of that little rookie, so small she seemed like a child, far surpassed the potion brewers' expectations.

"Sorry I forgot to mention this, but I need the witchweed that came this morning to be processed as soon as—"

"I thought you might need it, so I already did it! Here you go!"

She was more relaxed than anybody else, but she watched everything, predicted what tasks needed to be done, and finished them in advance.

"I ordered some extra astral leaf yesterday, but I don't know when it's coming. Can someone contact the supplier?"

"I checked earlier, and they said it should arrive around 4 p.m. I'll be ready to bring it in once it gets here."

"O-Oh, sure. Thanks. That would be great."

She appeared to have some knowledge of magical potions, but she was nowhere near the brewers in that respect. Nevertheless, she made up for it with her ability to anticipate her coworkers' needs. Even though this was the lab's busiest, most intense period in years, she didn't seem especially perturbed. In fact, she was so calm that it was as if she felt there wasn't much work to do at all. She took on a wide range of tasks, she got them done right, and she got them done fast.

"Hey, who is that little girl?" one brewer whispered to another, seeing how unusually industrious she was.

"No idea. She's clearly somebody special though."

"Where could they possibly have found somebody like that?"

"She's the newbie everyone's talking about," somebody else added. "They say she saved the Queen of Neunzelle at the Red Rose Ball."

The other brewers gasped.

"Not the one who passed the Sixty Seconds of Blood?"

"I guess I did hear the people in the third unit bragging about it."

"And to think they sent her here..."

There was nothing more the potion brewers could say in response to seeing this girl working quicker and better than anyone else despite having only just arrived. One after another, she was completing all the tasks that had fallen by the wayside.

In a flash, the lab had begun to revolve around her.

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I was nervous about whether I could settle into this unfamiliar workplace, but luckily, the people in the Magical Potions Research Section were a friendly bunch. They acted really surprised as they complimented me on my efforts. I was pleased to know they were thinking about me, and it drove me to work even harder.

It wasn't long before we had caught up from the aftermath of the infectious breakout in the northern region. The great efforts of the Magical Potions

Research Section were celebrated throughout the kingdom. Even if the most I could do was provide some basic assistance, I'd wanted to help them in any way I could. But of course, it was the section's potion brewers who were doing the real hard work.

"Thank you, Miss Springfield," the section chief said to me. "With your help, we got through it."

The chief's praise made my heart flutter. Having worked in a place where nobody would ever speak to me so kindly, I felt blessed to be in the royal court magicians' division, where everyone was so nice.

"By the way..." the chief added. "I have something to ask you."

"Yes, sir. What is it?"

"Is there any chance you could transfer here from the third unit?"

"Huh?"

This request was totally unexpected. Even among the fifth unit, only a handful of people got to work in the Magical Potions Research Section. I'd thought that I'd have to be a top-level potions specialist to work here.

If I was being invited to join, then I must have done a good job. Out of sight, I proudly clenched my fist.

"So, what do you think? I don't need an answer right now. It's fine if you want to take your time and think it over."

The offer was so wonderful that I felt undeserving of it. Still, it didn't take me long at all to reach a decision.

I'd struggled at my old job at a remote mages' guild, been treated like I was worthless, and been thrown out. I was high and dry, with no other job options available, when my dear old friend extended a helping hand to me. The happy life I lived now was all thanks to his support, and I felt that I wanted to repay his kindness by working hard by his side.

I apologetically turned down the section chief's invitation.

"That's a shame," the chief said. "Well, if you ever change your mind, just say the word. You'll always be welcome here, Miss Springfield."

This heartening praise was probably thanks to the skills I'd developed through the endless slog of work at the Mages' Guild. Looking at it that way, I supposed that horrible experience hadn't been for nothing.

"Hey, Luke! I got invited to join the Magical Potions Research Section!" I boasted excitedly when I returned.

We peacefully whiled away the afternoon as Luke sipped his tea and listened to my story.

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"You still haven't found that girl?!" the incensed guild chief shouted.

"I'm sorry, sir," the vice chief responded meekly. "I put in a request at the Adventurers' Guild and reached out to all the other nearby magic guilds..."

"Don't you have any information at all?"

"Well, it's hard to say... There are rumors of somebody with a similar name working as a royal court magician."

"That couldn't possibly be her."

"Indeed. I don't think it's possible either, sir."

They were in agreement on their expectations for a low-level mage. Even if she *had* attended a prestigious magic academy and had some training in magic, it didn't make sense for her to be powerful enough to work as a magician at one of the most important organizations in the land.

After all, if she really had that kind of power, why would she have sought work at a rural mages' guild in the first place? One could assume that somebody who continued to work under those atrocious conditions couldn't really be such a great magician.

"You don't suppose she could've given up on magic and got an unrelated job?" the chief pondered.

"In that case, should I try asking some of the non-magical guilds?"

"Actually, never mind. Magic is too important to her. I figure she must've found something. But when you think about it rationally, there's no way a girl

like that could really have enabled the guild's progress, right?"

"I agree. But I do wonder how she managed to make all of those crystal balls."

"That girl was a lying brat. She probably came up with some dirty trick."

The two of them nodded for a moment, before wide grins appeared on their smug faces.

"The marquis and Oswald and Company really mustn't have a clue if they're that impressed with what that little girl could produce," said the vice chief.

"We're in luck! If she can fool them, just think of how much better the two of us could do."

"Do you have a plan, sir?"

"I sure do," the guild chief responded, looking utterly self-satisfied. "The good guys only win in fairy tales. In the real world, success is all about being smart. Society is designed to help the bad guys win."

Next, the guild chief and the vice chief began ordering crystal balls from other guilds. They purchased finished articles from the highest-rated guilds in the area, polished them up, and presented them as luxury goods.

"Incredible..." the vice chief cried, his voice quavering with excitement. "The artistry of these crystal balls is above and beyond anything we've ever produced!"

"Of course. I planned it all out and took action myself. Our old staff were limited to what they could physically manage. What I can do is obviously gonna be miles better than that."

"I should have known, sir. I admire your skill."

"Good grief. To think that I would have to do work like this myself! I just hope this is the last time," the chief lamented. "For one thing, our funds are low after having things to sell on the black market. And then there's the mages, daring to turn on us when following orders is all they're good for... They really piss me off!"

"We were in real trouble. For a moment there, I even thought there might be no hope."

“I wouldn’t let scum like them bring our business down. They’re nothing compared to me!”

“You’re quite right. These crystal balls are bound to be the best Oswald and Company can get.”

“Enjoy this moment. Soon enough, business will be booming.”

They managed to supply the marquis and Oswald and Company with the finished crystal balls on the morning of the agreed day. Utterly sure of success now that the job was complete, they smirked conceitedly, and the guild chief went straight to bed.

However, his peaceful sleep was soon interrupted by the vice chief calling to him from outside. He could hear the distant sounds of a knock at the door and a trembling voice.

That stupid wimp, the guild chief thought irritably. *Can’t he just be quiet for two minutes?*

“All right, what’s going on?” he said, getting out of bed to open the door. “What’s all this noise for?”

“The marquis wants to see us urgently! There’s a problem with the crystal balls we delivered!”

Chapter 5: The Misty Woods and the Green Giant

I'd always dreamed of one day visiting the palace's enormous east wing. Now here I was, coming here nearly every day.

"All right, what should I read next?" I murmured to myself, giggling happily in the Grand Library.

Shafts of light filtered in through the skylight, illuminating the vast sea of bookcases opposite the atrium. Fine particles of dust tumbled gently through the air, twinkling like snowflakes.

My favorite spot was a room in the far corner of the rows of dark wooden bookcases. It was home to the oldest and rarest books. It was usually quiet, as most people seemed to prefer newer releases, but there was no place in the library I loved more.

I smiled as I recognized the distinctive, oddly familiar smell of old books. I gazed at the spines of these old, thick volumes and looked for something to capture my imagination. I figured any book that had remained here for so long had to be full of deep wisdom. That meant I was basically communicating with the sages of old. How exciting! Better yet, reading intellectual books that other people avoided made me seem interesting—or so I thought, at least.

I hummed to myself and selected books to borrow. I was limited to taking out ten at a time, so it was essential that I chose carefully. One caught my eye from its place on a high shelf.

Oh! That one sounds interesting! Here we go... I thought, extending my hand toward it. But it was just a little too high for me to reach. As I stood there on tiptoe, struggling to get to the book, somebody cast a large shadow over me.

"Did you want to borrow this one?" Luke asked, looking down at me with his deep blue eyes.

I was more annoyed than pleased to receive his help.

Why is he so tall? And why am I so short?! It isn't fair. I even made sure to be a good girl and drink my milk every day!

But I knew that even if I was unhappy with the reality of the universe, I ought to be grateful for the assistance.

"Thanks," I muttered, pouting.

Luke let out a little laugh. His untroubled air got on my nerves.

It's all so easy for him because he already has it all! I'm only half his height, so why can't he share that with someone who's directionally challenged?

Though I couldn't help but bemoan this injustice, the smell of the books under my arm quickly dispelled my anger. Soon enough, I was happily humming again as I walked through the sunny garden with Luke, holding the books I'd borrowed.

"You're really into books about magic, aren't you?" Luke commented.

"I sure am. More accurately, I *love* them. That's no exaggeration."

"What do you like more: these books or fancy meat?"

"Oh boy... Hmm, that's a tough one..."

I love books. And I love meat. I've never thought of ranking them. Which is better...?

"Give me some time," I said. "This needs serious thought."

"Take as long as you need to," Luke replied as I wrestled with this conundrum. Suddenly, he muttered, "You could always pick me instead."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"It's nothing." Luke turned away bashfully and changed the subject. "By the way, there's something I wanted to ask you about."

"What is it?"

"It concerns our next job."

Oh? What could we be doing? I wondered, looking up at him with equal parts anticipation and unease.

“You know the Misty Woods near the northwestern region?” he continued. “We’re supposed to conduct an investigation there.”

The Misty Woods was situated in the wild area in the kingdom’s frontier. It was widely known as a monster-inhabited forest, but they weren’t particularly dangerous. It was the kind of place even a beginner adventurer could handle; although, I’d heard that it wasn’t very popular with adventurers due to the poor visibility caused by the ever-present mist.

“But why is the royal court magicians’ division doing this?” I asked. I couldn’t see why court magicians would be sent to investigate somewhere that wasn’t very tough or dangerous.

“Apparently it’s by order of His Royal Highness Prince Michael.”

“The crown prince?”

I didn’t follow politics, so I didn’t know very much about Michael Ardenfeld beyond that he was supposed to be impressive and good-looking, plus all the girls loved him. I’d spotted him briefly at the Red Rose Ball, and I supposed I could vaguely remember him being handsome.

“It seems to be quite a serious investigation. Even the order of royal knights is involved,” Luke continued. “Not only that, but you and I were specifically requested.”

“I was?” It took me a moment before it fully sank in. “Oh, I get it. I’m your apprentice, so I go where you go. For a second there, you had me thinking there was a special request for me!”

“You misunderstand,” Luke replied, shaking his head. “You *were* specifically requested. Apparently, the crown prince thinks it’s important you be involved.”

“F-For real?”

Why on earth would I be chosen...?

Then again, when I thought about it, it wasn’t as if I had no idea where this had come from. When I’d saved that queen from that empire, it probably did a lot to boost my reputation. I could imagine somebody saying something along the lines of, *That newcomer seems quite promising.*

But it was exciting to think that the crown prince thought I had potential! This was the ultimate honor for a newly recruited court magician like me.

All right! Time to do a good job and live up to his expectations!

I pumped my first into the air, taking care not to drop the library books.

We set off from the royal capital first thing in the morning and headed for the northwestern region in a horse-drawn carriage carefully loaded with equipment and supplies. I gazed longingly at the appetizing heap of bread.

“That’s not for you to eat!” Luke snapped.

Rude. I would never do something like take other people’s food! I can’t imagine a worse thing.

“I told you to make sure you brought enough for yourself,” he said. When I revealed the contents of my bag, he laughed. “I see. There’s nothing but baked goods in that bag.”

I was glad to have lightened his mood. I cheerfully pulled out a custard cream croissant—the bakery’s most popular item—and took a bite. With its flaky texture and the melt-in-the-mouth sweetness of the custard filling, it was truly the flavor of happiness.

Outside the carriage, I watched as the scenery flew by and the royal knights followed alongside. In total, one hundred people were involved in this operation: around half were royal court magicians, while the rest were royal knights. I’d been told that one of them was Bismarck Alstreim, an accomplished knight who’d served for many years in the King’s Guard, and was currently commander of the second division of the order of royal knights.

According to Luke, the crown prince had expressly chosen the two of us and Alstreim. I couldn’t imagine why I would be included in such an illustrious group.

Mmm, bread...

In the midst of so many things I couldn’t get my head around, escapism was the answer for me. On the other hand, there was one real thing that pleased

me: Luke was acting as the platoon leader and commanding our group. It was nice to see him doing such an impressive job as a superior officer.

That snot-nosed kid has turned into a fine young man!

It was genuinely moving for me, as somebody who had known Luke ever since we were the same height. Even though he was much taller now, he'd been shorter than other kids back then. In contrast, I hadn't grown even a millimeter. That was a complaint I'd need to raise with God some time, but for now, it was at least heartening to see my old buddy doing such an upstanding job.

It took around half a day for the carriage to reach our destination. The mist surrounding the forest before us was as expected of a place known as the Misty Woods. To be honest, the name didn't get across just how low the visibility was.

"That's some seriously thick mist."

The name of the woods conjured up an image that was at odds with the reality we encountered. The forest wasn't veiled in a gentle mist; it was thick enough to keep you from making out someone's face even close by.

"Well, I've been here a few times before, and this is denser than normal," Luke said. "We should investigate whether this might not be a natural phenomenon."

"If it's not a natural phenomenon..." I paused in thought, and then an idea struck me. "Could it be water-type magic?"

"That seems likely." Luke nodded sagely.

"What if I blow the mist away with magic?"

"That would probably work, but it might reveal our presence to whoever is causing this. We should gather more information first."

We moved deeper into the woods, keeping a careful eye on our surroundings. The air was damp and cool on my skin.

I cast Search to scan the area for any evidence of monsters or other creatures, and I quickly found a lack of life. There didn't appear to be any animals, and I hardly heard so much as a bird's call. Taking care not to get separated from the group, I continued my survey.

“Hey, what’s this?” I called to Luke, spotting many tiny footprints.

“It appears to be...the tracks of a goblin lord’s troops.”

A goblin lord was a high-level goblin that would emerge naturally in areas of intense magical concentration. They were specialized leaders that used support magic to strengthen other goblins and command them in large numbers. The largest hordes to be found were made up of nearly one thousand goblins.

