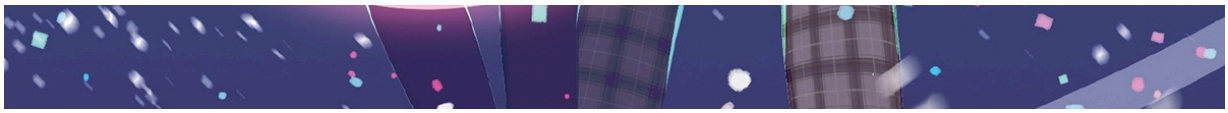

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT
WITCH
-another-
Rise of the
Barrier Mage ⟨I⟩
Matsuri Isora
Illustration by
Nanna Fujimi


This was a textbook for magecraft, filled with all kinds of magecraft formulae.
Guess I'll pick up from where I left off this morning. Uh, right, here we go. All about mana control techniques…
SECRETS OF THE
SILENT WITCH
-another-


From an Impoverished Village to a Prestigious School
Rosalie Verde
Lionel Brem
Edward Ridill
Louis Miller


“Can you take over here, Carla?”
“Sure thing. Get going.”
Carla Maxwell



# SECRETS OF THE SILENT WITCH -another-

## Rise of the Barrier Mage

⟨ I ⟩

**Matsuri Isora**

Illustration by Nanna Fujimi

YEN ON
New York

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## Secrets of the Silent Witch -another-
## Rise of the Barrier Mage 1

**Matsuri Isora**

Translation by Alice Prowse
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PROLOGUE

# Mirror Prison

In the Benerust Plains, in the southeast of the Kingdom of Ridill, the ground rumbled.

The sounds of large creatures trampling the land and ramming one another with their bulky bodies could be heard as hordes of earth dragons and fire dragons clashed over territory.

The earth dragons were bigger and stronger. Their scales were dark brown, their arms and tails as thick as logs.

Meanwhile, the fire dragons, with their scales of reddish-brown and orange, were somewhat smaller, with thinner limbs. But they could breathe fire.

Neither type could fly, and both were categorized as lesser dragons. But they were still plenty threatening to humans.

Currently rampaging in the Benerust Plains were a total of four earth dragons and six fire dragons. Looking purely at the numbers, the fire dragons held the advantage. But the more powerful earth dragons were winning the day, as they were nearly immune to their enemies' flames.

From a human's perspective, however, fire dragons were infinitely more troublesome. Their flames could catch the surroundings on fire, causing even greater calamity.

Even now, the flames they used to intimidate their enemies were charring the plains' grasses, raging more furiously by the minute.

As the horde of dragons howled and warred amid the spreading fire, a small group of people watched from a little hill overlooking the plains.

There were five of them, all men wearing deep-green uniforms under their cloaks and holding the staffs of high mages. These uniforms marked them as members of the Magic Corps, an elite fighting force that utilized magecraft.

Standing at the head of the group was the youngest of the five: a man in his midtwenties, his chestnut hair tied into a braid and a monocle sitting in front of his right eye.

His name was Louis Miller, the Barrier Mage, and he had slender, handsome features that one might even call feminine. This genius mage was the youngest in history to be appointed commander of the Magic Corps.

Louis narrowed his eyes behind his monocle and began to speak.

"Results from the scouting magecraft have been shared and the coordinate axis identified. Preparing to deploy Mirror Prison. Gather all enemies at a single point."

Despite the giant dragons raging before him, Louis showed no panic or fear. He delivered his instructions to his subordinates dispassionately and began to chant a spell.

He was calm—and yet the corners of his mouth lifted into a smile he couldn't hide.

The mages under him let loose attack spells, staggering their strikes to produce a constant stream. Dragons had incredibly tough scales, and unless one struck at their weak spots—the point between their eyes, or the eyes themselves—one's attacks would have little effect. This barrage was meant for another purpose: to distract and direct.

As Louis chanted, he stuck the staff in his right hand into the ground. A glowing white magic circle emerged at the staff's tip, and from it, white rays of light stretched toward the ground and sky, forming a large dome.

These rays became the frame for a giant, translucent wall. Expanding, it locked the earth dragons, the fire dragons, and the burning plains inside.

"That should make it easier to stamp out these annoying lizards," he said.

His four subordinates switched to a different chant, this time firing wind arrows *inside* the half-sphere barrier enclosing the dragons.

Within the barrier, invisible arrows made of compressed air zoomed about. Even if one didn't hit a dragon, it would bounce off

the barrier's wall and fly back toward the beasts at a different angle.

Louis's barrier wasn't just sturdy—it could reflect mana-based attacks striking its interior walls, hence the name of the spell: Mirror Prison.

Most defensive barriers could only parry one or two enemy attacks at most. It took a considerably talented mage to create a barrier strong enough to trap a dragon, much less one that could reflect magecraft, too.

Though his title implied a particular strength in defensive combat, Louis Miller, commander of the Magic Corps, used his barriers more offensively than anyone else.

"Continue your staggered attacks," Louis ordered the others, fixing his stare on the dragons rampaging inside the barrier.

None of his subordinates' strikes would be fatal unless they struck the beasts' vital areas. The wind arrows were purely to confuse the dragons and to buy time for another chant. You needed a *lot* of power to finish off a dragon—they were tough as nails and had a lot of life force.

Maintaining his barrier, Louis began a slightly longer chant. The words took the mana within him and wove it together, giving shape to a formula. The work was precise, steady, and delicate.

"In the name of Louis Miller, the Barrier Mage, I command this gate to open!"

In the center of the domed Mirror Prison, white particles of light gathered and formed a shining gate. It opened slowly, and wind gusted out of it, filled with glittering, yellowish-green lights.

This was grand magecraft. It borrowed the power of one of the great spirit kings, and very few in the Kingdom of Ridill could use it.

"Come forth from the edge of stillness—Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits!"

A moment later, a storm whipped up inside the barrier.

The spirit king's wind was far mightier than any normal attack spell, forming whirring blades inside the barrier. In turn, the barrier's reflective properties caused these tempestuous winds and their invisible blades to strike at the dragon horde from every direction, while also cutting the burning grass before the fires could spread

any further, all in a single breath.

One fire dragon staggered into another, and they both toppled over, only for wind blades to rain down upon them. They sliced into the creatures' brows, eyes, and even their mouths, brutally tearing them apart.

These winds were much more dangerous and destructive in an enclosed space, especially when they continuously reflected off the walls of the barrier, never losing momentum. Smaller dragons were whipped right off the ground and slammed into the barrier itself.

Eventually, the gate silently drew closed. As the storm subsided, Louis dispelled his Mirror Prison.

Holes now dotted the ground where the barrier had stood. Scattered grass lay about, along with the corpses of dragons.

Their remains, brows pierced and mangled by the storm, lay awkwardly, one atop the other. Anyone who hadn't seen it happen would have doubted their own eyes.

"…That should do it," murmured Louis, tapping his staff against his shoulder.

He'd locked the dragons into a barrier and slammed them with high-powered magecraft—a tactic that, while incredibly rough and violent, was perfect for confining damage to a set area.

That said, it wouldn't have been possible without high technical proficiency in both barrier techniques and attack magecraft.

And the one who had done it all so easily was a slender, delicate-looking man who seemed like he belonged in a strategy room giving orders, not on the front lines.

The other members of the Magic Corps beheld their young, beautiful, and *wicked* superior, their hearts filled with fear and awe.

* * *

This dragon hunt on the Benerust Plains was considered extremely difficult, as it involved a horde of earth and fire dragons. It was also

highly dangerous; they'd feared a major outbreak of fire and damage to the nearby town.

Normally, such a hunt would have called for a much larger party composed of both the Magic Corps *and* the Dragon Knights.

Unfortunately, the Kingdom of Ridill's eastern provinces had been plagued by a string of dragonraids over the past week, and the Dragon Knights, along with part of the Magic Corps, had just left on an expedition headed there.