Because goblin hordes had wrecked towns and villages, the disaster ranking system designated goblin lords as a level-5 threat. However, goblins weren’t particularly strong monsters, so if A-rank adventurers worked together, they could suppress a goblin lord and its horde without too much trouble. With this many court magicians and royal knights in our contingent, no one would expect a difficult fight. We just had to make sure we lived up to expectations and beat the horde.

On the other hand, the magical concentration in this area was low, so it was strange that there should be a goblin lord around.

That was when something caught my attention. I saw the surface of a pond ripple and felt a faint rumble in the earth beneath me.

They’re here.

“Noelle, you handle the mist,” Luke instructed.

“On it.”

I cast Windy, and a strong breeze drove away the mist. But even once our view was clear, there was still no sign of goblins. Luke then cast Dispel to negate the effects of any support magic.

Right. Search would never discover them if they used a concealment spell.

An invisible wall disappeared, revealing a sprawling throng of goblins. I gasped as I saw two great green legs like tree trunks rising up at the back of the horde.

This isn’t right...

Goblin lords were fairly large monsters, but this was on another scale. The green giant that stood there was as big as an ogre—maybe even a dragon. It was the absolute highest level of goblin, a kind that only appeared very rarely in

areas of extreme magic concentration: a goblin emperor. Historically, goblin emperors had even flattened entire cities, earning them a threat level of 8.

Now I understood. This was why the crown prince had called up Luke and Alstreim and assembled such a large platoon.

This was clearly a lot for me to handle, but the crown prince believed in my potential. Now was no time to be scared.

“Let’s do this, Luke!”

“I knew you’d say that,” Luke said with an exasperated sigh. “But I’m with you all the way.”

I stood back-to-back with my old friend once again as the two of us faced our foes.

It was time to fight.

The goblin emperor appeared to have noticed that the support magic hiding the horde had been lifted. It brandished a huge, uprooted tree and let out an earth-shuddering roar: the goblin emperor’s call to arms.

All at once, the goblin troops advanced on us. As over a thousand of the monsters rushed forward, I fought back with a selection of ranged attacks. I started with Multicast, then maximized my magical power with Enhance and Mana Boost. I followed up with a double header of Spell Boost and Mana Charge as I let the goblins get in just close enough for me to attack them all at once.

Now.

“Wind Blast!”

I launched an explosion of compressed wind. It lifted the earth beneath our feet into the air, tore through the goblins, and sent them flying. The front line was devastated. Without delay, I raced toward the goblin emperor and launched another attack.

“Air Raid Storm!”

Knives of wind burst forth, but although they were tough enough to slice

through the surrounding trees like jelly, they didn't leave so much as a scratch on the goblin emperor's hide.

"What?! How can it be so tough?" I gasped, stunned by its unexpected endurance.

During the cooldown required after launching such a powerful technique, goblins came at me from either side, wielding stone swords. Fortunately, I knew I wouldn't need to deal with them myself.

"Lightning Blitz!"

The goblins crumpled as Luke's attack came crashing down.

"Thanks, Luke."

"Leave them to me."

For all my magical capacity and firepower, my flaw was that my weak spots were often exposed. Our basic strategy for taking on large monsters had always been for Luke to back me up, being a more balanced magician who didn't give openings.

"Why do you have to be so scattershot?" I could remember him lamenting. "At least give some thought to your next move!"

"If I think about the consequences, how can I push myself past my limits? I live for the moment!"

When we first met, we were always bashing our heads together because of the differences in our personalities and skill sets. Now, though, we could understand each other's intentions without needing to say anything. The two of us had devoted ourselves to magic and worked hard day after day to get to this point.

I still longed to compete with Luke. I wanted to become someone who could stand alongside him as his equal and rival, just like when we were students. That's why I had to get stronger.

As the youngest-ever adamantite-class magician, my old friend was miles ahead of me. It seemed like a laughable prospect that somebody like me, who bombed at a backwoods mages' guild, could ever be on a level playing field with

him. I knew that all too well, but I wanted to believe. Even if everyone else in the world said it was a waste of time, at least I would still believe in myself.

I had to believe that I could catch up to him and become the person I wanted to be. If I didn't believe in myself, then trying really would be a waste of time. I didn't mind taking small steps, as long as I was still moving forward.

This was no time to stop.

Hey, goblin emperor. Sorry about this, but I'm gonna have to grind you into the dirt.

I fixed my gaze on the green giant and advanced.

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Tirion Gray was third in command in the second division of the order of royal knights. He knew that this assignment was out of the ordinary. After all, not only had the crown prince himself taken charge, but he had deployed the second division commander Bismarck Alstreim, somebody who had worked closely with the crown prince in the King's Guard, and whom he trusted more than anyone else.

Also present were personnel from the royal court magicians' division. The youngest magician to ever reach the adamantite class, Luke Waldstein was the kingdom's great prodigy. Additionally, the crown prince had selected Noelle Springfield, the superhuman rookie who had saved the queen of Neunzelle's life before producing awe-inspiring results as an assistant at the Magical Potions Research Section.

Because of the significant responsibility that magi held, it wasn't always practical to call them up for operations at the last minute. Luke Waldstein and Noelle Springfield were comparatively easy to get hold of, and between them they had the greatest magical power the kingdom had to offer. In other words, calling them up was the boldest option available without bringing trouble to the daily business of the court.

The rest of the platoon was also made up of the most accomplished people from each unit. With their combined strength, it was not the kind of group that one would send to the Misty Woods, somewhere that even low-level

adventurers could take on. It was safe to assume that there was something unusual to be found there.

What's going to show up then? Tirion Gray thought. *A goblin lord? A basilisk? I can't discount the possibility of a wyvern. I'd prefer not to think about that, though...*

Wyverns stood at the top of the food chain in the western continent. Having built up the possibility that this situation was the work of an apex predator, Tirion found it somewhat anticlimactic when they found the goblin footprints.

Is that it? A mere goblin lord?

Even though goblin lords were dangerous enough to have a threat level of 5, it certainly wasn't the kind of monster that would worry a big shot in the order of royal knights like Tirion.

I expected there would probably be something more dangerous than that. I suppose even His Royal Highness can err in his judgement once in a while.

Other neighboring countries had begun to take notice of Michael Ardenfeld and his impressive intellect. He had defeated another nation's grandmaster in a game of chess, leading others to suggest he could see into the future, but Tirion was beginning to wonder if the crown prince's intelligence may be flawed after all.

However, when he saw the green giant appear before him, those thoughts immediately disappeared.

A goblin emperor?! And even by that standard, this thing is huge!

He knew that as the highest-level goblins, goblin emperors were a great rarity, found only in areas of extreme magical concentration. They were a Level 8 threat, known to destroy cities. And yet, this monster seemed to transcend even that.

This couldn't be a mutant, could it...?

Some had speculated that if the magical concentration in a place was high enough, exceptionally powerful mutant species could appear.

Even a typical monster can become a serious danger if it mutates, but a

mutant goblin emperor? Tirion thought, doubting that even the crown prince had predicted this. *As it stands, we're bound to be overrun if we try to fight. What should we—*

An intense wind, strong enough to rattle the ground beneath his feet, brought him back to his senses. With a great explosion, many chunks of earth and rock were lifted into the air. With that single attack, the front line of goblins was swept away without a trace.

What is this chaotic approach...?

Tirion couldn't believe his eyes. The extraordinary destructive force of the attacks was reminiscent of Gawain Stark, a man whose firepower was unmatched in the kingdom. Moreover, Tirion had never known anybody to work so quickly; this speed represented a pinnacle that perhaps even the magi couldn't reach.

He'd heard rumors about the girl who had demolished the magical measurement wall and held her own against an assassin wielding a supreme relic, but this was ridiculous. He watched in fascination as the new court magician unhesitatingly charged towards the green giant.

She's leading the attack on a giant that the most experienced fighters would cower before.

He trembled at the thought of such willpower. Her talent was so astounding that even an old hand like him couldn't fully fathom her power.

Who is *this girl?*

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The goblin emperor was on an entirely different plane than the monsters I'd encountered. It was so absurdly strong that it could rip up trees like they were weeds and launch them with enough force to cause the devastation you'd see in your wildest nightmares. Just being hit by the rubble and dirt clods scattered in the wake of each attack would be enough to instantly take someone out of commission.

In that case, my top priority is to avoid it all.

“Spell Boost!”

I accelerated time and dodged its attacks. Luke and I were acting as decoys, drawing the goblin emperor’s attention to let the other court magicians chip away at its strength with a barrage of spells. We coordinated masterfully as I deployed summoning circles on top of one another, and the magicians’ attacks erupted thunderously.

But when the fine smoke that had enveloped the goblin emperor dissipated, I was shocked to see that after such a relentless attack, it seemed totally unharmed. Even for a monster that posed a threat to whole cities, its endurance was astounding.

It had to be a mutant. Its hide must have mutated to become resistant to magic.

“What can we do?” Luke exclaimed. “A brute force approach won’t cut it with this kind of opposition.”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “I have a plan.”

Still standing beside me, he stared in shock. “What is it?”

My explanation was simple. “The way to deal with an opponent with high endurance is to overwhelm it with maximum firepower until it can’t take any more. That’s my foolproof plan for every situation.”

“It was stupid of me to expect anything more from you...”

“Huh?! It’s a great idea!”

I thought I had the perfect plan!

“I’ll give the orders as usual,” Luke said in spite of my protests. “Follow my lead.”

I wasn’t in total agreement, but I decided to do the grown-up thing and accept his instructions. After all, Luke had always been the tactician when we’d worked together before.

“Focus your attacks on its eyes,” he said. “We need to weaken its vision.”

I followed Luke’s orders, figuring the eyes would be a more vulnerable spot

than its other areas. The giant blocked my attacks with its arms and hurled a barrage of trees at us, but those trees were Luke's target.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a lone knight moving towards the giant, almost too quickly to see. The charging knight was clearly no ordinary soldier. It was the veteran second division commander, specially called up by the crown prince himself: Bismarck Alstreim.

I immediately cast another spell. I cast Spell Boost—the support spell that accelerates time for the target—on the second division commander. If he could move faster, his offensive power would increase massively.

The battle-hardened swordsman moved forward in a flash and cleaved through the resilient hide of the goblin emperor. In the next moment, Luke took aim at its wound and launched another attack.

"Paralyzing Lightning!"

That spell's light was beautiful. It was captivating. The lightning brushed past the tip of Alstreim's nose as it arced inexorably towards the goblin emperor's wound. It happened so fast that onlookers might not have noticed, but as a lover of magic, I knew what I was seeing. That degree of control over magic seemed beyond human capability.

And I knew the tremendous amount of effort that had gone into it.

The giant was slowing down.

To paralyze a monster that size with a single strike was the work of a genius—and Luke Waldstein was that genius. Not only that, but he'd put in the work to reach that level. That was why he was the youngest magician ever to be promoted to the adamantite class, and why he was so far ahead of me. I knew he was an opponent that I might never catch up to, but I had no intention of giving up. I couldn't stop myself wishing to fight alongside him like in the old days.

And so...

Luke turned to me and opened his mouth as if to tell me something. But before I could hear what he had to say, there was something I knew I must do: if I wanted to get closer to Luke's level, I needed to give this my full power right now.

I'll catch up with you one day, no doubt about it.

With that thought in my mind, I was ready, and I was determined.

"Wind Blast!"

My attack's trajectory was smoother than usual, probably thanks to Luke inspiring me. The salvo of wind was concentrated carefully on the small wounded area, even if my effort wasn't *quite* as neat as Luke's.

A thunderous noise filled my ears as the attack blew a cloud of dust into the air. The giant wobbled violently and its knees gave in. The earth shook. The wound wasn't fatal, but it was certainly bad enough to keep the goblin emperor from fighting much at all. Luke's paralyzing magic had already slowed it down, and now its movements only became more sluggish.

The balance of the battle had rapidly swung in our favor. It wasn't long before we dealt the decisive blow. The other magicians and the knights tore into the goblin emperor in one swift move, and soon it could no longer move an inch.

As Luke turned to me and smiled, I mumbled, "I knew it."

That's when I realized that Luke was bound to achieve the rank of magus before long. My friend and rival was such a long way ahead of me, but I didn't want to let him win. I wanted to once again be somebody who could compete with him on equal terms.

That means I need to try and become a magus myself.

Nobody would believe a goal of that scale was something that I could achieve;

they'd see it as a joke. Even so, I couldn't give up.

I kept my wild dream close to my heart, but I kept it a secret too. I wished to be able to stand next to Luke as a true rival, but for now, I wasn't prepared to say that out loud.

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There was a room in the Crimson Palace decorated with vivid red carpets and silver crystal sculptures. The masterpieces lining the walls were so valuable that one could sell a single painting and never have to work another day in their life. A refined aroma filled the air.

This was the office of none other than His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld.

"How did it go?" the prince asked. He was keen to hear the outcome of his efforts to personally order the new magician to be called up for the operation in the Misty Woods. In the sofa opposite him sat a knight: Bismarck Alstreim, commander of the second division of the order of royal knights.

"She exceeded expectations," Alstreim replied. "She fought diligently on the front line, not backing down even in the face of a mutant goblin emperor. She evaded its attacks with extraordinary speed, and her prodigious firepower decided the outcome of the battle. Not only that, but she possesses skills that go beyond just magical ability."

"Oh?" the prince said, intrigued. "Do go on."

"Right before I made my move, she cast support magic on me," Alstreim elaborated. "In the heat of battle, she intuitively understood what I was doing and used magic to maximize the effectiveness of my attack. Even from a far distance, she managed it perfectly without a verbal incantation. I can think of no other magician who could do that under such circumstances. She was perceptive and calm, even though the battle was so tough. And her situational awareness was second to none. In that moment, I truly felt that Noelle Springfield has something that can't be described in terms of one's ability as a magician."

"That's quite remarkable, coming from the second greatest swordsman in the

kingdom," the prince responded. He breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. "And to think that she did even better than I'd predicted! This is all very interesting."

Bismarck Alstreim found the crown prince's reaction surprising. Michael Ardenfeld excelled in so many fields and had the expectations of the entire kingdom on his shoulders, but in spite of his renown, he always seemed bored. The only time Alstreim could remember seeing him smile in recent years was when he lost to the chess grandmaster touted as the best in all the nearby countries—but even that losing streak ended after a few more matches.

"I resign," the grandmaster had finally mumbled, seemingly with great difficulty, as he hung his head. "This is hard to admit, but you've got the best of me."

"I see," was all the crown prince had to say in response, casting his eyes downward. Alstreim had thought he seemed disappointed, perhaps even a little sad. It was the boredom and isolation of a man who always comes out on top.

That side of the prince was only visible to somebody like Bismarck Alstreim, who was closer to him than anybody else as a member of the King's Guard. That closeness was how he could tell the prince seemed to have taken an interest in Noelle Springfield. She was someone who confounded expectations.

Someone he hoped would upend the boring reality of his world.

"Shall we put in another request for her to join the King's Guard?" Alstreim suggested. "When mutated, a goblin emperor must have a threat level of at least 10. This surely warrants an increase in her rank. It should be easy to lure her away now."

"No, things are fine as they are. There is some sense in what Gawain Stark told me. What's the use in picking a flower while it's still trying to bloom? There's a right time for everything." Michael Ardenfeld gazed out of the window. "And there may be another incident still to come."

"Another incident, Your Highness?"

"There was the assassination attempt on the Queen of Neunzelle. Then there was the infection in the northern region. And now, a mutant goblin emperor suddenly appears in the Misty Woods of all places. Doesn't it all seem like too

much for mere coincidence?”

“You can’t be saying...” Alstreim gasped.

“If there is a next time, it’ll be in the western region. That’s my prediction.” The crown prince narrowed his golden eyes and smiled. “Now, what does she have in store for us next?”

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After hearing about the problem with their crystal balls, the guild chief and the vice guild chief rushed to the marquis’s villa.

“What kind of problem could there possibly be?” they choked, completely out of breath after running to get there.

“I would’ve thought you two would know the answer to that better than anyone,” the marquis responded. He sighed deeply as he continued staring out of the window, the afternoon sun shining in. “I want to hear your explanation. What made you do this?”

A chill ran down the guild chief’s spine upon hearing the marquis’s stern tone.

Huh? he thought. *What could he be angry about...?*

They’d met the deadline. The goods were of good quality; they’d paid a lot to bring in high-quality crystal balls and improved on them themselves. The guild chief was sure that these products were superior to anything they’d ever produced before.

Then...he must be annoyed that we changed our process without warning!

“My apologies, sir!” the guild chief said. “You see, we’re always diligently working to produce better and better magical items. Fear of change is the greatest barrier to progress. We must accept the risk and bravely move forwards. That is our ethos. I understand that you may be surprised to find that we have changed our methods, but I’m sure that somebody with such distinguished taste as yourself can recognize the value of our new crystal balls.”

The marquis listened quietly. There was a long silence before he eventually spoke.

“Indeed. Yes, I can recognize the value of these crystal balls,” he said, his tone

not giving way to any emotions. “These items were purchased from elsewhere and superficially patched up, leaving them recognizable in form only. I suppose that you might say they are visually more beautiful than they were before, but appearance is not what matters here. A skilled artisan put their heart and soul into the product, and that true beauty has been lost.” He turned to the guild chief. “What you have produced is a lie.”

The guild chief couldn’t understand what the marquis was saying. How could this be happening after all the time and money they had spent?

“Wait, please! I think I may have misunderstood you. The new crystal balls are surely far better than what you saw before. Perhaps there is some kind of mistake, sir?”

“You know nothing,” the marquis replied coldly.

“My deepest apologies!” the guild chief blurted out in a total panic. He had to do something to get through this and repair the relationship with the marquis. “I realize we might have failed to meet your expectations on this occasion, sir, but next time—! Next time we’ll be sure to live up to that standard. We’ll return to our old process.”

“Is that something you can do?”

“Absolutely! What could possibly stop us from doing what we did in the past?” the guild chief answered, attempting a reassuring smile.

However, the marquis looked on stoically. “I took the liberty of investigating the two of you. I’m embarrassed by my own carelessness. My excitement after seeing such splendid products blinded me to the truth. It’s hard not to be ashamed of myself for being so foolish, but how could I have known? Who could have imagined that such miraculous items could be produced under those awful conditions?” he said, his voice as cold as ever. “It appears that you mistreated the worker who was in charge of making crystal balls and dismissed her. I heard this from one of your former employees. I was also informed that all of that wonderful work was her doing.”

“With all due respect, I must say it sounds like there has been a huge misunderstanding. It is true that we dismissed the staff member who used to make our crystal balls, but this was because she wasn’t up to the job. It’s as

simple as that. I understand that you trust the word of the employees who quit our workshop, but isn't it only natural that people of that sort would have something bad to say about their former workplace? It couldn't be further from the truth, so please rest assured—"

"You think I didn't bother to ascertain the truth?" the marquis shot back. "Let me spell this out for you. Right now, your guild has a horrendous reputation. There's the false labelling of products bought in from elsewhere and improper deals with smaller companies. Making the mages in your employ work under life-threatening conditions is another issue. The union has already been made aware, and you can expect a business suspension order to come very soon. You will be stripped of authorization to operate a mages' guild."

The guild chief was unable to breathe. *A business suspension order...? How could they think something so ridiculous would be necessary...?*

The success that had nearly been within his grasp—and the years of prosperity he had earned—were all crumbling away.

"This could be a good opportunity," the marquis added. "You two have no love for magical items or for your staff. You're clearly not suited to this profession. Find yourself other work as soon as you can."

The guild chief had nothing more to say. He left the room like a soul departing its body. The vice chief bowed agitatedly and ran after him.

As he left the marquis's estate, the guild chief's face showed no emotion. *What happened...? Where did I go wrong...?*

He knew the answer. There was only one person who had caused this mess: the one who dismissed the supposedly useless little mage girl. He couldn't deny that any longer. The marquis and the archduke weren't fools; they'd seen the true value of what the girl made, and that's what had set their business dealings in motion. That little girl had done better work than anyone else in that atrocious environment.

No amount of regret was enough. Because he'd thrown away one person, everything he had ever gained was gone. Now, they were facing a business suspension order. They'd no longer be able to run a mages' guild.

“How could this happen...? Why would they...?” the guild chief muttered, but as much as he tried to deny it, there was no changing the reality before him.

After wandering aimlessly for a while, he ended up at a carriage positioned outside the marquis’s estate. In the carriage was a heap of crystal balls. He stared at the balls, the root of his downfall, as anger slowly bubbled up inside him. He staggered over and picked one up.

If this one job had gone right, he could’ve had everything—but now, he could hardly bear to live anymore.

“AAARRGHHH!!” he screamed, throwing the crystal ball to the ground.

The vice chief tried to stop him, but his words couldn’t get through. The chief grabbed one crystal ball after another and went on smashing them, causing an endless cacophony of splintering glass. At his feet, shards lay scattered about everywhere.

“Damn it! Why?! How could this happen to me...?” he sobbed, raging like a wounded beast until he had destroyed every last crystal ball on the carriage.

Chapter 6: The Jet-Black Dragon

I woke up at five in the morning, three hours before I had to be at work. I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

My futon was warm and comforting. *The grind can wait till tomorrow,* it cajoled me sweetly. Being weak-willed, I wrapped myself in my blanket and allowed myself another five minutes of sleep, but no more than that. I then readied myself and leaped out of bed with renewed vigor.

In the cool morning air, I washed my face with fresh water and forcefully banished my remaining drowsiness. Truthfully, I wanted to crawl back into bed, but I knew I wouldn't catch up to Luke that way. I had no choice but to work hard, doing things I didn't want to do. It was the only way to become the version of myself that I envisioned: somebody who could stand up and say, "I've got this!"

I put on some light clothes and made my way outside, making sure I didn't wake up my mother as I left. I raced through the city streets in the dim morning light.

"Noelle!" the vendor at the newspaper stand called to me. "You're full of energy today!"

I gave a greeting as I ran by. This was all part of the training regimen I'd resolved to do.

"You want a training regimen?" Letitia had said when I'd brought up the idea. As another female magician, she was my idol. "I don't mind coming up with something if that's what you want."

I'd then taken the exercises Letitia showed me and organized them into my own training regimen. I'd made it quite intense, so just getting all the way through it was tough going.

Even so, I was sure that Luke was doing even more. I needed to be working at least this hard to reach his level. Until then, I had to put everything into my own methods.

After my training, I showered and alleviated any physical fatigue via magic. Once I changed into my uniform, I went to the palace.

“You’ve been working like crazy lately,” Luke said. “Is something going on?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I deflected. “You sure you’re not imagining things?”

It would just make the task even harder for me if he knew what I was doing and started doing more training himself. I had to keep him in the dark and work hard behind the scenes so that I could quickly close the gap between us. This was the secret plan my brilliant mind had concocted! This was Operation: Training!

Heh. Luke thinks he’s so smart, but he has no idea what I’m plotting!

Even during official training in the royal court magicians’ division, I made sure to do at least a little more than Luke. “Another drill, please!” I’d call out. Meanwhile, I read grimoires during my breaks on the weak areas I’d avoided learning about before.

My friend had risen through the ranks at a younger age than anyone in history. My desire to get the better of him seemed foolish, considering my failure at a remote mages’ guild, but giving up now would be a waste of everything I’d been through. I’d decided that I was going to believe in myself, no matter what anybody else said.

“Starting today, you’re a bronze-class magician,” Gawain said one day.

Still in my workaholic mode, I bowed. “Thank you very much, Captain!”

This was the second time I’d received a special two-rank promotion. Gawain told me this was in recognition of my efforts in defeating the goblin emperor and helping the brewers of the Magical Potions Research Section.

“The section chief with the intense glasses spoke very highly of you,” Gawain continued. “Apparently you were the first assistant who could actually do the work.”

My hard work was paying off! I was putting my all into it, and others’ appreciation of that made my heart sing. Things were looking good for my dreams of success: the bronze class was the sixth rank, and while the status of

magus was still a ways off, an increase of two ranks in one go was no mean feat.

The fact that I was the second fastest to ever reach this position was making waves in the court. I was irritated to still be behind the absolute fastest person—no prizes for guessing who *that* was—but for now, I was on the right track. I still had time to become the unbeatable version of myself.

“You don’t have the same weird look on your face as last time,” Gawain remarked as I enjoyed my triumphant thoughts. He sounded surprised.

“What weird look?”

“The last time we had this conversation, your eyes were practically popping out while your mouth flapped open.”

How embarrassing. I supposed I had been stunned speechless at the time, but an adult woman like me wouldn’t want to be caught with such an undignified expression.

“Sorry, my bad,” Gawain said in response to my horror. “But this is a sign of how much you’ve grown since then.”

That was probably good, even though I wasn’t sure I personally agreed.

“I have a goal,” I said.

“What sort of goal?”

“Like, there’s somebody I want to beat. But, um, I don’t really want to go into detail. You might laugh at me for being too bold.” I let out an uneasy laugh.

“Someone you want to beat, huh?” Gawain gave me a serious look. “I bet you want to become a magus.”

“H-How could you tell?” I stammered, frozen.

“You’re pretty easy to read.”

I thought I’d been so careful to avoid letting anyone find out, but here was Gawain, figuring out my deepest secrets. He seemed quite absentminded, like me, so it was hard to imagine that he would be so good at recognizing such emotional subtleties.

Then, does that mean...?

“I’m so sorry!” I blurted out. “I get that you’ve been watching over me in the beginning of my career, which means you’re good at understanding my deepest feelings, but I’m working really hard in my job as a royal court magician right now, so I’m in no position to return your affections...”

“Not again!”

No? But I was so sure this time... I stood there and racked my brains, trying to understand.

“You asked Letitia for tips on creating a personal training regimen, right?” Gawain continued. “I also hear you’ve been very motivated during training within the unit. And more specifically, you’ve been competing to do one more drill than whatever Luke does. Knowing that, it isn’t hard to guess the rest.”

“I-I’m impressed...”

Wow, Captain. You really watch over your staff carefully, don’t you?

But still, this meant that he’d figured me out.

“It’s dumb, isn’t it? The idea that I could compete with Luke.” I smiled awkwardly, fearing rejection. It was the defense mechanism I used to avoid getting hurt.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Gawain asked, amazed. “Isn’t it good to have a goal? Isn’t it good to aim higher? There’s no reason to take issue with that. Am I wrong?”

“I just thought you might laugh and tell me I don’t stand a chance...”

“If anyone thinks that way, let them laugh. It just shows how big and exciting your dream is.” Gawain grinned at me. “You’ve got what it takes—I really do believe that.”

Rejection was all I’d known at my previous job. I’d hardly dared to dream that anyone would speak to me this kindly, or that others would look out for me. I couldn’t hide the stupid smile taking over my face.

“But right now, I’m really strapped for cash...” Gawain added, seeming embarrassed. “Sorry, but do you mind waiting for your reward? I’ll get it to you as soon as I get paid.”

Even his faults were admirable. What a wonderful boss!

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“Letitia!” the little rookie magician said, looking up at her. “Can you show me some training exercises?”

Just a day before, the girl had defeated a mutant goblin emperor in the Misty Woods. That was the kind of success story that one might expect the average adventurer to keep on boasting about for the next ten years. But after accomplishing something above and beyond the requirements of a royal court magician, she still didn’t seem satisfied.

She had the look of somebody who wanted desperately to become stronger. She wanted a training regimen, and she wanted vitamin supplements too.

“Whoa! So smart! So cool!” the girl exclaimed in awe when Letitia told her what she knew.

She was an odd one. She would polish off the eating contest items at the cafeteria like it was nothing, and now she was reading ancient grimoires too difficult for anyone else to understand. She was somebody who found what interested her and rushed headlong into it. At the same time, she wasn’t very perceptive when it came to other people’s opinions, and even now that she was gaining a reputation around the court, she didn’t appear to have let it get to her head.

“I’m amazed that everyone heaps so much praise for a nobody like me,” she would always say. “I’ll just have to keep on working hard!”

But now, she had begun to add another comment on the regular: “I want to be able to compete with him like I did in the old days!”

Luke Waldstein was the prodigy who had risen through the ranks faster than anyone else in history, and she seemed serious about catching up to him.

“I can’t let him get the better of me,” she’d say. “I know it won’t be easy, but I feel like if I give up, I’ll lose something really important.”

She was motivated and hardworking. With her unpretentious personality and tendency to treat everyone with equal kindness, she’d proven popular with the

others in the unit.

“Bronze already?” somebody said to her. “Damn, you’re really something, kid.”

“Who are you calling kid?!”

When somebody progressed this quickly in their job, coworkers would often be spiteful, but that didn’t seem to be the case at all for her. She was always surrounded by people. She was nothing like the boy she had in her sights.

Letitia knew what Luke Waldstein had been like when he first joined the royal court magicians’ division. She remembered his early days, when he emotionlessly achieved success after success and got promoted faster than anybody else.

Luke Waldstein produced results with the ruthless efficiency of a machine. That’s how everyone saw him at that time. He saw no value in connecting with others, pushing people away in favor of stacking up outstanding achievements to further his pursuit of career advancement. The people around him didn’t just envy him; they feared him.

He barely slept. He arrived at work before everyone else and went home last, even on his days off. Despite the warnings from his concerned superiors, this situation continued unabated. When he was officially off-duty, he still insisted on working, and yet his impressive results kept coming.