Facing a serious shortage of personnel, Louis Miller had brought a tiny, elite team with him—and they'd slain both types of dragons, kept the fire from spreading, and protected the town.

People were eager to praise the Barrier Mage as noble, virtuous, and courageous. They called him the true defender of the realm.

…At the moment, however, that virtuous, courageous man was in a private room at his lodgings, busily counting his money.

Louis went over his bank deposit record, then turned his wallet inside out. Then, as if suddenly remembering, he opened a locked drawer and took out an empty jar of jam. It was filled with large silver coins—twelve of them, to be exact.

He sat cross-legged on his bed as he counted up all his money, including the reward for this dragon hunt.

"Hell yes!" he exclaimed, sounding less than classy. "It's enough… At last…" He clenched his fists, his voice filled with joy. "I can buy a house in the capital!"

Louis picked up a bottle of spirits he'd left next to his bed and swirled the contents around. It was cheap, but he gulped the entire thing down, savoring it, then let out a happy breath.

"And then… And then I swear I'll become a Sage."

As he wiped his alcohol-spattered mouth with his hand, his lips parted in an intrepid, toothy grin, revealing his high canines.

He'd changed a lot about himself, growing his lustrous hair out long and acting like a refined, sophisticated man. But in truth, he was from an impoverished village in the northern reaches of the kingdom.

Dangrotes was a village with nothing—nothing but the sheer white snow that buried it in winter. In one of its out-of-the-way corners stood a desolate brothel. That was where he was born.

This is the story of how a boy raised in a remote, destitute village rose to become one of the Seven Sages—the greatest mages in the kingdom of Ridill.

Louis's distaste for losing made him a very hard worker.

One could even say he was a genius of hard work.

# SECRETS OF THE SILENT WITCH -another-

## Rise of the Barrier Mage

⟨ I ⟩



CHAPTER 1

# So Much to Discover: Family, the Whole World, and New Flavors of Jam

Snow fell from the roof with a muffled *thump* as a man crumpled to the floor. He'd just been punched in the gut.

The man, around thirty and wearing Imperial-style clothing, rolled out the door of the desolate brothel into the snow. He'd been frequenting this place when he wasn't working border security.

At first, it had been a way to relax. That was before he developed an obsession with one of the prostitutes. Without the money to free her from bondage, he'd urged her to commit double suicide with him. And now *this* had happened.

The punch had come from the brothel's errand boy. He looked to be in his early teens; his chestnut-colored hair, cut short by an untrained hand, was dried out at the ends.

The boy trudged toward him through the accumulated snow. The man ranted and raved in the Imperial tongue until the boy's boot sole mercilessly slammed into him.

"I've got no idea what you're even *saying*, idiot."

The boy spoke Ridillian with a northern accent, though it wasn't as heavy as a farmer's, since he'd been working in a brothel—a hospitality business by nature. Still, he spoke more quickly than people did in the central provinces and tended to mumble the ends of his sentences.

The man, punched in the gut and kicked in the face, wheezed as he spoke, blood trickling from his nose. He was still conscious, but at this point, he seemed unable to fight back.

The boy lifted his foot to kick the man in the face once more for good measure. But the brothel's owner, who was having a smoke

inside the building, stopped him.

"Enough," he drawled. "He's learned his lesson. Just close the damn door already. It's cold out."

"All right," said the boy. He withdrew into the brothel, glaring at the man half-buried in the snow. "You wanna die? Then spend the night right there. You'll pass in your sleep."

Outside the door was nothing but white snow and the darkness of night. Nothing else—as if those two things made up the entire world. The village truly had nothing.

The boy shut the door, locked it, and rubbed his dry, cracked hands together.

The sun had long since set. Other boys his age would have been fast asleep, but he still had work to do—washing dishes, taking care of the fire, and keeping accounts. One of his tasks was to beat up and drive out any rogues like that Imperial man.

*I hope he was the last piece of shit for the night*, thought the boy.

Not even a moment later, he heard a drunk make a strange noise, followed by a woman's shriek; it sounded like she'd been hit. The boy clicked his tongue.

"…What a crappy day," he muttered.

Despite this violence against one of the brothel's prostitutes, the owner remained in his spot near the fire, smoking a cigarette. He blew smoke out of his nose, then raised one hand, as if to pray for the boy's success.

"Sure is easy with you here, Louis," he said.

"Yeah, thanks," came the errand boy's sarcastic reply as he—Louis Miller—dashed up the stairs.

* * *

Louis's mother had been one of the prostitutes working at the brothel in Dangrotes, a village in Northern Ridill close to its border

with the Empire. He'd never seen his father, and his mother never spoke of him. She had died when he was very young—so long ago that he barely remembered her.

Dangrotes was a poor village. Nobody had the means to look after orphaned children. Still, the prostitutes there made time for him, taking turns caring for and raising him. His mother had evidently been well respected by the others there. The ladies, seeing his mother in him, would always say how much their "elder sister" had helped them out.

The owner, Karsh, was a miser who treated those under him with a rough hand. He was generous enough to let Louis stay, though, as long as he pulled his own weight. Karsh had been the one to teach him how to read, write, and count money.

*"These lands are poor. If you want to survive, then learn—like your life depends on it. Because it does."*

That was one of Karsh's lessons. Fortunately, Louis was a quick learner and a force to be reckoned with in brawls. And these qualities had earned him his valued position as an errand boy and a bodyguard.

It snowed at daybreak the following morning, but it had let up by breakfast. More dreary, gray skies graced the view out the windows. The skies of Dangrotes were pretty much always covered in thick clouds. Clear days were rare.

Louis was carrying a serving tray with porridge on it as he knocked on the door to Shauna's room. She was the woman who the patron from the previous night had tried to press into a double suicide.

Knife in hand, the man had urged her to die with him. Louis thought for sure Shauna would still be shaken with fear, but she was sitting on her bed, yawning as she fiddled with her hair. The long, wavy black locks formed a failed braid in her hands. Shauna wasn't very dexterous.

"Hi, Shauna," he said. "Got breakfast for you."

"Oh, thank you. And would you mind braiding my hair for me?"

"Sure thing."

Shauna threw a hand-knit stole over her sleeping clothes and sat down in a chair. Louis put the tray of porridge in front of her, then moved behind her. Helping her get ready in the morning was one of his more important tasks.

"I'm really sorry about yesterday," said Shauna. "I feel like I made more work for you."

"Don't worry about it," Louis replied. "Happens all the time, doesn't it?"

People raised in the north tended to have a particular accent, and to speak more quickly. Shauna's words were clear, however, and her speech was rather slow. She'd told him she was born in the south.

"What happened to him?" she asked.

She was probably talking about the guy who'd wanted her to die with him. Louis didn't hear any gravity or sadness in her voice, despite the serious question—she was essentially asking if a customer was alive or dead. From her tone, she might as well have been inquiring if soup was on the day's menu.

So Louis responded in the same cavalier way. "No frozen corpses out front, at least."

"I thought not," she said, her smile somehow resigned.

Once Louis was done braiding her hair, Shauna—instead of reaching for the spoon for her porridge—opened a drawer and took out a small jar. It was filled with goopy, red jam.

"Thanks for yesterday," she explained.

Louis's eyes lit up. Jam, which required a lot of sugar, was a luxury in this impoverished region. Usually, he just smashed up some lingonberry to put on his almost-rotten meat or fish to try to cover up the taste. Jam had come as a shock to him—so sweet, it melted on his tongue. And this was a whole jar of it!

"…Are you sure?" he asked.

"Very sure," she replied. "I like marmalade better anyway."

"Marmalade?"

"Jam made using citrus peels. I was born in the south, after all," she explained, adding in a mumble, "I doubt I'll get to eat any here, though."

Louis stared at the jam jar in his hands. She'd probably gotten it from a patron. The glass was very clear; it wasn't even scratched or cracked. There was a cute picture of a raspberry on the label.

*Such a nice jar*, thought Louis. *Once I finish the jam, I'll use it for my secret savings.*

Shauna put one elbow on her desk and rested her head in her hand. "Hey, Louis. I have a question."

"Eh?"

"You shouldn't stay here forever. Why don't you leave? Make a family of your own?"

Louis stuck the jar in his pocket, chewing on Shauna's words.

Both of them knew how difficult it was for someone who lived in a brothel to leave it and start a family. *Why would Shauna suddenly suggest that?* he wondered, his expression dubious.

Shauna gave him a pained smile. "All right, well, not *all* families are good," she said, adding softly, "I mean, my parents were the worst." She picked up her spoon and used it to stir her smooth porridge. "But unlike me, you never had much of a family. I just thought it might be nice for you to leave and start one."

"But all of you are like my family," said Louis. The prostitutes he lived with all treated him kindly. Why couldn't *they* be his family?

But Shauna slowly shook her head. "We're very fond of you, of course, but we can't be your family. We're just strangers huddling together for warmth."

Strangers huddling together for warmth? *Isn't that good enough?* thought Louis.

Shauna was right. His mother had been dead for as long as Louis could remember. He'd never had a family. It hadn't ever bothered him, though. He didn't particularly *want* a family.

Seeing that Louis was still confused, Shauna offered him a gentle smile. "This isn't your home. And that means we're not your family. So…"

She turned toward the window. Outside was a vast world of silver: a desolate village, buried under the snow.

"So you must leave here. It's the right thing to do."

A month later, before Louis had even finished his jam, Shauna died. She'd been ill.

According to the other prostitutes, she had realized she didn't have long. The owner ordered Louis to bury her. And as the boy dug a hole through the snow and dirt, his hands cracked and red, he idly wondered if she'd wished she could have died with that man from the Empire.

* * *

Four months passed after Shauna's death, and the first week of Widdol arrived. People said this was the time when spirits brought the winds of spring, but today, Dangrotes was still covered in snow.

Louis made sure to finish his washing tasks before the snow started up again. Then he headed back to his room, rubbing his numb hands.

The room had a straw mat to sleep on and a small box containing a few of his personal possessions, but more than half of it was taken up by cleaning supplies. It had once been a simple supply closet.

Louis dug into his straw bed and came out with a jar he'd hidden inside. He'd started using the empty jam jar for his secret savings. He dropped in a few coins from his pocket.

*I wonder how much more I'll need to fill my belly with jam.*

He shook the jar. The jingling of copper coins wasn't very loud. After enjoying it for a moment, he put the jar back in the bed.

Then he took out a book—also hidden in the straw. He'd picked it up on the stairs that morning. A patron must have misplaced it. A lot of people had been staying at the brothel over the last few days; an avalanche had blocked their path. Louis never considered looking for the book's owner. It was his now—that was how lost items worked.

And this was not just *any* book. The title on the front cover read *Practical Magecraft Beginners Course*. This was a textbook for magecraft, filled with all kinds of magecraft formulae.

Magecraft was a way to produce miracles by using mana via incantations; before, the art was confined to noble circles. But mage training institutions had proliferated in modern-day Ridill, throwing open more doors for commoners; nevertheless, one needed money, talent, or both to enroll in such a school. As a result, mages were few and far between. They were almost unheard-of in this remote village.

*Guess I'll pick up from where I left off this morning*, he thought. *Uh, right, here we go. All about mana control techniques…*

The magecraft book had many small notes written in the margins. It must have belonged to a teacher, rather than to a student. The notes made the content easy to understand.

Even a regular book would have been a rare treasure out here. Normally, Louis never would have gotten his hands on one about *magecraft*.

He pored over the book until it was time for his next task, then he hid it in his clothes and headed off. Next, he would be chopping firewood; if he got it done quickly, he could hide behind the piles of wood and read some more.

* * *

A man hastened down a hallway in the Dangrotes brothel. He was in his late fifties, with short white hair and striking, bushy eyebrows. A pipe sat between his lips.

The man was Gideon Rutherford, also known as the Mage of Violet Smoke. The "violet" part wasn't literal, however—the smoke he used was white. "Violet smoke" was merely an old Ridillian euphemism for tobacco smoke. Though he didn't have his staff and robe at the moment, he was a high mage and a teacher at Minerva's Mage Training Institution.

He was visiting the area on work, but his carriage had been held up by an avalanche. Left without a choice, he was now staying in

the village—at the brothel, rather than at the inn, which had been full.

On this, the third day of his stay, he was searching for a book he'd misplaced.

*I shouldn't have brought it with me, but I wanted to write those exam questions… Damn it.*

He'd asked the brothel's owner, but the man had said he had no idea. After Rutherford slipped him a bit of money, however, he had confessed that a kid named Louis, their errand boy, had been slinking around lately. The brat was currently chopping firewood out back.

After stepping outside the establishment, Rutherford quick-chanted a flame to light his pipe and took a pull.

The snow had stopped, but the wind was frigid, and it stung his ears. Opening and closing his gloved hands, he went around to the rear of the building and saw a boy facing the other direction, chopping wood.

He wore adult hand-me-downs layered thickly. His hair was chestnut brown, short and dry, with no sheen whatsoever, and his skin was covered in tiny cuts and scrapes. Despite his heavy clothing, Rutherford could easily tell the boy was malnourished.

That wasn't unusual in these parts. The northern provinces of Ridill tended to be especially impoverished. And yet, regardless of his condition, the boy moved sharply as he chopped the wood, easily lifting the heavy ax and splitting each piece with practiced motions.

"Hey, you there. Boy," called out Rutherford.

The boy stopped chopping and looked at him. He was slender, with girlish features, but his actions were a sharp contrast: He jutted out his lower lip, as if to intimidate him. "Yeah?" he replied. He was indeed quite intimidating.

*This won't be easy*, thought Rutherford immediately. "You're Louis, right? Seen my book anywhere? It's called *Practical Magecraft Beginners Course*."

"Nope," came the brusque reply as Louis turned back to his chopping.

Rutherford took another pull of his pipe and mulled this over. He'd

been a teacher for a long time; he knew when a child was hiding something from him. He was sure Louis knew something about his book.

A child from some backwater village would never understand that textbook. It would be best to assume he'd sold it off for some pocket change. If that was the case, finding it and buying it back would be the quickest solution.

"All right, brat," said Rutherford. "Tell me who you sold my book to. If you're honest with me, I'll let you off with just one hit."

"I'm sorry, what?" said Louis in reply to his threat; he sounded exasperated. "You think I'd sell something that nice? I'd have to be stupid— Oh."

Realizing his mistake, Louis dropped the ax, whirled around, and ran. Very quickly, too, considering he was traveling over snow.

Rutherford performed an incantation, then slowly exhaled a puff of smoke from his pipe. The smoke should have drifted around him for a short time before disappearing—but instead, it went against the wind and toward Louis, as if it had a mind of its own.

After inhaling some of the smoke, Louis managed to run a bit farther. But soon his feet tangled up, and he fell to his knees.

"…Huh? The hell's this…?"

"I imbued the smoke with a numbing component."

Rutherford leisurely walked toward the boy, twirling his pipe in his hands. The Mage of Violet Smoke was proficient in a rare kind of magecraft that could imbue tobacco smoke with special properties.

The numbing sensation traveled throughout Louis's body, and the boy flopped down face-first into the snow.

Rutherford went around in front of him, then bent down and peered at his face. "All right, brat. Give back the book."

Louis clawed at the ground to bring his head up, then stuck out his tongue. "Shut up, old man. In these parts, you lose something, it belongs to whoever finds it."

"Pure rubbish!"

"Hah. Don't hate *me* because *you're* a dumbass."