“This has gone on long enough. It’s going to affect your health,” Letitia told him after calling him over one early afternoon.

“I don’t care about my health,” Luke replied, avoiding her eyes. “There’s something else that matters to me more.”

His insistence that something was more important than his own health made Letitia uncomfortable. Did he really prioritize his career that much? She realized that as the son of Duke Waldstein, he was expected to be successful. His complicated situation as the heir to a distinguished household was also something that Letitia understood well, coming from a noble family herself. However, that made her even less inclined to take to somebody so

pathologically obsessed with prestige.

"Just let him do what he likes," Gawain had suggested. "What does it matter if he hurts himself? He's not a kid anymore. He can take responsibility for himself. You have to let him learn from his own mistakes."

To some extent, Letitia agreed with the captain that she shouldn't interfere, but at the same time, she knew she had a responsibility to Luke as his superior officer.

"You haven't been eating, have you?" she said to Luke at the time, sighing and offering him some bread she had bought.

He flinched with surprise, but he still managed to mutter, "Thank you..."

He could be surprisingly well-mannered, presumably due to his upbringing.

From that point onwards, Letitia took it upon herself to give him food, knowing that he would skip meals the second she looked the other way. It was as if she was feeding a cat that only cared about itself yet still came to her for food.

I can't understand him, Letitia thought. *Why would he go to such lengths to be promoted?*

She was having one of those days with him when she came upon his journal. She recognized the Waldstein family crest embroidered on the cover and picked it up so that she could return it. Suddenly, she noticed that something had fallen out from inside the journal: three photographs taken with a magic camera. They showed a petite girl who appeared to be unaware she was having her photograph taken.

A little sister...? No, that's not what this looks like...

The photographs were damaged here and there. He must have been carrying them around with him for years.

Letitia felt like she had an inkling of what was so important to Luke.

Little by little, she came to understand Luke Waldstein over the following months. He was actually quite a different person from what she had first

imagined—but how was she to know?

Luke was a prodigy, blessed with talent in anything he turned his hand to. Who could have guessed that he was working himself to the bone to bring his unrequited crush closer to him? He must have had plenty of options; with his looks and position, he could surely take his pick from any number of distinguished beauties. From the perspective of social standing, that was clearly a problem-free route to happiness, but he was throwing all of that away for one person. What a fool.

This was utterly at odds with his calm demeanor, and so was the fact that while he seemed to manage everything with such confidence, it was based on huge amounts of preparation, training, and effort. He really was such a pigheaded boy.

After being promoted to the mithril class, he became more personable, which significantly improved the perception others had of him. Other coworkers would make comments like, “Everyone grows up eventually,” but they didn’t know the full story. Knowing what drove Luke, Letitia could only sigh in exasperation.

“If his friend doesn’t succeed here, he’s bound to lose his composure,” Letitia murmured. His attitude and actions were actually quite consistent once she better understood him.

Letitia had grown quite fond of Luke since she began giving him food. It was hard not to worry.

This really isn’t looking good for him. He seems prepared to fight anyone if it’s for her sake.

Recently, it had become clear that there was a real danger of Luke losing his time with that girl.

“There have been discussions about recruiting her for the King’s Guard,” Letitia said.

“I know.” Luke nodded.

“How do you feel about that? She wouldn’t be your apprentice anymore.”

“If Noelle is happy with it, it’s fine. It wouldn’t be right for me to limit her options just for my own selfish reasons.”

“And what if she isn’t happy with it?”

“Then I’ll do whatever it takes to stop it from happening.”

“You’re up against the crown prince, you know. If you slip up, there could be serious—”

“I don’t care. Noelle is far more important.”

Luke’s stubbornness brought out a selfish side in him. Even if it meant making an enemy out of the entire kingdom—or the entire world—he wouldn’t hesitate to stand with Noelle. No matter what Letitia said, that would never change.

Only one person had the power to affect this situation, but that key person had no idea what was going on.

All I can do is help behind the scenes to avoid any problems, Letitia thought, rolling her eyes at her troublesome younger coworkers.

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Lunchtime had arrived, and I’d just eaten plenty of food to give me the energy needed for the afternoon’s work.

“An expedition to the western region?” I repeated, having listened to Luke explain our next job.

“That’s right. It’s another request from the crown prince.”

It was hard to believe. Even though this was the second time I’d been called up personally by the prince, it didn’t feel real yet. How could I, the girl who’d lost her last job and been excluded from all other magic careers at home, be in this situation?

Of course, this was something to be grateful for. I was rising through the ranks, and I was succeeding as a royal court magician, working in my preferred area of magic duels.

“But why the expedition?” I asked.

“The details are a secret. Everyone from the Misty Woods battle has been

called upon, though. I figure something must be expected soon."

"Another monster on the disaster ranking scale?"

"We should be prepared for that, yes."

I clenched my fist. This was exciting news! If a strong monster appeared, that would be a chance for me to produce more results. And if I worked hard and got promoted quickly, maybe I'd be able to break Luke's record.

I'll break his record, and oh boy will I brag about it! I resolved. However, I had something else to do first.

"I definitely want to be part of the expedition," I said, "but before that, I'd also like to take a couple of days off."

"Is something going on?"

"My mom's class reunion. She's nervous about going alone and wants me to come with her."

The town where I'd worked at the Mages' Guild was out on the edges of the western region. To get there from the capital, we would have to order a carriage and tell the coach driver how to get there. My mother was raised in the countryside and wasn't confident she could be a proficient guide, so she wanted my help.

"Sorry, I know paid leave is an urban legend. This is probably an unreasonable request..." I mumbled nervously.

Luke looked astonished for a moment, but then he smiled. "It's not unreasonable at all. Please have a nice time with your mother."

I was amazed that it was really that easy to take time off. I knew that it officially existed, but I'd been sure that in practice, I'd need a good excuse like sickness or a family emergency.

Non-exploitative companies are incredible!

And so it was confirmed that I would accompany my mother to our frontier town in the western region.

"Hey, Noelle," my mother pestered me. "Any developments with that boy?"

“I told you it’s not like that with Luke.”

The carriage went on shaking to and fro as my mother’s salvo of marriage talk washed over me.

“Thanks. See you later,” my mother said once we’d arrived and she was heading for her class reunion meeting spot.

“Have fun,” I called, waving goodbye.

This was my first time returning here, but the town hadn’t changed one bit. It brought back painful memories.

“Good grief. To think that in three years of working here, the only things you’ve managed to produce are crystal balls anyone could make! You should consider how I feel, having such a waste of space working here.”

I remembered how I’d struggled with my job and been treated like I was worthless, only to get fired. I remembered how I’d wanted to work with magic but couldn’t get a job anywhere I went.

“Regrettably, we have decided not to move forward with your application at this time.”

Nobody had wanted me here, and that still hurt. I had no desire to go anywhere near my old workplace; as if to escape it, I began walking in the opposite direction.

That’s when I heard a voice from behind me.

“Noelle?” a familiar voice rang out. “It *is* you! Noelle!”

When I turned around and saw that grown-up face, my heart sang with excitement.

“What? Nina?! No way! It’s been so long!”

Nina Lawrence, a friend I’d played with nearly every day before I went to the magic academy of my dreams, was right before my eyes.

I met Nina in the days when my life revolved around climbing trees and catching bugs. Our first encounter happened one day when I saved her from

some bullies.

“Super Ultimate Magician Noelle is here!” I announced rambunctiously. “If you wanna bully her, you gotta go through me first!”

I couldn’t resist letting out the energy from within me, feeling no guilt in going around and beating down every bully I could get my hands on. My exploits earned me the fearsome nickname of the Deadliest Hands in the West.

“Take this! Ultra Super Final Magic Punch!”

I was clearly itching to follow my dream of becoming a magician, but I didn’t actually know how to use magic, so I relied on my fists.

I recalled their cries of anguish. “Dang it! This ain’t over!”

Then I’d smirk. “Justice prevails!”

I racked up a tally of four hundred fights without defeat, and in the process, I gained a following among the children I saved.

Nina was a particularly big fan. She was the beloved daughter of a wealthy household, and she had just moved to my rural town. She wasn’t used to the place, and it made her a target for bullies. Apparently, I had come to her rescue in her greatest hour of need.

“Wow, Noelle! You’re so cool!” she’d exclaim. I wasn’t complaining.

After repeatedly striking up conversations, Nina began to come along with me. Her eyes sparkled with delight as I taught her tricks of the trade like how to climb trees or punch bullies. I had no toys and spent my days running around fields; from her pampered perspective, it must’ve been a very different world.

“I want to be just like you, Noelle!” she told me one day. “You take on boys bigger than you and save other kids from bullies. Maybe I can’t do those things, but I want to try and be a little bit more like you!”

Nobody had ever said anything like that to me before. It made me really happy, but at the same time, *I* looked up to *her*.

Unlike little ol’ country bumpkin me, Nina’s every move conveyed elegant sophistication. She could play the violin, and she was brilliant at drawing. And most importantly of all, her house was filled to the brim with books. There were

so many about magic—too many for me to read in one lifetime. I was incredibly jealous.

“Noelle,” Nina said one day, seeing my glum expression. “You can borrow as many books as you like, you know. Nobody reads my great-grandpa’s books anymore.”

I gratefully accepted the offer and soon found myself engrossed in those faded grimoires. That was probably when I developed my preference for reading old books. I also had her to thank for giving me that place to study so that I managed to qualify for a magic academy in the capital. I was so appreciative of everything she gave me.

I could remember how much I looked forward to playing with her when I visited my hometown after enrolling at the academy. However, on the first day I was back, I was shocked to find nobody home when I went to the end of the road that led to Nina’s house.

“The Lawrences?” somebody said when I asked about them. “Oh, they moved away. Their daughter recovered from her respiratory illness.”

Of course, Nina was a rich family’s daughter. It was only when I was an adult that I understood she hadn’t decided to leave me—she was a child and couldn’t make her own choices.

I figured I’d never see her again. Joy surged through me as I took in the pleasant surprise. It had been so long, and I had all kinds of things I wanted to tell her, but I didn’t know where to start. Nina giggled as I struggled to find the words.

“So you’re a royal court magician now?” she asked.

“How did you know?!”

“I heard a Noelle had joined their ranks and knew right away.” Her voice was as calm and gentle as it had always been. “When I heard that you were such a big success, I wasn’t surprised in the slightest. I knew you could do it.”

“Well, the magic career hasn’t been all good. Things were really bad at one point. I didn’t even have anywhere to work.”

“I know it’s hard for women to get magic-related jobs. It’s been a struggle for me too.”

“Really?”

“But I was sure that if I worked hard, I’d get to see you again,” she said, smiling sweetly.

“Do you have time to spare? I’m free right now.”

I decided to bring Nina along to my old haunt: Big Belly Cafeteria, the eatery run by the town’s Adventurers’ Guild. This was where soldiers came for action.

As I passed under the curtain, the chef became teary-eyed once he caught sight of me. “Hello there, young lady. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it certainly has,” I replied, happy to be remembered.

“What’ll it be?”

“One Big Belly Meal, please. How about you, Nina?”

“I’ll have the daily special.”

The chef skillfully began to cook while customers gossiped about me at a nearby table.

“Wow, that girl’s dead meat,” I heard one of them say.

“Can that kid really handle a Big Belly Meal?”

Kid? I thought indignantly. *I’m a refined, intellectual adult, and I’m smoking hot to boot!*

Damn it. I’ll show you! Just you watch...

Twenty minutes later, my plate was sparkling clean. The other customers stared at me in astonishment.

“No way...”

“That girl’s stomach is something else...”

I just wished that people would finally take me seriously as a big eater.

Nina shot me a sneaky smile as she sipped her tea. “You’ve always had such a

big appetite.”

“As a kid? Really?”

“That’s right. When you had dinner at my house, you ate so much that even my normally reserved mother was astonished. It was so funny.”

Old memories came flooding back.

That’s true. I remember the food at Nina’s house being so good that I ate as if I was trying to fit two days’ worth in at once.

That must have been when my ability to eat huge amounts of food started to increase dramatically. I had no idea at the time, but in hindsight, I could see that I’d been something of a difficult child.

“Um... It’s a bit late now, but sorry...” I said.

“Why? I just want to thank you, Noelle. You saved me from my boring everyday life. You don’t have to hold yourself back. I’m glad that you never tried to be a perfectly good girl.”

I was flattered, but I also got the feeling I’d been a bad influence. I’d spent all that time teaching a well-to-do young lady how to climb trees and punch bullies. In the cold light of day, my behavior as a child didn’t seem worth admiring...

As I rued my youthful indiscretions, Nina continued. “I became a witch doctor thanks to your influence, you know. It was all because of the healing magic that you taught me.”

“Wait, you’re a witch doctor?”

I was surprised. It wasn’t an easy profession to get into: you needed to have a national qualification. It was one of the toughest jobs to get in magic, and only the best of the best could do it.

“There are still hardly any female witch doctors around, right?” I said. “I’m really impressed!”

“Go on. I like it when you compliment me.”

“So smart! So cool! Nina, you’re the best!”

She giggled happily.

A witch doctor, huh? That's really something.

"But actually, I've been working another job too," Nina added. "I bet you'll never guess."

"What is it?"

"I'm an adventurer."

"Huh?!" I repeated it back to her in disbelief. This was even more surprising that she'd led me to believe.

She smiled impishly. "I do adventurer work as a healer."

Anybody could work as an adventurer, regardless of their rank or background, so the majority of adventurers were commoners. Since I'd heard that upper-class people often mocked adventurers, that made this news particularly surprising. Why would a posh girl like Nina become an adventurer?

"Adventurers are responsible for protecting towns and villages from monster attacks, aren't they?" Nina explained. "I wanted to be able to defend vulnerable people against the danger posed by monsters. Just like what you did for me."

"I really admire that. You're amazing, Nina."

This grown-up version of Nina was dazzling. I was happy to be able to fully congratulate her on her impressive achievements.

"Well, my job didn't work out so great." I remembered the last time I was sitting here after reuniting with an old friend. *"I can't help comparing the two of us, and I'm so jealous of what you have. Sorry you have to put up with someone like me."*

I hadn't been able to find it in my heart to congratulate him back then, and yet he'd picked me up as a royal court magician, much to my delight. Once again, I was thankful to my dear old friend for finding me at a time when nobody needed me.

"But you know, I think you're the impressive one, Noelle!" Nina said.

“Keep going,” I replied smugly.

“So cool! So great! You’re the best!”

“Hee hee!”

It was just like the old days; we laughed together, complimented each other, and got embarrassed.

Time flies when you’re having fun.

“An outbreak of fog on Dragon Mountain?” I repeated, surprised by Nina’s explanation.

As it turned out, Nina was here to investigate the fog, working as a B-rank adventurer behind the backs of her strict parents.