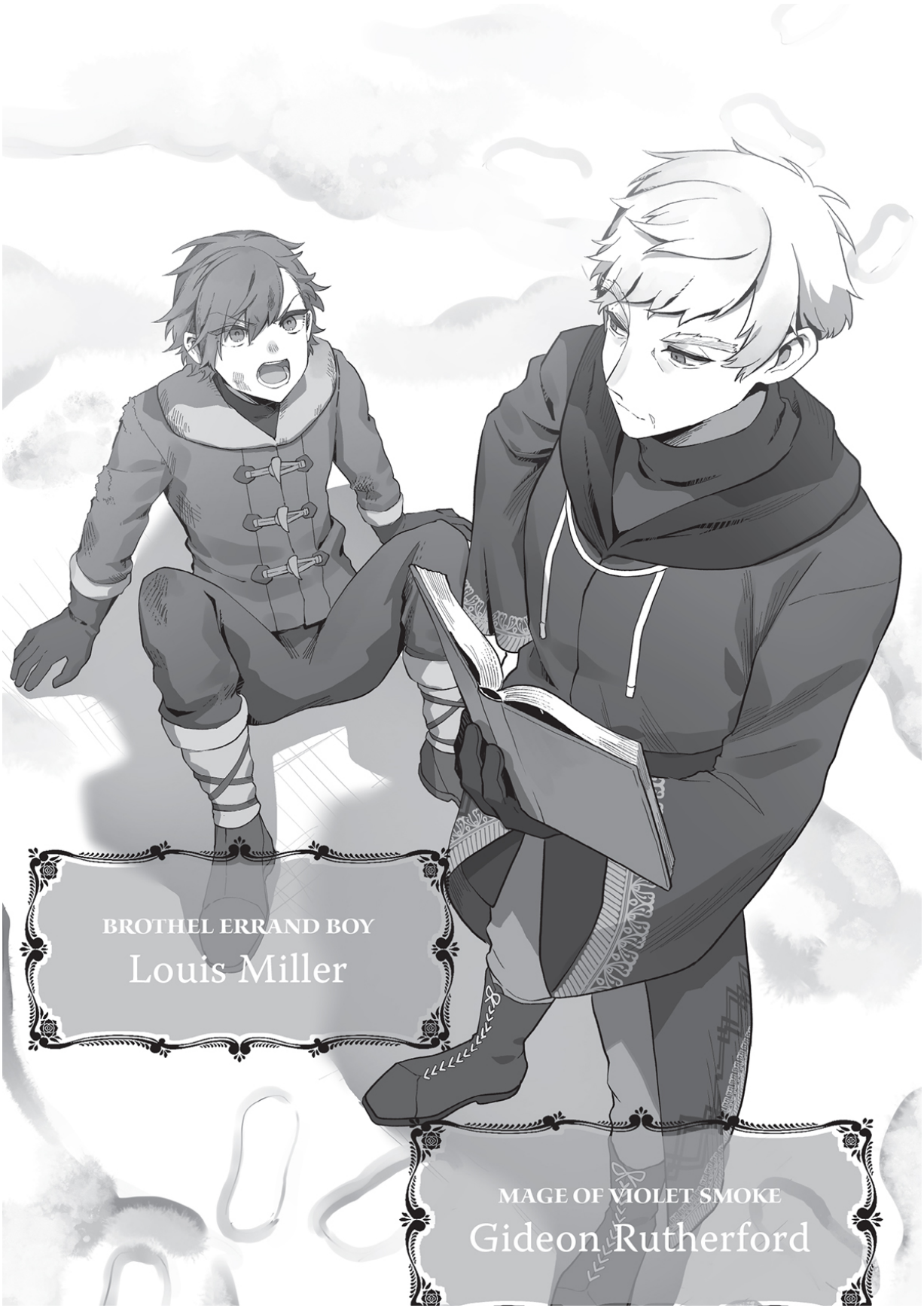
Surprisingly, Louis managed to get to his feet, though he was still unsteady. Then he threw a punch.

*I went too easy on him because he's a kid.*

Rutherford evaded the strike, then grabbed the boy by the chest of his ragged old clothing and, holding back nothing, slapped him across the face.

As the slap connected, something tumbled out of Louis's clothes—the book Rutherford had dropped. Apparently, that was where he'd hidden it.

Rutherford tossed the bone-thin boy to the side, sending him sprawling on his rear end, then picked up the textbook.


BROTHEL ERRAND BOY
Louis Miller
MAGE OF VIOLET SMOKE
Gideon Rutherford



"Hey, give that back!" Louis pleaded. "I'm only halfway through it!"

"…Eh? Halfway through? This is a book on magecraft. Enough with your pointless fibbing, brat."

Louis felt rage boiling up from the pit of his stomach.

This bushy-eyebrowed mage seemed to think he couldn't read. The literacy rate in this village certainly wasn't high; Louis could only read and write because the owner had made him learn. The man had said that if he couldn't manage it, he'd put him in a dress and make him start taking customers.

*This old geezer is looking down on me. Underestimating me.*

Enraged, Louis staggered to his feet and chanted the words he'd just learned from the book.

The mage's eyes went wide. Louis pointed a finger at the tip of the man's nose, then chanted the final clause.

Wind blew from his fingertip, causing the man's short white hair to flap. He'd wanted to produce fire to burn the mage's bushy eyebrows off, but he was most compatible with wind, so this was easier.

Louis sniffed. *How do you like that, old man?*

The mage groaned.

"…Kid, who taught you that?" he asked, his voice hard.

"It was written right there in that book, idiot."

The textbook was filled with a teacher's notes, so it hadn't been too difficult to understand the contents.

The bushy-eyebrowed mage still seemed surprised, his eyes wide as he watched Louis. "You mean to say you *learned* it? Just by reading this?"

Louis forced his numb body to lean back a little and put on a spirited grin. "Yeah. So?"

"That sort of thing would take a student at Minerva's half a year to learn."

*Minerva's.* Louis had heard that name. It was the most prestigious mage training institution in the kingdom.

Magecraft used to be a privilege of the noble class. He'd heard that even now, the only ones who went to mage training institutions were nobles or the children of wealthy families. A boy running errands for a brothel in the remote countryside had no connection to such a world.

And this man had said it took *six months* for them to learn something so simple? How laid-back their lives must be. Louis laughed. In *his* world, he had to learn like his life depended on it. Those who couldn't pull their weight died like animals.

"Well! I guess Minerva's is no big deal after all," he said. "Your students are even dumber than some brat from the boonies."

He looked at the man, gaze full of mockery. Louis wanted to provoke him—and then, when his guard was down, give him a good punch.

But the man didn't fall for this. Far from it—he seemed to sink into thought for a few moments. Then he handed the confiscated book back to Louis.

"All right, brat. I'll be staying in the village for another week. If you learn four beginner-level spells from this textbook in that time, I'll give you something even better than this book."

Two impulses began warring inside Louis. One said *Who are you to give me orders?*—but the other said *I want to get back at this guy*.

It didn't take Louis long to reach his conclusion. He'd always been strong-willed—so unwilling to lose, it aggravated everyone around him.

"I swear, you old geezer, if whatever it is turns out to be something really stupid, I'll bury you under the snow."

* * *

For the next week, Louis spent every free moment studying. To conserve candles, he would memorize a section of the textbook by

daylight, then devote his evenings to single-minded practice.

Those who couldn't pull their weight were doomed to die a miserable death. It wasn't a great environment to grow up in, but it *had* given Louis the ability to learn and focus.

First, he determined how to order his learning for maximum efficiency, then he worked out a plan of action. And once he had his plan, he didn't merely practice until he was blue in the face. When he failed, he'd figure out what went wrong, then consider alternative approaches—including whether those approaches would be applicable in other contexts.

And on the evening of the seventh day, in the wood-chopping area behind the brothel, Louis showed off every single beginner-level spell in the textbook.

At the end, he created blades of wind—the final spell in the book—and chopped a log clean in half. Then he sniffed with pride. "See that, old man?"

The man, who was smoking his pipe as he sat on a stump, took a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Louis. Louis's face scrunched up—he'd been numbed by that smoke only a week ago. He avoided it and nervously took the paper.

It was a recommendation for Louis to enroll at Minerva's Mage Training Institution as a scholarship student. The name of his sponsor was one of the institution's teachers: Gideon Rutherford, the Mage of Violet Smoke.

Louis looked up from the letter, his expression serious. "Is this some kinda child kidnapping racket?"

The man punched him. Louis held his head and groaned.

Rutherford took a pull from his pipe. "I'm leaving tomorrow morning. Make your decision before then."

With that, the man took his leave. Louis looked down at the letter of recommendation again, biting his chapped lip.

He'd learned those spells because they had seemed handy—and to outwit Rutherford. He'd never considered what might come after that.

*…Me? At Minerva's?*

Strangely, Louis felt more confused than happy. He didn't have

any ambitions or desires. Life kept him far too busy for such distractions. When he thought about it, he couldn't come up with a single thing he actually *wanted*.

"……"

Louis looked down at the letter once more. A recommendation letter. Even the paper was of a quality one rarely saw in this village.

He'd never imagined a future where he left the brothel. He couldn't think of anything he wanted to do or become. All he could think about was that he needed to get the cleaning and accounting done soon or he'd go without dinner again. Such things filled his mind.

Everything was about avoiding starvation, making sure he didn't freeze to death. How could a stray pup whose every effort went into survival afford such grandiose dreams?

Louis folded the letter up and put it in his pocket before walking back to the brothel. As soon as he was inside, Karsh called out to him.

"Something happen with the guest?" he asked.

"Nothin'," replied Louis.

Karsh probably wouldn't suffer Louis leaving. The miser wouldn't want to let go of his handy errand boy. If Louis was up-front and told him he was going to leave, Karsh would surely punch him and demand that Louis remember the debt he owed the man for raising him.

After heading back to his room, Louis got cleaning supplies and returned to the hallway. This time, an older prostitute named Vivian spoke to him.

"Louis, would you mind cleaning Shauna's room again?"

"Eh? Why?"

Shauna had survived the patron who wanted her to die with him, but she'd been unable to make it through the winter and had succumbed to illness. Louis idly remembered the clumsy woman's black hair and how he'd always braided it for her.

"I hear we'll be getting a new girl soon," said Vivian casually. "It would help if the room was a bit cleaner, right?"

"…Huh. All right."

There was always a lot to prepare whenever they got a new girl at the brothel, so Louis was usually informed of it ahead of time. There must have been a slipup in communication.

As Louis headed to Shauna's room with the mop, Vivian called out again.

"Take as much time as you need. I'll talk to Karsh for you."

Apparently, Vivian was worried about him. Did his face really look that awful?

*…I bet it does. I haven't slept—I was too busy practicing magecraft.*

Louis yawned, then opened the door to Shauna's room. He came in here every once in a while to clean, so it wasn't that dusty.

Since Vivian was looking out for him, maybe he'd take a little nap. He lay down on the unwrinkled sheets and closed his eyes. This room had always smelled like perfume and makeup when Shauna was around. But now it just smelled like damp air.

*What did her perfume smell like again…? Oh, right. It was citrus.*

Born in the southern provinces, Shauna loved citrus fruits. Louis only knew of them through her perfume.

*"You shouldn't stay here forever. Why don't you leave? Make a family of your own?"*

As he dozed, he remembered what she'd said to him.

*"This isn't your home. And that means we're not your family. So you must leave here. It's the right thing to do."*

She'd looked out the window as she spoke—at the empty village, covered in white.

*Shauna*, he thought. *I've never wanted a family.*

The concept of family was still vague to him. But there *was* something he wanted—something a little more concrete. Just before he fell asleep, he made up his mind.

*That's right. I guess that'll be my goal for now.*

After his nap, Louis straightened out the sheets on Shauna's old bed, then went back to his room and shoved his hand into his straw mat. The first thing he took out was a shoulder bag. Then he grabbed

Rutherford's textbook and the letter of recommendation.

At last, he stuck in his hand one more time, meaning to take the jam jar containing his secret savings. But when he did, he realized it had a strange weight to it. He frowned.

"…Huh?"

As he pulled it out, he saw large silver coins stuffed inside. Twelve of them—exactly the number of prostitutes working at the brothel. Just one of those coins was enough to keep Louis alive for a month and a half if he ate frugally.

As he stared at the jar, he noticed writing on the label.

*"Don't you come back, now!"*

The slightly misshapen letters belonged to Vivian, the older prostitute.

"…Ha-ha."

He laughed, mussing up his short hair. Shauna had told him that they weren't a real family, just strangers huddling together for warmth. But just then, Louis thought maybe that wasn't so bad, either.

* * *

The Mage of Violet Smoke, Gideon Rutherford, looked up at the cloudy sky as he made his way to the carriage station outside the village. He'd stayed here quite a bit longer than originally intended, for obvious reasons.

*Now, then. Will the brat come?*

Louis had looked more confused than happy when Rutherford gave him the letter of recommendation, and that had made him curious. It wasn't that the boy had no confidence in himself. From his expression, Rutherford got the feeling he'd simply never thought about his own future before.

The old mage stopped and turned back to look at Dangrotes, buried in the snow. In a poor village like this, it was all you could do

to make sure you didn't freeze or starve, day in, day out. The people here must not have had the time to harbor hopes for a better future. Perhaps a few of them *did* entertain fleeting, unattainable dreams based on half-heard rumors of others' success. But that boy was smart. He'd kept his eyes on the cold, harsh reality.

*…Maybe he won't show up after all.*

Eventually, Rutherford saw his carriage approaching. It was still a little early, so there were no other passengers. The driver dozed as he held the reins.

Just as Rutherford took out his pipe for one last smoke before departing, he heard an odd noise come from within the carriage.

"Ah-choo!"

*Who was that?* he wondered, peering inside.

There were several boxes in the back—luggage, probably. And there was the brat, squeezed between two of them, trembling and dressed in nothing but rags.

Louis tried to say something but sneezed again instead.

Rutherford climbed in with an air of nonchalance and took a seat on the bench.

"Hey, brat," he said. "How long have you been here?"

Louis sniffled. "Since before sunup," he said quietly.

No wonder. He must have been freezing.

Rutherford took out his pipe, but instead of lighting it, he simply twirled it in his hand. "What do you want to do once you're a mage, Louis Miller?" He was interested in what grand ambition this boy—who had only ever seen the cold reality right in front of him—was bringing along.

Louis looked up at Rutherford, his purple eyes tinged with gray, and declared, "I'm gonna save up money and eat something called *marmalade*."

"…Eh? Marmalade?" Rutherford sighed. What was that supposed to mean?

Louis grinned, baring his teeth. "Better than something wishy-washy, right?"

"Be sure to give some thought to what you want to do *after* you eat marmalade."

“I’ll get right to it.”

As a cold wind blew into the carriage, the boy wrapped in rags closed his eyes.

That was how the brothel’s errand boy left the impoverished village where he was born, without a single grand desire or ambition to his name and carrying only his meager possessions—and a single jam jar.

Louis Miller was eleven years old at the time. Back then, he never dreamed that one day he’d be striving to join the Seven Sages.



CHAPTER 2

# The Dormitory Jam Hunt Incident

Minerva's Mage Training Institution was housed in a series of grand brick buildings located in a quiet area surrounded by forest outside the city of Ragliszilbe in central Ridill.

It would have been more convenient to put this sort of school in a city, but magecraft practice required wide-open areas, and magical research often resulted in accidental explosions, so this one had been built some distance away.

Behind the school were the student dormitories, two three-story buildings surrounded by high fences. Most of the students lived there.

Louis left Dangrotes in the middle of Widdol and arrived at Minerva's over two weeks later, where he was interviewed several times. Once he showed his interviewers the spells he'd learned from Rutherford's textbook, however, his enrollment was quickly approved.

On their way to the school, Rutherford had sent out a familiar to tell the other faculty members about Louis, so nobody was surprised when the older man returned with a filthy boy in tow.

Louis sat in the meeting room on the school's first floor and received an explanation of the enrollment process for both the school and the dorm. He had assumed classes would start the very next day, or fairly soon, at least.