“That’s right,” she replied. “Ever since this mysterious white fog appeared, entry to the mountain has been restricted, even for members of adventurers’ guilds.”

Located on the frontier beyond the kingdom’s western border, Dragon Mountain was well known as a place to find rare medicinal herbs and magicite ore. It was classified as a grade-7 challenge for adventurers, which meant that only adventurers of at least C rank were allowed access. Even then, they could ascend no further than Station Two, a point in the mountain’s lower section. Going beyond Station Two was strictly prohibited.

According to the S-rank adventurers who had dared to go as far as the summit, this mountain was home to a monster that no human should face: a wyvern.

Wyverns were the most powerful creatures in the western continent, and the presence of one had earned this place its name.

“What could’ve caused the fog?” Nina went on. “The local Adventurers’ Guild put out a call for the toughest adventurers in the area, thinking that humans might be behind it. They requested the formation of a special team, and I came here after receiving an invitation.”

“You got invited to join an elite team? That’s really cool, Nina!”

“Well, I don’t quite feel like I belong. Everyone else is an A-rank adventurer or higher,” she replied with a shy smile. “But during the first investigation, we found the scattered remains of a large monster that had been eaten by something. And around Station One, there were several bodies of monsters that are usually only found higher up the mountain. We inspected the bodies, and we think it was the work of a predator. Judging from the marks left behind, something with huge claws had seized these monsters and bit them dozens of times until it broke their bones. We concluded that the attacker must’ve been

very large, and was probably out of control.”

“You don’t mean...?”

“We think the wyvern went berserk and came down as far as Station One.”

I was shocked into silence. Berserk monsters indiscriminately attacked everything around them. Wyverns had a strong resistance to anomalies like these, so it was very strange for one to go berserk. But if this was true, then nearby towns and cities—even the entire western region—could be wiped off the map.

“Shouldn’t there be an evacuation order?” I asked.

“We’re currently requesting one be made. We sought help from private knights’ orders and volunteer units in the area, and we’ve just managed to assemble some.”

“I’ll get in touch with the royal court magicians’ division. There’s an expedition team coming to the western region, and I think they’re supposed to set off today. Royal knights should be on their way too.”

“You can ask them for help?!” Nina stared in amazement. “Organizations of that level would never respond to a request from adventurers.”

“Well, I’m buds with the leader of the platoon going on the expedition. I’m sure the team would go to Dragon Mountain for an emergency like that.”

“Thank you! This is a huge help!” she exclaimed, leaning forward in excitement. Seeing her reaction made me feel lucky to be a royal court magician.

That’s when I noticed ripples forming on the surface of my tea. I felt a faint rumbling beneath me, and I heard voices from outside. I looked out the window to see townspeople wildly rushing towards the east.

“Excuse me! I’m going to leave our money on the table!” I called to the chef before running outside with Nina. I waved somebody down. “Did something happen?”

“A wyvern! There’s a wyvern in the western forest! You girls need to get out of here too. You’ll be killed!”

I locked eyes with Nina. “I’m going to request backup from the royal court magicians’ division. What will you do?”

“I’ll go to the forest and buy some time until help arrives.”

“It’s too dangerous! We’re talking about a wyvern here!”

Nina had grown up wonderfully, but in my heart, she was still that little girl who’d always hidden behind me. It was unimaginable that she’d do something as scary as fighting a dragon.

However, the Nina I saw now was a very different person.

“Didn’t I tell you? I became an adventurer so that I could help people at times like this.” She grinned. “I’m the Super Ultimate Magician’s top student. Handling a dragon is a piece of cake. You can count on me.”

Wow, I thought, deep down in my heart. I couldn’t help but admire her. In the face of a monster that was the very epitome of disaster, she was prepared to put herself in the most dangerous position of all for the sake of others.

We parted ways, and I went to the Adventurers’ Guild to use their magicom to contact the royal court magicians’ expedition team. Once I finally got through, Luke told me he would come right away, but he also said it would inevitably take some time to mobilize the rest of the organization. We would just have to try and hold out until help arrived.

My mother was in this town. How could I make sure she was safe?

The answer was clear. I had to stop the problem at its source: the wyvern.

My best student said that she would fight to protect the townspeople. If I, as her mentor, didn’t step up, who would? I pushed through the crowds of people falling over themselves to run away in the opposite direction.

Hold on, Nina. I’ll show you what your old mentor is capable of. I’ll show you I’ve still got it.

◆ ◆ ◆

In a remote town in the west of the kingdom, there was a mages’ guild.

An envelope had just arrived. The guild chief broke the seal and scanned the

letter inside. It included two notifications: a business suspension order and the rescindment of his authorization to operate a mages' guild.

"What?! How could this happen?"

The guild chief threw the letter to the floor, stomped on it, kicked it away, and then ran after it to stomp on it some more.

"Why must I suffer like this?!"

He went on kicking it over and over. Eventually, he sank to his knees amid the strewn scraps of paper. He curled into a ball, wrapped his arms around the back of his head, and moaned like a wounded animal. He was still bent over on the floor, as if groveling before some unseen judge, when the vice guild chief walked in.

"S-Sir, what are you doing?" the vice chief gasped, gawking at him.

The guild chief said nothing. He remained there in blank silence. Baffled, the vice chief looked at the state of the room, before bowing briefly and taking his leave.

The room was totally quiet now. The guild chief stayed curled up on the floor, not getting up for any reason. He was filled with rage and regret so unspeakably intense that it threatened to tear him asunder.

He'd thought he was in the most enviable position. He'd thought he was a winner.

"Arrrrghhhhhh!" he groaned.

This was unacceptable. It was intolerable. How could something like this have possibly happened to him?

At that moment, he overheard hurried footsteps outside.

"It's an emergency!" the vice guild chief shouted as he burst into the room. "A wyvern has appeared in the western forest!"

"A w-w-wyvern...?"

No other word could have knocked sense into the guild chief, who until that moment was almost driven mad by all-consuming fury. There was a wyvern: the

most powerful creature in the western continent. Its body was as gigantic as a mountain, its wings broad enough to block out the sky. Its roar could turn a city into a wasteland. A monster like that could certainly obliterate a little border town in the blink of an eye.

The guild chief dashed outside, carrying his wallet and a few valuables. The town was in chaos: people ran around wildly in search of an escape route, trampling on fruit from an overturned cart. As he ran amongst the masses of people, the guild chief spotted a little girl—though he knew for a fact that she was actually too old to be a little girl.

It was Noelle Springfield.

The guild chief watched her as she ran against the tide of people heading eastward. That extraordinary mage had kept the Mages' Guild afloat with her remarkable work rate, and the magical items she'd produced were impressive enough to be recognized by Archduke Oswald, one of the kingdom's leading noblemen. Nevertheless, she was a naive girl who had never understood her own value, desperately trying to cling on to her job at the guild.

He couldn't help but smile. She was a foolish little girl. He was confident that somebody else had led her astray and was taking advantage of her. Surely, nobody would realize the ability that that childlike girl had as a mage.

As long as he had her, he could be a winner again.

"What are you doing?" the vice chief shouted. "Where on earth are you—"

"That girl is here!"

The guild chief ran forward mindlessly, chasing the little mage girl.

◇ ◇ ◇

Forty-eight hours before the wyvern appeared, Raven Albarn was on a quest to investigate an outbreak of fog on Dragon Mountain. As the toughest adventurer in the western region, Raven looked out over all the people who had been summoned for the mission. He let out a sigh.

Is this really all we can muster? he thought.

The people assembled before him represented the foremost adventurers in

the region. Including Raven himself, three had an S-rank license. However, even knowing how much power was at their disposal, Raven was still uneasy. He knew better than anyone how dangerous the threat they faced was.

If the wyvern were to come down from the top of the mountain, I can't even imagine how much harm it would do. I just have to pray that I'm stressing out over nothing.

They pushed through the western forest and over the border of the kingdom, into the frontier land where monsters lived. They went to the fog-shrouded Dragon Mountain and conducted their investigation.

What is this...?

What they found there hinted at an even more drastic situation than Raven had imagined. There were remains of a large monster with a threat level of 4, torn to pieces.

"I'm a registered witch doctor," said Nina Lawrence, a B-rank adventurer. "Shall I inspect the body?"

Nina had earned recognition among other adventurers for boasting an impressive record as an adventurer while also working as a witch doctor. It was that reputation that had earned her a place as the only member of this team to be a mere B-rank adventurer.

The results of her careful examination of the monster's remains showed that the attacker must have been physically strong enough to hold a large monster down with one limb, and that it must have had teeth that could penetrate a tough hide with one bite.

That could mean only one thing: it was a wyvern. The ruler of Dragon Mountain had descended as far as Station One.

It soon emerged that the reality of the situation went beyond the worst-case scenario.

"The evidence suggests that the attacker bit the victim over and over, enough to break its bones, and kept attacking even once the victim was dead," Nina continued. "A typical monster wouldn't do that. Those actions are signs of a monster that has gone berserk."

When a monster went berserk, it was seized by a powerful urge to destroy. It would attack anything around it, friend or foe. Because they had no fear, even a common monster gone berserk required additional caution in an engagement—but if a wyvern went on a rampage in that state, it could cause unprecedented devastation.

This may be my final battle, Raven realized.

He prepared a will for his wife and daughter. He ate the most luxurious food the town had to offer, had his hair cut, and shaved his long beard. He was not afraid. From the moment he became an adventurer, he had been prepared for the end to come one day.

Now, he was up against the most dangerous creature of all. If he defeated it, he'd be remembered as a dragon slayer. There was no greater thrill for an adventurer.

Raven made preparations so he could fight in the most perfect condition possible. By the time the news came in that a dragon had been seen in the western forest, it no longer had any power to unsettle him.

Very well. Come. I shall face you.

He ran into the forest, hearing rumbles and roars reverberate from its depths. He saw the beast's jet-black wings spreading out across the sky; its vivid crimson eyes; its enormous, phantasmagorical form. It seemed like nothing a human could ever hope to compete with.

So this is a wyvern...

In spite of himself, Raven was drawn to it. It was such a magnificent, beautiful creature.

I could wish for nothing more in an opponent.

Sword in hand, he rushed forward in a blur. His charge was the first component in a joint attack; the sight of Raven running headlong towards the dragon without fear encouraged the other adventurers to provide him with reinforcement. Over twenty of the mightiest adventurers leaped into action together.

In that moment, their hearts ignited with hope. They were more than ready for the task. They even had a chance of victory.

But then, those bloody crimson eyes locked onto Raven.

“Ngh!” he grunted.

In a flash—so fast that it made no sound whatsoever—*something* happened. By the time he came to his senses, Raven lay sprawled on the ground, the gritty feeling of dirt filling his mouth.

He knew he must get up, but he couldn’t move. He was stunned by the realization that he’d already lost the energy to fight on. It wasn’t that he’d taken this lightly. It was simply that the wyvern’s power was fundamentally much greater than a human’s.

He’d just needed to keep going long enough to land his attack, but by the time he understood that, it was already over. He’d been overwhelmed by pure destructive power. One by one, he saw his comrades fall too. It was so one-sided that it could barely be called a battle.

How could I have been so wrong...?

The dragon pounded the earth with its feet and screeched toward the heavens. Its claws tore through the ground as it spread its wings. A light was visible in the depths of its gaping maw. That light was a sign of so much concentrated magical energy that Raven was lost for words.

Dragon’s Roar...

According to legend, wyverns had the ability to release a beam of light known as a Dragon’s Roar. The vast magical energy stored in their bodies was converted into a light said to be so powerful that it could blow away mountain ranges without a trace and reduce cities to smoldering embers. Raven had always thought its power was exaggerated, but by the time he realized that the tales were true, it was too late.

The magical concentration in the area was so mind-blowingly intense that Raven’s vision appeared warped. He knew that everything—himself, his comrades, the forest, the town—was sure to vanish. The last thing that went through his head was the knowledge that he was leaving behind his wife and

daughter.

I’m sorry...

The wyvern released its Dragon’s Roar, and then...

“Wind Blast!”

He didn’t understand what was going on.

With a great explosion, a compressed gust of air blew everything away. Raven shuddered in the face of such tremendous magical power. This was unlike any magic he’d ever encountered before. It was on a par with the wyvern itself, causing Raven’s vision to blur.

The explosion ripped through the air toward the dragon’s throat.

In the next moment, another beam of light was released. The Dragon’s Roar split the sky, rattling the earth and sending light flooding straight through any onlookers’ trembling eyelids. A shockwave of heat mowed down trees, spreading out far enough to scorch even Raven’s skin.

The beam opened a perfect circle of blue sky in the blanket of clouds above. The sun shone through, bathing the forest in a pillar of sunlight.

Before Raven’s eyes was a petite girl, small enough that she looked like a child. She stood in front of the adventurers, protecting them.



Was this her doing...?

Raven couldn’t believe his own eyes. Everyone was speechless—except for

one person, softly speaking out from somewhere in the silence:

"It's been a long time, my hero."

◇ ◇ ◇

I could tell the jet-black dragon was there, in the forest. I felt my face tighten as its Dragon's Roar cut through the sky. I'd heard that wyverns were the most powerful creatures in the western continent, but this was truly a monstrous foe.

Even so, there wasn't so much as a hint in my mind that I would consider running away.

The sight of Nina, lying on the ground, unable to continue fighting, brought back memories of a time when I'd run around this very forest with her, back when I'd decided I would blow away any bad guy who dared to hurt my friends.

I was in no position to apply moderation. I launched a surprise attack, deploying one summoning circle after another and unleashing a barrage of wind.

However, the wyvern was still stronger. A series of Dragon's Roars issued from its mouth. Even though it lost energy with each attack, it was still so relentless that even my maximum firepower wasn't enough.

In terms of raw power, I didn't stand a chance. But if I attacked with precision, I could play the long game. By focusing my spells on one spot, I could start to reduce the ferocity of the wyvern's attacks.

This strategy probably would've been beyond me in the past. My style was always to put all of my strength into a spell, without considering the finer details. But things were different now, after what Luke had shown me. I'd been captivated by the superhuman precision of his attack that day, and I wanted desperately to equal it.

I'd trained hard. I was still nowhere near Luke in terms of precision, but I could make up for that with my firepower and speed.

Has he ever fought a wyvern? I wondered. *I bet he hasn't.*

I didn't think a wyvern had shown up in Ardenfeld in decades. That meant

that I was the first of us to face one, so if I were to defeat it, I'd get to record my first victory.

My old friend was so far ahead of me, but I wanted to catch up to him, and to be able to compete with him as an equal. For the sake of that goal, it didn't matter if I was up against the strongest creature around. I was determined to prove that I could beat it.

As I tenaciously fired off my magic attacks, I realized they weren't so different from Luke's.