But then Rutherford, twirling his pipe, scowled. "You're moving in today, but you won't actually enroll until Fuere."

"What?!"

Louis's eyes widened. It was the last day of Widdol, which meant there were five whole months before he would start school.

"Next month is the exam period," explained Rutherford. "But once that's over with, Minerva's is on break until autumn. That means you

have five months to get yourself as prepared as you possibly can."

Schools attended by the children of farmers had their break in the autumn, since that was harvest season. But the kids who went to Minerva's were mostly the children of nobles or otherwise wealthy families. The start of summer marked the beginning of the social season for the nobility, so the long break had been positioned there instead.

Whatever the case, Louis had originally expected to start right away, and this turn of events had dampened his enthusiasm somewhat. A long break for social parties seemed like a complete waste of time for a commoner like Louis.

"Ugh. What am I supposed to do for five months?"

As annoyance rose to Louis's face, Rutherford picked up a box at his feet and set it on the desk. Almost too big to put your arms around, it was packed full of textbooks and loose sheaves of paper.

"At Minerva's, students don't begin practical magecraft until six months after enrollment."

Louis didn't know what to say. There were still five months until he would begin school, and then it would be six *more* months after that before he'd start practicing for real—he'd be waiting a whole *year* to truly get started.

But before he could yell about how stupid that was, Rutherford continued. "But you've already memorized all the magecraft in the beginner coursebook. I had a talk with the principal, and we've decided to give you assignments as an exception."

*I see*, thought Louis. *All the paper stuffed inside this box must be my assignments.*

Rutherford held up all five fingers and thrust them right in Louis's face. "Five months remain until you enroll. However, if you complete all these assignments before then, we'll let you take part in practical magecraft training as soon as you become a student."

What Louis really wanted to do was enroll tomorrow and start practical training right away. But before he complained about it, he decided to check out what these assignments were. He picked up a few of the papers.

The assignments truly seemed to span everything—there were

those related to magecraft, but also those concerning general education subjects like language, history, and mathematics.

"…Wait, you old rat. You're tellin' me you don't just teach magecraft here?"

"Indeed. You'll find the level of general education at Minerva's quite high. We are, after all, one of the three most prestigious schools in the kingdom."

Louis flipped through the pages, then grimaced. *I don't understand any of this crap!*

He'd worked at the brothel from as far back as he could remember—he'd never gone to school. He didn't know much when it came to general subjects. He could read, write, and do basic math, but foreign languages were out of the question. On that topic, all he knew was how to threaten people in the Imperial tongue. Like the words for *Pay up*, or *I'll kill you*.

Louis even saw some subjects he'd never heard of, like *ancient magecraft script* and *Spiritspeak*.

As Louis fell silent, a grim look on his face, Rutherford twirled his pipe and grinned. "Or would you rather I start you out in the first year of the beginner course with the other *children*?"

"Cut the crap, old man."

Louis hated losing, and his grayish-purple eyes flashed, just as they had when he'd promised to learn all the spells in Rutherford's textbook.

"This'll be a cinch," he declared, full of determination. "I won't even need five months."

"I see. There are actually two more boxes about this size, so come to the faculty room to get them."

"……"

This man had just pulled a fast one on him—he'd shown him only part of the work at the outset, then piled on extra after getting the okay. It was a cunning, mean-spirited tactic. Louis even wondered for a moment if the man wasn't cut from the same cloth as he was. "You're from up north, aren't you, you old rat?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," said Rutherford with a shrug, pipe still in his mouth.

* * *

Carrying all three boxes of assignments, one on top of the other, Louis walked down the hallway of the boys' dormitory.

Minerva's school building was quite impressive, and even the dorms were nice. It was better than any building in Louis's hometown, at least, and it was very clean. The sunlight shining in through the large glass windows was warm and comfortable. Up north, they'd still be getting snowfall at the end of Widdol.

Walking past the sunlit windows, Louis glanced at each student as he crossed paths with them. There were quite a few, probably because it was a weekend morning.

*They all look like rich kids from good families.*

Everyone wore white shirts with checkered pants and vests, their uniforms nice and clean. Each of them had a dark-green cape across their shoulders as well. At Minerva's, even days off were generally spent in uniform. Louis's ragged clothes stood out.

Eventually, he reached his dorm room. It was on the third floor of the east wing of the boys' dormitory. Since his hands were full and he couldn't knock, he just kicked the door a couple times.

"Hey, open up. My hands are full."

He thought he heard someone inside, but no one responded, and the door remained closed.

Louis clicked his tongue, annoyed. Then he put the boxes down and opened the door. "Coming in."

The room was twice as big as the storage closet he'd been living in before. One desk for studying was placed in front of either wall, to his left and right, and at the back was a bunk bed.

On the lower bunk was a young man with blond hair, somewhat plump, staring closely at Louis.

"Look at that," the boy said. "I heard the new kid was a commoner, but I guess he had enough money to hire a servant after all."

"Eh?" replied Louis, meaning to ask what he was talking about.

The boy gave him a look of pity. "I feel sorry for you. He won't even let you wear proper clothing. Oh, you can just put his things next to that desk there. That's what you're here to do, right? Deliver it for your master?"

At last, Louis put two and two together. This boy thought he was the new student's servant. He put his things on the desk. "I'm the new student," he spat, causing the other kid to stare at him in surprise.

*This is so annoying*, he thought as he looked at the desk. There was a lock on the drawer, for what it was worth, but it was cheap. Any lockpick could crack that open in a jiffy. But it was better than nothing. Always good to keep your valuables safe, especially your wallet. He'd be sleeping with *that* directly on his person every night.

*I heard they even have baths here. That's crazy. They want me to get in a bathtub without wearing any clothes? That's like asking for someone to steal your valuables.*

Both back in Dangrotes and on the way to Minerva's, whenever he'd wanted to get clean, he'd simply drawn some water—hot or not—into a barrel and wiped himself down. What was he supposed to do with his valuables when he took a bath? *Maybe keep them on top of my head?* he wondered.

His roommate got out of bed and walked over to him. He was smiling now, as though trying to be kind. "You're Louis Miller, the new student? The rumors said you were a commoner."

"…Yeah? And?"

"I'm Terrence Abanethy. My father is the lord of Doltart, and my uncle is one of the leaders of the Mages Guild."

Terrence continued to speak at length about his whole family, even though Louis hadn't asked him to. And when Louis went to carry in the boxes he'd left in the hall, the boy continued, unbothered. Naturally, he didn't appear the least bit inclined to help, either.

As Louis put the third box down next to his desk, Terrence spread his arms wide. "Some may detest living in the same room as a commoner, but I, for one, welcome you!"

Louis didn't sense any duplicity or malice in the boy's remark.

Terrence was smiling—an expression so natural and unsophisticated, he might even call it *innocent*.

"Now, then," Terrence said. "About your role here."

"…Eh?"

"I'd like you to clean for me, carry my things, and pick up my laundry."

"What'd you say?" Louis's lip curled up. He squinted at Terrence.

The boy continued, his tone implying this was very normal. "Well, you see, we can't have any servants here at school except when we're moving in. It's been such a bother, not having anyone to take care of me on a daily basis."

*I get it*, thought Louis. Terrence was welcoming him because he wanted a commoner he could force to do his errands. Here at the dorm, you apparently cleaned your room and picked up your laundry yourself.

To Louis, having people cook for you and do your laundry was already quite a luxury. But Terrence was from a noble family, and apparently this wasn't enough to satisfy him. Either way, Louis thought it was best to just ignore people like him.

As Louis quietly tidied up his things, Terrence went on, undeterred. "And if a commoner becomes a mage, they quite often end up employed by a noble family. Consider this practice."

"Screw that. And don't try to order me around, you pile of dung," said Louis quickly and bitterly.

Terrence stared at him, face blank. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure what you're saying. Can't you do something about that northern accent?"

Louis flashed him a wicked grin, then grabbed his collar. Terrence was a noble. He'd know the Imperial language—they were neighbors, after all.

And so, dropping his northern Ridillian altogether, he said one of the few phrases he knew in Imperial.

* * *

Rutherford narrowed his eyes and groaned. "Terrence came running to the faculty room in tears, you know. He said you proclaimed that you'd kill him, and that he was so scared, he couldn't be in the same room with you."

Louis had been forced to kneel on the floor in front of Rutherford while the latter sat at his teacher's desk. The boy had started causing trouble not thirty minutes after moving in.

"…What did you say, and how did you threaten him?"

"I didn't threaten him. I was just having a little fun learning the Imperial language."

"Oh? The Imperial tongue?" Rutherford twirled his pipe and glared at the boy. "And? What did you say?"

"*I'll rip out your organs like a pig and boil them for dinner.*"

"So you *did* proclaim you'd kill him! You fool!"

Rutherford slapped Louis across the face without mercy.

Louis wasn't one to be discouraged by a mere slap, though. He leaned back, still sitting on his knees, and sniffed arrogantly. "Pah! If that's all it took to make him cry, then there's something wrong with *him*, not me!"

"Don't assume every kid in the world is the same as you, brat!"

The other teachers in the room winced as the two flung abuse at each other. One old professor, unable to stand by and watch, turned to Rutherford.

"…Would you two stop disturbing the peace of the faculty room?"

"This is what teachers are supposed to do, Macragan. I'm disciplining him."

"Then please, do a better job of it."

The short old man named Macragan fiddled with his long beard as he glanced between Rutherford and Louis. His eyes were half-buried under bushy eyebrows, but one could still clearly see the exasperation in them.

Rutherford clicked his tongue, then scratched his short white hair. Finally, he glared at Louis. "I've arranged a different room for you. Your new roommate is Owen Wright. He's a year younger than you. Don't scare him off."

"Hey, I'm fine with a storage closet or an attic room," said Louis.

“Not like I’ll have to worry about freezing to death here anyway.” A closet would be much more comfortable if the alternative was sharing a room with someone like Terrence.

Rutherford continued, brooking no argument from the cynical child. “No. You will be in a room. With a roommate.”

If he threw Terrence, the son of a noble, into a closet, his parents would storm into Minerva’s, enraged. But Louis didn’t have any parents to intervene on his behalf.

The boy stopped kneeling and crossed his legs, placing an elbow on one and resting his head in his hand as he looked up at Rutherford. “I’m a stray. You could just isolate me. I don’t have any parents to complain, you know.”

“No means no.” Rutherford’s tone was clear. He threw Louis his new room key, implying that the conversation was over. “Oh, and one more thing, brat. Before you enroll, I want you to make a friend.”

“Eh? A friend? I don’t need friends.”

“Not true.”

Rutherford caught his twirling pipe and leveled the end of it at the center of Louis’s forehead, as if it were a teacher’s pointer. His eyes narrowed beneath his bushy eyebrows.

“You can only go so far on your own.”

* * *

The key Rutherford gave him was apparently for a room on the third floor of the boys’ dorm. Louis loaded up his three boxes of assignments again and trudged down the hallway.

*Make a friend? What’s that old man getting at? Well, he can act like a teacher all he wants. He’ll never look like one. He’ll always be a bushy-browed rat.*

Finally arriving at his destination, Louis kicked the door again instead of knocking. He got a reply immediately.

"Yes?"

Along with the response, someone opened the door from inside. But Louis, who had a stack of boxes in his arms, couldn't see anything in front of him—he just knew the door was open. For now, he decided to introduce himself to his new roommate.

"I'm Louis Miller. I'll be using this room starting today."

"…Owen Wright." Owen murmured his name and held the door open for the other boy.

Louis went in and dropped the boxes on the floor, then glanced at Owen. He was short and had curly blond hair with hints of gray in it. His uniform was tidy. Behind his longish bangs, his eyes were suspiciously narrowed. He was staring at Louis.

*Must not be very sociable*, thought Louis, meeting his gaze before smoothly looking away and shutting the door. *Guess he's better than some idiot who starts bragging about his family when no one asked*, he decided.

Louis looked around the room. It seemed pretty much the same as the last one. Facing in from the door was a window on the opposite wall, with a desk to either side and a bunk bed at the back. But Louis frowned when he saw the desks. Both of them had books and other study materials open on them.

Realizing what Louis wanted to say, Owen hastened over to the desk on the left and began to pick up all the books.

"…I didn't realize someone else was coming," he explained.

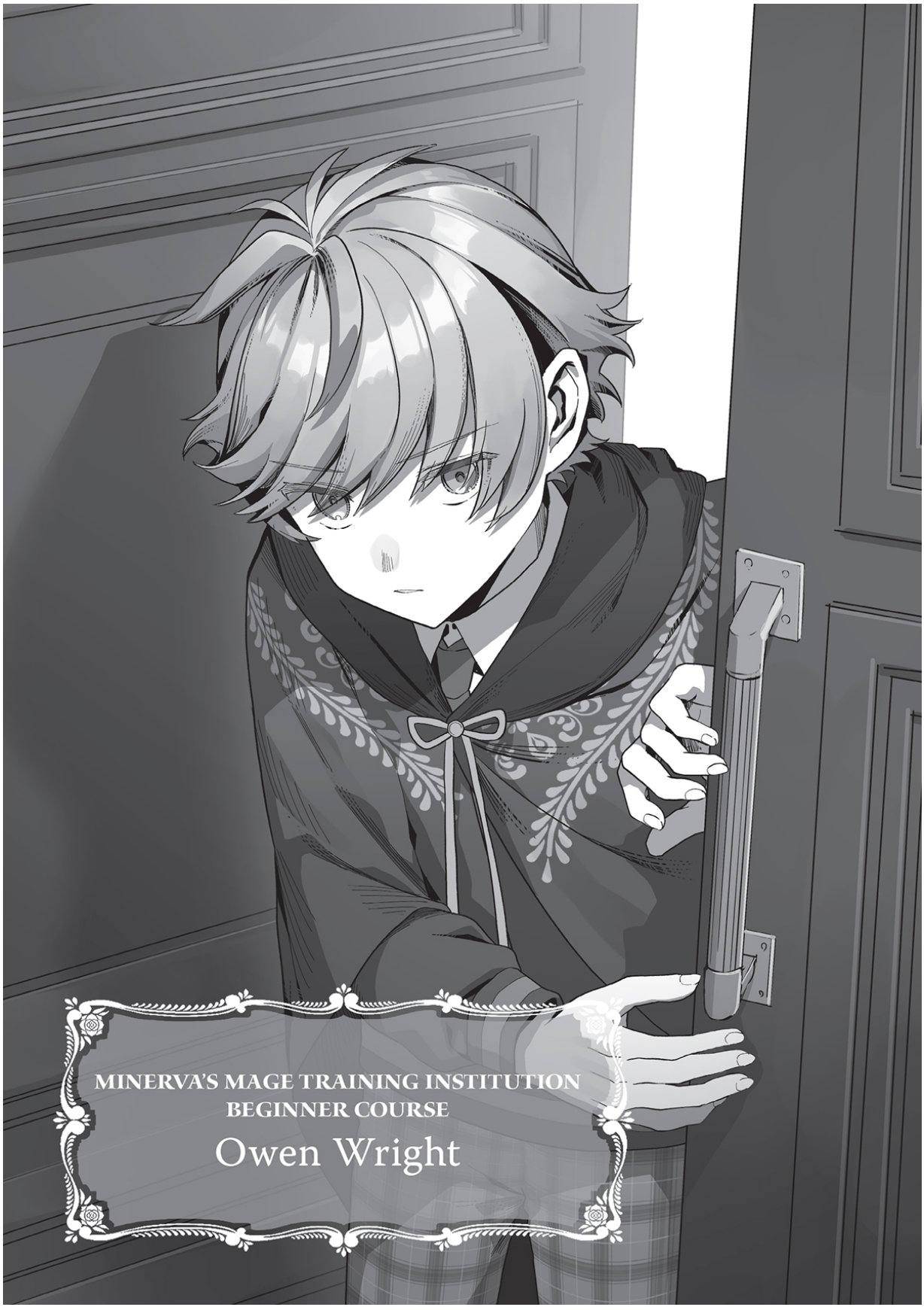
"Uh, do you always use two desks?"