◇ ◇ ◇

The person standing in front of Nina Lawrence and confronting the jet-black dragon was a familiar figure she knew from her childhood.

"Go home, out-of-towner!"

Nina remembered how she'd moved to this rural town. As a shy girl, she'd struggled to make friends, and she had nobody to turn to when the neighborhood children bullied her.

"I was outside playing with some friends, and I fell over," she would say, trying to explain away the scratches on her skin and the dirt on her clothes. She smiled and deflected, but it took its toll on her.

One day she asked her one and only friend, "Why am I so rotten?" Little Bear had been with her ever since her fourth birthday.

"Don't worry, Nina! You're not rotten!" Little Bear answered, not opening her embroidered mouth.

That gave Nina some small comfort, but she still felt like something was wrong with her. Surely only a strange, rotten child would have a stuffed toy as her one and only friend.

Nina wanted a human friend. A real friend. But she didn't have the courage to talk to anyone, so her wish went unfulfilled.

"Hey, this girl's got some fancy-looking toy!"

"Let me borrow it. I'll give it back in a hundred years."

The world was so much crueler than she'd thought. On that day, she thought she was about to lose the only friend she had. She pleaded, "Give her back! Please, give her back!" All she received in return were laughs and jeers.

"What's with that stupid voice?"

"If you're so mad, why don't you try and take it back?"

"This little rich girl's getting all high and mighty with us! Let's teach her a lesson."

With her weak constitution, Nina had no means of fighting back. She could only bemoan her own helplessness.

Nina's beloved and trusted friend bounced as she was hurled against the ground. One of the children—a big boy—began bringing his foot down to trample on the bear's face.

Stop... Nina cried internally, but at that moment, she heard a great shriek.

"Take this! Ultra Super Final Magic Punch!" A small, nimble girl leaped between them and sent the big boy flying. "Super Ultimate Magician Noelle is here! If you wanna bully her, you gotta go through me first!"

Even though she was surrounded by three boys bigger and older than herself, the little girl wasn't scared in the slightest.

"Dang it! This ain't over!" a bully cried while they all ran away.

"Justice prevails!" the girl shouted, smirking with satisfaction and holding out Little Bear to Nina. "Just tell me if you ever need help. I'm always ready to pulverize some bullies."

That was just what Nina needed to hear. As a frail, demure little girl, she was blown away by somebody so brimming with energy.

It was only natural that she began associating with the girl. She learned how to climb trees and deliver punches. Even her strict mother and father were completely taken by this girl. Every single day was full of fun. Her life was bright and colorful. She was shocked to see how beautiful the world could be.

However, those days didn't last.

“No! Let me stay here! I don’t want to leave!”

“Don’t be so selfish. Everything is already planned out.”

They were moving to a nearby country, the Holy Nation of Clares. She never even got the chance to say farewell. She could only say it in her heart: *I hope we meet again. No, I’ll make sure we meet again.*

Nina had gone on chasing the girl she remembered. Even if she couldn’t go up against boys in a fight, she wanted to become at least a little more like her old friend.

Now that Noelle was really there, Nina couldn’t help feeling inspired.

Noelle was standing right in front of her eyes, just the same way she did on the day that she became her hero.

“Thank you, Nina! Getting to read magic books is like a dream to me!” Noelle had exclaimed when Nina offered to let her read her great-grandfather’s grimoires. The girl who had immersed herself in those books back then was now a top-class magician, fighting on everyone’s behalf.

Nina gazed at the girl reflected in her eyes, silently pleading.

Please, Noelle... You can do it!

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“No way...” somebody breathed.

Raven Albarn, the adventurer known as the western region’s strongest, couldn’t believe what he was seeing either.

The jet-black dragon let out one Dragon’s Roar after another. They lashed through the air like rain, with each shot promising certain death. Despite the amount of magical energy consumed by each sky-splitting beam, the catastrophic power they continued to hold was on an unimaginable level.

And yet, the girl in front of him was facing such a fierce opponent head-on. She deployed countless summoning circles at frightening speed and accelerated her relative time using Multicast.

Her wind attacks collided with the wyvern’s beams of light.

Everything shook.

A great cacophony assaulted the onlookers' ears. Unable to withstand the impact, the ground cracked, launching clouds of dust into the distance.

What Raven was witnessing was a perfect balance. This girl was the lone challenger to the wyvern and its constant stream of Dragon's Roars, and she was competing with it on equal terms.

It was an astonishing sight. He could hardly breathe. The magical energy on display was enough to warp one's vision. The girl commanded seven different spells back to back; she shifted between ritual gestures faster than the eye could see, resulting in a whole new level of firepower. It was totally unlike any of the magic-wielding adventurers that Raven had encountered.

What on earth...?

It didn't seem real. Raven's mouth was bone-dry as he stared ahead without any thought for his own situation. This was so extraordinary that it obliterated all his preconceptions.

Something truly special was happening.

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Two men stood speechless as they watched the little magician facing off against the wyvern—the guild chief and the vice guild chief, fresh from having received their business suspension order.

They'd followed the girl who had been a lowly employee at their guild until they dismissed her, and now they saw the Dragon's Roar cut through the sky and open a circle in the clouds. Against an incredibly powerful monster that a human could never be expected to match, she was holding her own and maintaining a balance. She was moving at lightning speed to deploy one summoning circle after another, canceling out each Dragon's Roar with a wind attack.

The girl who they'd fired, thinking she was useless as a mage, was now

fighting a dragon. Even at a considerable distance, the two men could feel the shockwaves blowing through their hair.

All they could do was stand and stare in silence.

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The rain of Dragon's Roars would've taken me out of action if I lost concentration for even a second. I was hanging in there, focusing my counterattacks, maintaining balance, and keeping everything contained, but I was getting ever closer to my limit.

My body felt heavy as fatigue set in. Most importantly, my magic power was soon going to run out. At the very least, I had to try and buy some more time.

I moved to where the adventurers wouldn't be hit by a Dragon's Roar, then stopped trying to intercept the wyvern's attacks and began to run away from the town. In accelerated time, I evaded the attacks and launched spells of my own to provoke the dragon. It was unbelievably quick for a creature with such a strong body and huge wings, but I still had the upper hand when it came to speed.

As I darted between the trees, the dragon vaporized them behind me. This was my second time fighting a monster in a forest, and as I remembered the previous occasion, one possibility suddenly occurred to me.

When I'd fought the goblin emperor, its troops were cloaked with a concealment spell. I realized then that a similar spell might affect this dragon.

"Dispel!" I yelled, casting a spell over the trees to lift any enchantments.

A thin localized veil vanished, revealing a collar around the dragon's neck. Could it be that the source of that sinister light was a supreme relic, the kind of elusive dungeon relics that only entire cities, or even entire countries, could afford?

A purple glow enveloped the wyvern's body, appearing to control it. This relic must have had the power to drive its target berserk. Forced into this state, the dragon could do nothing but run amok.

Basically, if I destroyed that collar, I could save the town.

But could I do it? I'd already passed my physical and magical limits. I would have to go straight to the belly of the beast—a wyvern that was practically a natural disaster in its own right—and destroy a supreme relic. I wasn't sure I had what it would take...

No.

Willpower was what I needed. Of course I wasn't feeling confident; apprehension and fear were natural responses. But what really mattered right now was that I had the will to put absolutely everything into this.

I looked around and dived into the most deeply wooded area I could see. With the trees as cover, I got closer to the jet-black dragon.

It didn't matter to me if I was facing a wyvern, a supreme relic, or anything. And why should I have a limit? To become somebody who could compete on level terms with the friend who was so far ahead of me, I had to give this everything I had, right now.

It's as simple as that.

I'm stopping this dragon. Now.

The wyvern charged towards me, blowing trees to smithereens in its wake. I kicked my feet against the smashed pieces of wood in accelerated time, and leaped through the air.

Everything was white. I managed, just barely, to stay alert as my senses threatened to escape me.

I locked onto the collar and established my magic sequence with all of the strength I could still muster.

"Wind Blast!"

A cannonball of wind burst forth. Compressed air shot towards the dragon and slashed at its throat.

That's when everything went blurry as the world returned to normal speed. I'd totally depleted my magic reserves.

I was blown backwards and tumbled to the ground. I tasted dirt. The earth was cool and damp beneath me. I had no strength left in my body. This was hypomagia, the state when one's magical energy is abruptly used up.

The battle was over. At the dim boundaries of my vision, I saw something big and black approaching. Red eyes glared at me. Great claws towered over me.

I guess it wasn't enough.

I shut my eyes as the wind blew fragments of wood across me. Everything was blank for what felt like an eternity, but then the huge claw merely stroked my hair.

Its voice resonated, *YOU HAVE SAVED ME. I THANK YOU, LITTLE ONE. ONE DAY, I SHALL REPAY YOUR KINDNESS.*

With a beat of its wings, the enormous presence vanished into the distance.

Thank goodness. Somehow, I did it. I held my hand to my chest, relieved. *If Luke comes, I'll never let him hear the end of this.*

The forest was still. Lying on a bed of wildflowers, I closed my eyes. Rays of sunlight shone in through the perfect circle of blue sky overhead, glowing red through my eyelids.

I'm tired. I think it's time for a little nap, I mused, giving in to the tender caress of sleep.

"Noelle! Noelle, wake up!"

Just as I was losing consciousness, I felt like I heard his voice, unsettled in a

way I'd never heard it before.

I opened my eyes to see a familiar ceiling above me. I'd visited this place many times: it was the local infirmary. It turned out I'd passed out from hypomagia and been brought here.

My mother ran to me from the doorway and squeezed me tightly. "You did such an amazing job! I'm so impressed with who you've become!"

My face was buried in her warm body. It was a nostalgic feeling that somehow brought me back to my childhood.

"You're my pride and joy!" I heard her go on behind my head. "You always were, but I feel it now more than ever!"

I felt happy, I felt embarrassed, but most of all, I felt safe. My mother continued to hold me for a little while, before straightening up and looking at me.

"But I have to say, you've done even better than I expected," she commended me. "I can hardly believe that boy thinks of you like that!"

"Huh? What?"

"The Waldstein boy you keep calling your friend. When you passed out, he looked totally different. He carried you here and wouldn't leave your side. It was surprising even to me as your mother. I was amazed! Little did I know that you'd become such an irresistible expert in the ways of love!"

No, I would never suggest that. I don't even know what that means.

As I sat there with a blank look on my face, my mother pointed to a corner of the room. Luke was lying asleep on a side table. It made me smile to see him there and know that he'd stayed by my side. I could tell that I was really important to him.

"I'll do whatever it takes to stop anybody interfering, so strike now, while the iron is hot!" my mother raved. "If you can't persuade him, you need to overwhelm him! Love is war, you know?"

I shrugged my shoulders in exasperation as my mother fled from the room. *I*

told you it's not like that!

I heaved myself up and leaned in closer to look at Luke's sleeping face. Just as I noticed how handsome his features were, his eyelids began to flutter, as if in response to my movements. He let out a sigh, opened his sapphire eyes, and looked straight at me.

"Hey," I said, causing Luke to recoil in surprise. "What kind of reaction is that?"

"You're just very close."

"I am?"

"Don't worry about it," he responded awkwardly, before suddenly changing tone. "So, you woke up!"

"I sure did. But never mind that. Did you hear about how I fought a wyvern? It was running wild because of a supreme relic, but I figured it out and saved the town!" I chattered animatedly. "Have you ever fought a wyvern, Luke?"

"No, I haven't..."

"Aha! Then this is my first victory!" I clenched my fist, brimming with the warm glow of success. I thrust my finger at Luke and declared, "I'm not gonna give up! From now on, we're rivals, the way we used to be. If your goal is to become a magus, then that's my goal too. I'm never gonna let you leave me in the dust. Prepare yourself!"

Luke's eyes widened in surprise. A moment later, though, he smiled and let out a chuckle. "What are you talking about? You must know I already see you as a rival."

"How can you be so blasé? Oh, I see! You think you've already won! Well, fine! Soon you'll be laughing on the other side of your face!"

"Sure thing. I look forward to it."

His grinning face just made me even angrier. I protested, but in all honesty, it wasn't so bad to be treated this kindly. But what gave me the most joy was...

No, that's too embarrassing. You'll never get to hear that.

Epilogue: Repayment

Once I was feeling better, I cooperated with the royal court magicians' division and the Adventurers' Guild to answer their questions. I gave them an honest account of what I could remember: how I'd responded to the Dragon's Roars with full force; how I'd caught the dragon's attention, run between the trees, and led it away from the town; and finally how I'd used Dispel to lift the concealment magic, found and destroyed the source of the mysterious light, and returned the dragon to normal.

Between interviews, I spent lots of time talking with Nina. After going on our separate paths in life, there was plenty for us to discuss. The hours went by in a flash.

"Make sure you get in touch if you ever come to the capital," I insisted.

"I will," Nina replied, smiling. "But it's a bit of a shame that I didn't run into you just a little earlier."

"Why's that?"

"I wanted to go on an adventure with you!" Nina pouted. "To be honest, I wish I could've formed a party with you. But someone else went and hired you first."

"Hey, that sounds fun! Let's do it!" I leaned forward and grabbed hold of her hands.

"Are you sure? Aren't you busy with court magician work?"

"It's cool. You'd be amazed how understanding they are! I get paid leave, and I can even take a long vacation. Just tell me your schedule, and I'll get an adventuring license."

Nina giggled at my genuine exuberance. "Thanks. I'll hold you to it!"

"It's a deal."

We were still happily chatting about our future plans when somebody spoke to me. It was one of the adventurers who had also been brought in for

questioning.

“Excuse me, Miss Noelle,” he said. “I’d like to make a request.”

What could it be? I wondered, as the adventurer continued:

“My family hosts a magic course, and I was wondering if you’d like to come in and deliver a talk some time.”

“A talk?” It took a moment to sink in. “Oh, no, I’m still just a novice. I’m not in any position to do something like—”

“I’m sure everyone would be delighted to hear from the great magician who banished the dragon,” he said, looking serious. “Please at least consider it.”

As I agonized over how to respond, more adventurers appeared suddenly from behind me.

“You snake!” one snapped. “Thought you could get in there before everyone else?”

“You’re damn right he’s a snake!” another butted in, as the crowd of adventurers began jostling for position. “I wanted to talk to her too, but I held myself back!”

Another person addressed me. “Hey, weren’t you involved in sorting things out after that infection broke out in the northern region? I work for a potion brewers’ guild, and it would be great if you could come and have a look.”

“Shut up! I was here first! Our magical items shop—”

I wondered if they were making fun of me, but looking at what was going on, it didn’t seem like that could be the case after all. People really did want me to come to help their guilds and deliver lectures. I was frozen in amazement, hardly believing this was reality.

“You should consider how I feel, having such a waste of space working here.”

My thoughts went back to my first job at the Mages’ Guild and how they’d fired me.

“Regrettably, we have decided not to move forward with your application at this time.”

Wherever I went back then, nobody would give me work. I'd felt depressed, wondering if I'd ever be worth anything to anyone.

But now, so many people seemed to want me.

I'm glad I never gave up. I'm glad I kept going. And I'm glad to be alive.

I smiled bashfully and enjoyed myself as I watched the adventurers squabbling.

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From a distance, the guild chief and vice guild chief watched adventurers excitedly surround their dismissed former employee.

She had shown magic on a scale that didn't seem humanly possible. She'd gone toe to toe with a wyvern. The two men still couldn't quite accept the shocking spectacle they'd witnessed.

"How is this possible?" the vice guild chief murmured. "To think that that girl had such incredible power..."

The guild chief couldn't even find the words to respond. It didn't seem real to him. If somebody told him that this whole situation had been nothing more than a horrible dream, that would have been more believable.

The girl had taken on a huge volume of work, all while aiding her colleagues with support magic. She'd even produced magical items to such a high standard that they won the admiration of an archduke.

It made sense that somebody with the kind of magic ability she had just demonstrated could achieve those feats. Clearly, she was at the top of the field of magic in the kingdom. Her power was so extraordinary that it would be foolish to even try to measure it. It seemed like madness to think that this outstanding magician was the same lowly mage they'd written off as useless.

The two men could only stand and stare.

"Should we go and talk to her?" the vice chief suggested.

"What's the point?" The guild chief heaved a great sigh. "You saw her skills. There's no way she'd come and work for us now."

“I suppose she really was working as a royal court magician after all...”

“I can’t believe we thought she was useless. We never should have kicked her out, now that we know she’s such a prodigy.”

“If only we’d realized before we chased her away...”

“Victory was as good as ours...”

Their feelings of disappointment grew stronger and stronger. Who knew what riches they could have amassed if only they’d recognized her ability and put it to proper use? No amount of regret was enough. They’d snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. It was as if those days of glory had just been a dream.

Their shoulders drooped as the guild chief and the vice guild chief walked away.

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The news sent shockwaves across the Kingdom of Ardenfeld and its neighbors.

A rampaging wyvern had appeared in the western region of Ardenfeld. Wyverns were the most powerful creatures in the entire western continent, and if one had gone berserk, the number of expected casualties was beyond imagination. The neighboring countries immediately set about gathering information and shoring up their own defenses.

Among those countries was the Holy Nation of Clares, a land to the southwest of Ardenfeld. It was a theocracy devoted to a great priestess believed to have been chosen by the Goddess Clares. The great priestess wielded tremendous power and was known as a miracle worker for her ability to cure people with healing magic. She had taken a position on the front line in times of great need, rescuing the country from many hardships.

Mercurius, the prime minister of Clares, sighed deeply. *We may have no choice but to call upon the great priestess’s power once again...* he thought.

According to the information brought back by one of their spies, there had been signs that a series of disasters may be on its way. First, an infection was set to break out in Ardenfeld’s northern region and spread dramatically. Next, a

mutant goblin emperor and its troops would suddenly appear in the Misty Woods and engulf towns and cities. And finally, a berserk wyvern would run wild and obliterate the western region.

In all of these situations, there were signs pointing to a planned strategy by agents in the international underworld.

I'm sure the crown prince is prepared, but this might just be too much...

No matter what extensive measures were taken, it would be impossible to avoid enormous damage. Indeed, one could imagine that the slightest miscalculation might lead to the destruction of the kingdom itself.

Is there...something we can do? Mercurius groped around for some way of helping the Kingdom of Ardenfeld. *No, it's impossible. If a berserk wyvern reaches their southern region, it might attack us too. My responsibility is toward* this *country.*

He had to assume the worst, and as a man of considerable intelligence, he understood that this would result in a crisis. At all times, his priority was to protect the citizens of his country. He couldn't afford to worry about other nations.

I'm sorry... he thought, grimacing.

At just that moment, the underling who had been sent to Ardenfeld as a spy came to his office.

"Sir, I would like to speak with you," the spy said. "I have come with the latest news from the Kingdom of Ardenfeld."

"I see..." Mercurius braced himself. He expected to hear troubling news that would terribly frighten him, but he knew that they couldn't make progress without this information. "What has become of the country?"

"The infectious outbreak in the northern region is no longer an issue. The mutant goblin emperor appears to have been suppressed. Furthermore, the berserk wyvern has been banished back to Dragon Mountain."

"What...?" Mercurius was baffled. That didn't make sense.

"It appears that the situation has been resolved with limited impact on the

kingdom.”

“No, no, no. That simply isn’t possible.”

“I couldn’t believe it either...but it’s all true.”

Mercurius investigated the matter further, and the spy’s report was correct. The situation had indeed been resolved, and the people of Ardenfeld were largely safe. Not only that, but it had all been achieved without the need to mobilize the magi—the kingdom’s strongest magicians—or their greatest swordsman.

Did Michael Ardenfeld fight it himself? No, even in that case, I would expect more casualties. It was a berserk wyvern after all. What could drive away such a beast without incurring much in the way of damage? From everything I know, it doesn’t seem possible. They must have something...

The Kingdom of Ardenfeld had something that transcended Mercurius’s expectations. He felt a chill run down his spine.

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A few days had passed since the tumult of the wyvern’s appearance in the western region. I’d returned to the royal capital, and now I was kicking back and enjoying a day off as a reward for my hard work. After really pushing myself lately, I felt it was important to take a break.

“Now, what next?” I asked myself, as I lazily lay on my bed, enjoying my favorite magic books and dozing off to my heart’s content.

“What does he see in her?” my mother muttered, shaking her head at the sight of me sprawled out. I didn’t care, though.

Oh man, being in bed is the best! What a satisfying day off!

I whiled away the hours just lying around, eating madeleines. And eating sherbet. And eating cupcakes.

I woke up from my third nap of the day when I heard a doorbell in the distance.

Huh...? I thought blearily, slowly coming back to my senses. *Oh, is somebody at the door?*

The doorbell rang again every few seconds. I realized that my mother must be out of the house. Who on earth could it be?

Puzzled, I made my way to the front door. The light coming in through the window had begun to turn a deep shade of red.

“Hello? Who’s there?” I called, patting down my bed hair as I opened the door.

In front of the door was a colossal black mountain. Whatever this huge thing was, it blocked out the sky.

I HAVE COME TO REPAY YOU, LITTLE ONE. Something was looking down on me from far above my head. *TELL ME WHAT YOU DESIRE. I SHALL GRANT ANY REQUEST.*

I remembered what the jet-black dragon had said to me when I destroyed the supreme relic that had controlled its actions: *“ONE DAY, I SHALL REPAY YOUR KINDNESS.”*

I mean, I appreciate the thought, and it’s great that you’re so conscientious and all... But I can’t really have dragons coming to visit...

“AAAAHH!!” I yelled, clutching my head and agonizing over how to deal with the mountainous dragon that had just shown up at my door.

It looked like the new career I’d embarked on after being kicked out of the Mages’ Guild was taking an unpredictable new turn.

To be continued in Volume 2

Extra Chapter 1: That Horrible Boy in My Class (Noelle Springfield, age 12)

There was a boy I just couldn't stand, but most of all, I *definitely* couldn't stand to let him win.

"It's about time you gave up," he sneered, glaring at me. "Know your place, commoner."

"Know *your* place," I retorted, glaring right back. "Here you are, Mr. Fancy Pants, acting like you're *so* important, and you don't even have the magic skill to beat me!"

It was after school hours on an early summer's day, but it was as hot as midsummer. Early evening light bathed the schoolhouse in an amber glow.

"Remind me, who is it that can't beat whom? Look at all our grades and you'll see I'm in front."

"I still beat you on last week's test."

"Fluke. Next time, I'll show you we're not even in the same league."

"I reckon I should be the one saying that. You'd better get ready to go crying to your mommy when you lose."

We each snorted derisively as we turned and walked away, but there wasn't much point in that, since it turned out we were both leaving in the same direction.

"Ugh! Why are you following me?" I snapped.

"I could ask you the same question! I wanted to go and talk with Professor Larsen about forming magic sequences."

"Huh? I had a question to ask Professor Larsen too. Quit copying me!"

"Surely *you're* the one copying *me*. Just let me be the one to talk with the professor first. I don't need a commoner like you getting in my way."

"I will *not* let you go first! I'm gonna show you that life ain't that simple, you

stuck-up snob!”

And so we began to fight over who would be the first to talk to the professor. We walked quickly down the corridor, our shoulders shoving each other all the while, and it was no time at all before we were running full-pelt. Of course, after years of running around fields, I was the fastest.

Ha ha! A sheltered brat like you couldn’t outrun me in a million years! I thought triumphantly as I rounded the corner and nearly ran right into the head of the dormitory.

“What’s this? Children running in the corridors?” the head of the dormitory exclaimed.

The two of us instinctively tried to run away, but the head caught us easily with a binding spell.

“Now, now. If you’re so desperate to run, I’ll let you run. I don’t wish to be unkind,” the head said with a smirk. “One hundred laps of the courtyard. Now.”

This couldn’t have gone worse. All I’d wanted was to ask the professor about some confusing aspects of magic sequences that I didn’t understand, but that boy just had to go and ruin it for me.

“Look what you’ve done!” I complained. “Now I have to run laps, all because of you.”

“What?! This happened because *you* were running so fast, you thoughtless fool.”

“You’re the one who started pushing!”

We continued to argue as we ran around and around the courtyard of the academy.

It had been like this all the time lately. People were always fussing over that mean-spirited “model student,” calling him a prodigy and whatnot. Not me, though. I hated him.

But by some cruel twist of fate, everywhere I turned, that creep seemed to be there waiting for me. When I went to the library to borrow the new grimoire I’d been so excited about, he was reaching out for the same copy and ready to

fight for it. When I went to the botanical garden to find the best ingredients to use in our potion brewing assignment, he was searching for the same herbs—and ready to fight for them too.

No matter my actions, he was in my way. I didn't even want to see his face, but everywhere I went, he was there first, and we would fight yet again.

I'm so sick of that horrible posh boy!

All summer, I loathed Luke Waldstein.

"Seriously, that was just the worst. A hundred laps is insane."

I was in the dormitory after completing my infernal punishment, and I was complaining about the day's events to my roommate Liz.

"Still, all things considered, you seem pretty happy," Liz remarked.

"Well, I know that I have the strength for it. But him, with his sheltered life? He was totally wiped out. Heh. Serves him right."

"You two are really good friends, huh?"

"Excuse me?" I responded, bewildered. "Wait, did you even hear what I was just saying? We're *enemies*."

"But you're never shy around each other, and you're always squabbling. I just thought it made you seem close."

"Yeah, but that's because of the hundred percent pure hatred we have for each other."

"Right, but from the outside, it really does look as if you're friends. I mean, normally he's this perfect, laid-back model student, right? He only shows that much emotion around you." As ever, Liz was as cold as ice, with a serious mindset to match. She gave me a warning: "You should be careful. You've started getting attention from the wrong kinds of people."

"Like who?"

"Like Sharon—the marquis's daughter—and her lot."

"Um... Who's that?"

“Not this again,” Liz said, rolling her eyes as I once again revealed my ignorance of the academy’s social order. “Sharon Fitzgerald. She’s always running after him cheering, like, ‘Oh, Luke, Luke!’ And then she’s got these sidekicks hanging around with her all the time.”

“Ohhh. The one with the curly blonde hair.”

Sharon Fitzgerald was pretty and attention-grabbing. She was always wearing flashy clothes, so I figured she came from a rich family. I hadn’t known she was the daughter of a marquis, though.

“I heard she doesn’t like that you’re friends with Luke Waldstein,” Liz went on. “And in that case, she might play some kind of trick on you. I heard some gossip about her plotting to put laxatives in your food.”

“Oh, that might’ve happened already.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, she gave me some madeleines. They smelled really good. I happily ate them up right there and asked for seconds.”

“Hold on a minute. Are you all right? You should talk to a teacher if you’re feeling sick.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I’ve got a strong stomach. My mom never bought me treats, so I used to nibble on random plants and stuff.”

Even if I was eating something a *little* bit poisonous, I could generally stomach anything that I could get down my throat. Then again, now that Liz mentioned it, I could remember the girl with the curly blonde hair seeming surprised that nothing was wrong with me.

“No... How could this be?” I remembered her muttering with a trembling voice.

“Good grief. You’re something else,” Liz said with a sigh. “Anyway, be careful. She might have something else up her sleeve.”

Just as Liz had warned me, the girl with the curly blonde hair came to me pretty much every day from then on, offering me snacks. They probably

contained laxatives or something, but once they reached my stomach, toughened up by years of whatever mystery plants existed in the western region, any nasty ingredients were completely obliterated.

And that meant that every day, I got to enjoy delicious treats.

“I’ve never tasted such nice sweets before! Thanks again!” I said one day.

“I didn’t come here for you to thank me!” the girl with the curly blonde hair retorted, turning away belligerently. “I’ll get you yet!”

“Well, see you tomorrow!” I smiled and waved as Liz looked on in wonder.

It was on one of those days that we were sent to explore the academy’s dungeon as part of our training.

A dungeon had already existed in this spot, and it was later renovated to be used for training students by preventing the magical concentration from rising above a determined level. It was a fairly safe location, home to only weak monsters, so it was used frequently for classes or exams.

Our assignment was to work with the other members of our team to defeat monsters in the dungeon. We were told that there would be significant extra credit in our end-of-term test for the team that defeated the strongest monster.

Inevitably, students’ eyes lit up at the prospect of extra credit, and I was no different. Realistically speaking, finishing top of the class in the end-of-term exam could depend on whether I could get extra credit from this assignment. If I wanted to show up that horrible boy, I had no choice but to defeat the strongest monster.

“Come on, Liz!” I called. “Let’s prove that we’re the best!”

“Let’s go!”

We were up for the challenge.

A little further away from us, I could hear some girls talking. The one with the curly blonde hair was addressing her enthusiastic followers.

“I will win the top spot here and demonstrate to Luke that I’m better than that little country girl!”

“Let’s do it, Miss Sharon!”

“There’s nothing you can’t do, Miss Sharon!”

Meanwhile, I could hear some boys from the other direction.

“I’m really glad to be on your team, Luke,” one boy gushed. “With you on our side, we’re bound to be top of the class.”

“Nah, there’s a limit to what I can do alone,” Luke replied. “But you guys are amazing. You really motivate me.”

“Wow, Luke... You are *so* cool!”

I stared coldly at the relaxed model student standing in the middle of the group.

He’s got them all fooled! He’s just acting *humble. On the inside, he’s thinking, “Nobody in this class is a match for a genius like me!”*

That arrogant son of a duke had obviously let it get to his head that people kept calling him a prodigy. It was up to me to give him a thrashing and teach him a harsh lesson about real life.

As the class began, we entered the dungeon. The sound of boots on the hard floor echoed around the stone walls. The air in here was cool and damp, with a faint earthy smell.

I launched right into our search, but an unexpected obstacle awaited us. My clumsiness and inattention led me directly into a trap, much to my teammates’ annoyance.

“Didn’t I tell you not to step outside of where I direct you?”

“I... I’m so sorry...”

I wanted to be top of the class, but I was already holding the rest of my team back. For the time being, I decided to keep quiet until I got my bearings. I had begun walking behind the others to avoid causing problems, when I felt something.

“Huh? Was that an earthquake...?”

The subtle shaking grew stronger. The walls began to creak and pebbles fell

from the ceiling. Pavestones started crumbling away as the shaking of the ground activated traps. A scream reverberated down the passageway.

Standing at the back of the team, I deployed a summoning circle instantly.

“Windy!”

I kicked against the ground as I cast the wind spell, and pushed my three teammates in front of me further into the passageway. I pushed until I knew they were safe, but that was as far as I could go. My outstretched hands weren’t enough to keep me from falling into the ravine opening up beneath me.

“Noelle!” a voice echoed from above my head.

Surprisingly, I reacted quite calmly to this unexpected turn of events. Maybe it was all thanks to years of fighting bullies in my hometown granting me an instinctive understanding that losing sight of my surroundings meant failure.

The key was to soften the impact when I hit the bottom. I cast an advanced spell that I’d only just learned.

“Wind Blast!”

The recoil from the spell canceled out the impact, and I found myself landing gently on the collapsed floor, unharmed. I breathed a sigh as I looked up. It looked like getting back to my teammates would be a tough task. For now, I just had to look for a way up.

Shortly after beginning my search, I was surprised to see that somebody else was here.

Phew. Looks like somebody else fell down too.

It was encouraging to know that I had a friend down here in the depths of the dungeon, where I could barely tell left from right.

“Hey, are you okay?” I called out, as I approached the person. “I fell too. Maybe we could work together to get back—”

I stopped abruptly and grimaced. I knew exactly who the other person was. It was that awful boy I was so eager to demolish—the one I just couldn’t bear to lose to.

It was the person I hated most—Luke Waldstein.

"This just gets better and better," Luke moaned. "Now I have to cooperate with *you*."

"The feeling's mutual! As if I'd be caught dead with you normally!"

We continued searching the collapsed floor of the dungeon, frowning and maintaining enough space between us for five other people. We were in agreement that neither of us enjoyed the other's company, but we both had the presence of mind to understand that it was in our best interests to work together under the circumstances.

"Hey," I said. "There's something different about the airflow here."

Luke stopped moving. "Which direction is it coming from?"

"Um... Over there, I guess."

"Then let's go and look. Maybe there's a passage that way."

We started moving in the same direction, then simultaneously jumped back, putting more distance between the two of us. We both looked away grouchily and began walking again.

As Luke had predicted, following the direction of the draft took us to a passage leading upward. I was even a little impressed with him. *Hey, not bad.*

Luke sneered at me. "Lucky you're with me, peasant."

Get lost.

"You're the lucky one," I spat. "It's thanks to me that you knew about the draft."

"What? Nah, I would've noticed that by myself, no problem."

"Yeah, well, I would've figured out that there was a passage this way myself."

Glaring at each other, we continued along the path. When we reached the end and the passage opened back up, we noticed something with a start.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Isn't the magical energy a bit weird in here?"

“This isn’t good. The system keeping the magical concentration low must’ve stopped working.” Luke stared intensely at a point deeper down. “Let’s get out of here. This place isn’t safe. There might be high-level monsters that don’t normally appear in this dungeon.”

We moved quickly along the path. Luckily, since I’d noticed the direction of the draft, we managed to find the passage heading upwards without too much difficulty. We both breathed a sigh of relief once we were out of danger.

But a scream from elsewhere shook us of our ease. I looked in the direction of the voice and spotted the girl with the curly blonde hair and her two lackeys.

It looked like they’d also ended up in the depths of the dungeon because of the tremors. The bigger problem right now, though, was the huge snake in front of them.

It was a black serpent: a large monster with a threat level of 4. There had been cases where a black serpent had ravaged villages, resulting in close to one hundred casualties.

“What are you doing?” Luke shouted from behind me. “Run! We have to call for help!”

However, I couldn’t bring myself to move away. “But those girls...”

“It takes time for a black serpent to digest its prey. We can save them later when we cut open its stomach.”

“But its fangs are poisonous! What if they get bitten?”

“What else can we do? We’re not strong enough to fight a thing like that!”

I knew he was right. As much as it irritated me to admit it, he was older and smarter than me. Still, being a child, I was irrational. Being realistic wasn’t my style.

By the time I knew what was happening, I was already leaping into the air.

“You go and call for help!” I yelled. “I’ll slow it down until someone gets here!”

I cast the strongest wind magic I knew. My barrage of attacks made the monster’s huge body shudder.

I stood in front of the three girls in danger and shouted to them. “Run! There’s a way out over there!”

However, they wouldn’t move. They seemed to be paralyzed in fear.

I’ll just have to fend it off until they’re able to run...

As I launched one wind attack after another, I heard a quivering voice from behind me: “Why...? After I was so mean to you...”

Mean? Oh, right. This is about the laxatives.

“Those were the best sweets I’d ever tasted,” I answered. “I’ve been looking forward to our lunch breaks more than ever! Every day is even more fun than the last!” I’d been given the chance to eat luxury treats for nothing. Considering how my mother had never bought me treats, leading me to make do with whatever I could find, I was genuinely pleased. “I want us to have fun at school together, so...”

I was doing whatever I could to protect the girls, but the black serpent was a tougher opponent than I’d expected.

“What? No way...”

Even though I was using my absolute maximum magical power, it wasn’t doing anything. The serpent’s huge body and firm scales made it incredibly resilient. The difference between us was obvious.

I did all that I could to just barely keep it at bay, but I couldn’t handle much more. My options were running out.

I saw sharp fangs and a flash of light. I instinctively held my breath as I realized that the light was a vibrant lightning attack, bursting forward right in front of my eyes.

“I’ll help you. Follow my lead.”

I saw *him* frantically holding back the serpent. I was shocked. I didn’t want to ask for his help, but more importantly, I didn’t want him to get the better of me.

“No, *you* follow *my* lead!” I countered.

“Why should someone like me have to follow a commoner?!”

“I’d rather die than take orders from you!”

We cast more spells as we continued griping. As stubborn as we were in our choice of words, we seemed to share an understanding.

We knew that we had to work together if we wanted to beat this monster.

Pouting, I aligned my attacks with his. I figured he was probably thinking the same as me.

Our combined attacks are working way better than I expected...

“This way, peasant.”

“No, you follow me, you snooty idiot.”

We were targeting the head—the enemy’s weak point. We were totally in sync as we put all of our power into our spells. The dungeon shook as wind and lightning bounced around.

The serpent’s huge body swayed violently, before finally straightening up for a moment and then crashing down to the floor, motionless.

I heard a voice from further along the passageway: “A black serpent...? Defeated by first-year students...?”

It was the teacher, who had shown up at that moment to help us. I was pleased by the teacher’s amazed reaction, but then I scowled when I made eye contact with the boy next to me.

“You got lucky,” he muttered. “It all worked out fine thanks to me.”

“You’re the lucky one. I know I’ve got the skills.”

We glared at each other bitterly.

“I can’t stand you.”

“Well, I can’t stand *you* either.”

Once we’d each given the other a piece of our mind, we snorted and turned away.

After defeating the black serpent, I received the highest possible marks for the class. I was glad to have earned such a good result, but the boy I detested got exactly the same marks, so I couldn't properly enjoy it.

"Thank you ever so much. You two are truly the pride of our academy." The teacher was effusive with praise after we rescued our classmates. That was pretty nice.

One thing changed as a result of all this too.

"Miss Noelle, would you like a taste?"

"Wow, cupcakes! Thank you!" I exclaimed. Ever since that class, the girl with the curly blonde hair had been offering me treats *without* any dodgy secret ingredients.

"I-I'm just giving you one because there happened to be some left over," she added churlishly. "It's not like I brought them in just for you."

As she turned away, her sidekicks chimed in.

"That's right. Miss Sharon just happened to have twenty left over."

"She never said, 'That girl eats so much, I'd better make sure to bring in extra tomorrow.'"

"There's no way she'd go out to buy lots of ingredients and ask your roommate about your favorite flavors."

"Don't get the wrong end of the stick."

Blushing brightly, the girl with the curly blonde hair looked at them and snapped, "Could you *please* stop talking?!"

One way or another, she seemed extremely thankful about the day when I helped her. I still remember those days as a happy time when I ate delicious treats and gained more friends.

However, there was one thing that didn't change at all.

"Why not give up and accept defeat, commoner?"

"Maybe *you* should accept defeat, fancy pants."

That detestable boy was still around, and I was still determined to beat him.

The day that our relationship changed...came a little later.

Extra Chapter 2: The Feeling I Can't Describe (Luke Waldstein, age 15)

There was a girl I just couldn't stand. And I most certainly couldn't stand to let her win.

"Oh, so you think I'm just a commoner? My mom raised me all by herself and worked like crazy so I could come here! I'm proud of my family! I don't give a damn if you're a duke's kid or whatever. I'll wipe the floor with you a hundred—no, a thousand times over!"

She didn't know her place whatsoever. Even though I was the heir of the Waldstein family and was seen as a child prodigy, she would pick fights with me. However, she was more capable than I'd expected, so I ended up preparing for tests in areas that I wouldn't have otherwise bothered to work on, just so that I could defeat her.

That lower class little girl was forever causing me problems. I was cutting into my time for sleep to immerse myself in my magic studies. I never played with toys or spent time with friends. Yet no matter how much effort I put in, she was always putting in the same vast amount of effort to try and beat me.

She was crass, chaotic, and careless. Her ear for music and sense of fashion were truly tragic. Sometimes she would display the most bizarre stereotypes of rural folk; she'd look so natural with a piece of grass sticking out from the corner of her mouth. I couldn't believe how strange and difficult to handle she really was.

But lately, I found myself acting oddly.

"I like that about you. If I'm going to compete with you as a rival, I'd much prefer to know that you're a real hard worker. It encourages me to do my very best too."

I remembered the classroom, bathed in shafts of evening light.

“There may be tough times ahead, but stay strong. Let’s work together, Luke Waldstein.”

Ever since she looked at me with her shining eyes that day, I started to follow her with my eyes and listen out for her voice. When I came to my senses, I was startled; I couldn’t understand why I was behaving so strangely.

My heart was gripped by an embarrassing, mysterious feeling I couldn’t place. I had no name for this feeling.

“Luke, my boy,” Professor Austin said, standing before me in one of the laboratories in the academy’s east wing. “That’s love.”

“No, it’s not,” I replied flatly and sighed.

Professor Austin was a friendly, relaxed teacher who’d asked to talk to me out of concern for my recent behavior. Thinking that he might be able to point me in the right direction to help reveal the nature of the indescribable feeling in my heart, I’d decided to be honest and explain my situation to him. I had no idea that he would miss the mark this badly.

“It’s okay. I understand the instinct to deny it,” Professor Austin continued. “Ah, first love sure is bittersweet.”

“I’m telling you, you’ve got it wrong.”

“Don’t worry. Boys always go through this at some point. Absentmindedly writing poems about the one you like... Imagining what songs you would perform if you had the chance to put on a concert for them... Changing their surname in your mind to see what it would be like if you were married... Sure, it’s just a dream, but there’s no harm in it. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“I don’t do any of those things.”

“No? I guess times have changed. I know I did all of that.”

“I think you’re just a little odd, sir.”

“Oh, Luke, you really aren’t getting it. It’s just as playwrights have been writing since time immemorial. If it doesn’t make you lose your head a bit, then it isn’t true love.”

“Please don’t quote great writers to justify your own strange behavior,” I muttered in exasperation.

“I really did love her, you know,” Professor Austin said suddenly. “As long as she was around, I needed nothing else. I wonder what she’s up to now.”

“You mean it didn’t work out?”

“Some things in life don’t go the way you wish they would.” He gazed out the window with a wistful smile. It was the look of someone coming across a beautiful stone they’d cherished as a child. “Just try not to be left with any regrets, all right?”

Those words stuck with me ever since.

I walked around the quiet academy buildings after parting with the professor, striding through the rear garden as a shortcut. I saw nobody around as I went, smelling the sweet olive trees and feeling fallen leaves crackle under my feet.

It was pure coincidence that I spotted her then.

In the otherwise deserted garden, she was practicing magic. I could see that she was working on difficult spells far beyond what was feasible for our year.

She looked like she’d been doing this for hours, failing over and over again until she had no magical or physical strength left, but she hadn’t given up. She still kept pushing herself, even though it was clearly impossible for her in this state.

Again. And again. And again.

I watched this foolhardy girl with ideas above her station.

She’s a fool, I thought. *She’s crazy.*

She’s amazing.

“I have to keep working,” I said to myself.

I couldn’t bear to let her win. I dashed toward my own practice area so I could train to defeat her.

I don’t understand what this mysterious feeling is. I still can’t place it.

If I ever find the words to describe it, I must tell her.

My head was spinning, full of these crazy thoughts.

Afterword

I like people who yearn. When I look at a person who continues to love someone even when their feelings are unrequited, I can't resist cheering them on. It's probably because I was like that for a long time myself. Even if it's not about romance, but about a person's dreams, or who they want to become, my instinct is always to cheer on people who don't abandon their feelings.

My appreciation for those people is part of *My Magical Career at Court*.

I also like coming-of-age stories, romantic comedies, and shonen manga. All of these things that I love play a part in this story.

As a result, I honestly expected that a lot of elements wouldn't click with readers. I thought people might not get why a story in the "isekai romance" section on Shosetsuka ni Narou would involve full-on magical battles, or why I was writing about a lovelorn boy's unrequited first crush.

I didn't think people would like it very much, but I liked it myself, so I went ahead and kept posting it anyway. For some reason, it ended up going over well. It still baffles me. When I met with my publisher, I must've asked thousands of times why my story became so popular. I really don't understand.

Still, that's what makes me so happy about it. People told me they enjoyed a piece of work that was brimming with all of my own feelings—as the creator, could there be any greater joy? I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who found this story to begin with and everyone reading it now.

Thank you all so, *so* much. I hope this finished work—one that I channeled my feelings of yearning into—can bring some color to your life.

Shusui Hazuki

Representative of the Pining Childhood Friends Supporters' Committee