"Saves time cleaning up."

Louis noticed a few books open on the bottom bunk, too. Owen didn't seem very good at keeping the place tidy.

Once the other boy was mostly finished cleaning up the left desk, Louis opened one of the boxes he'd brought in. Packed inside were all his assignments and textbooks. *Where to start?* He folded his arms and thought about it.

"…What's all that?" murmured Owen, sitting at the desk to the right.


MINERVA'S MAGE TRAINING INSTITUTION
BEGINNER COURSE
Owen Wright



"Assignments. Gotta get it all done in five months, before I enroll." Louis waggled a random workbook at him. Owen glanced at it, then narrowed his eyes.

"…How old are you?" he asked.

"One year older than you. I'll be starting the intermediate course in the fall."

"…You're older than me, and you're working on stuff like *that*? You still haven't learned basic subjects, and you want to be a mage, huh? Sounds like a fool's errand to me."

Owen delivered this stinging rebuke so smoothly that Louis clenched his teeth. But he didn't smack the boy in the head—he knew he was lagging far behind even this kid in the Beginner Course.

*Just you watch. I'll get you back for that*, Louis silently promised as he stacked his assignments on the desk.

Owen didn't say any more. He just turned away to face his own desk, his back silently rejecting any further conversation.

"I'm gonna get studying," said Louis. "Don't bother me."

"Fine. Whatever."

The two of them put their backs to each other, faced their desks, and quietly started doing their own work. Of course, unlike Owen—whose feather pen was scritching and scratching across a sheet of paper—Louis had his hands full just trying to grasp what he was reading.

After about two hours, he'd skimmed everything. He rubbed his eyes. *Whoever put this together must be evil.* Yes, the boxes were filled with textbooks and worksheets—but the questions on the worksheets didn't match the textbook contents. Underneath the book on mathematics was, for some reason, questions about history. What's more, the history stuff had the years all out of order. To top it off, he found yet another worksheet for a completely different subject inside the history one. Someone had probably scrambled them up on purpose.

*Is this some kind of prank, or…?*

For now, he set to work reordering all the materials and assignments. Eventually, he heard Owen call to him from behind.

He turned around to see the boy staring at him. "It's lunchtime," said Owen. "Do you know where the cafeteria is?"

"Nope."

Pausing, Owen got out of his chair and went over to the door. Then he looked back at Louis. "…You're not coming?"

Louis suddenly burst out laughing, which made Owen sulk. His shoulders shaking, Louis fought back his laughter. "Turns out you're a good guy, huh?"

"…What? I think this is pretty normal. And if you're coming, then put your uniform on."

Louis knew that the boy would sulk even more if he teased him too much, so he decided to get dressed without pressing the issue. He put on the nice shirt and pants, but he wasn't used to restrictive ties, so he left that hanging around his neck. Then he donned his cape, completing the ensemble.

*This cape should be handy for hiding anything I swipe*, Louis thought.

The cafeteria on the dorm's first floor served breakfast and dinner every day, plus lunch when there were no classes. The students were generally allowed to handle lunch however they wanted on school days, but most of them apparently used the cafeteria in the main building.

On the first floor, Louis found rows of long tables, with students sitting wherever they liked as they ate. He'd taken a tray from the counter and was now staring at his food.

"Hey, is today a festival or something?" he whispered to Owen.

"What do you mean?"

"Just look at all this food."

On the tray was a piece of bread the size of his fist, a vegetable soup, and a meat-and-bean stew. There was even jam in a little dish for the bread. It was goopy and orange, with thin slices of citrus peel inside.

"Wait. Is this *marmalade*?" he asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

*I don't believe it*, thought Louis, hands trembling as he held the tray. To leave his hometown and eat marmalade—that had been his goal. To think he'd accomplish it so soon!

Whatever the case, this would be his first taste of the stuff. Preparing to savor it, he was leveling an ardent gaze at the dish when Owen, who was walking in front of him, stopped.

Before the other boy stood three male students around his age, blocking his path. Instead of food trays, they carried paper assignments folded in half. They flashed the pages at Owen.

"Owen, got some more. Thanks," one said in a quiet voice.

"…I wish you wouldn't ask me for this so close to exams," Owen replied softly.

"Come on. Who cares?"

"We *know* you can do this."

"We're begging you, honors kid."

The others ignored Owen's complaints and pushed the assignments into his face. But as they did, one of their elbows hit Louis, who was still enthralled by the jam, in the arm.

The tray in his hands rattled. Then the dish of jam fell to the floor, upside down.

Owen and his classmates hadn't noticed. Louis's grayish-purple eyes bulged, and he froze, like a cat that had just had its tail stepped on. A thick, blue vein appeared on his temple. He set his tray on a nearby table, then silently wedged himself between Owen and the three boys.

The taller one, who had bumped into Louis, scowled at him. "What's with you? We're talking to Owen right now— *Orgh?!*"

Before he could finish, Louis grabbed the boy's face. "…How *dare* you do that to my jam, you bastard?!"

"Huh? What? Jam? Ow—ow, ow, ow, ow!" The boy shrieked.

The other two—his friends, probably—frantically tried to tear Louis's hand off, so Louis swung the boy's head around and used the back of it to smack the other two in the face. Cries and shouts rippled through the formerly peaceful cafeteria.

Louis bent down, then scraped the back of the boy's head against the floor. "You want to apologize? Give me your jam."

All three of the boys—the one he held, and the other two he'd hit—began to cry and wail, looking absolutely miserable.

Then, from a seat a short distance away, a shrill voice rang out. "It's him! That's the one who threatened me! The new student! He's a barbarian!"

Louis craned his neck to look toward the voice. There he was, pointing at Louis as he babbled—Terrence Abanethy, the one who was originally supposed to be Louis's roommate.

Louis squinted at the boy. Then the corners of his lips curled up in a wicked smile. "Oh, it's the *pig*. So you wanna be boiled in a big ol' pot, eh?"

Terrence let out a high-pitched wail and fell out of his seat. The cafeteria was in chaos now, but Louis was used to chaos. In fact, he felt his heart dance. He *loved* the tingle in the air, the thrill of the fight.

The boy whose face he'd grabbed was already unconscious, eyes rolled up into their sockets. Louis let go of him, then rose, cracking his knuckles. "If you don't want to be simmered over a low flame, then you'd better give me your jam, you scumbags."

* * *

Rutherford looked down at Louis, his expression serious. The boy was lying on the floor, tied up with rope.

"You *have* to be kidding me," the teacher muttered.

"About what?!" demanded Louis.

The report was nonsensical. A new student was causing chaos in the cafeteria in a crazed hunt for jam? But Rutherford had a bad feeling, so he'd come right away. As expected, he found the scholarship kid he himself was responsible for, full of energy and rampaging about.

Louis had been straddling another student on the floor, demanding his jam. Rutherford had kicked the boy off, then tied him

up with rope and dragged him to the faculty room. In the process, he'd heard some awfully undignified screaming, but he'd utterly ignored it.

So Louis, now covered in scrapes and bruises, lay on the floor of the faculty room, all tied up. His cheek was swollen, thanks to Rutherford's kick. The other, smaller injuries were probably from being dragged through the halls.

Rutherford bent down in front of Louis and smacked him in the head with his pipe. "Two problems on your first day in the dorms. Do you think that's normal?"

"It's not? Then I'll make it three."

Rutherford brought his fist down on Louis's head. The boy squirmed against the ropes, trying to bite his hand.

Macragan, watching from a nearby seat, sighed. "*Please* take your fighting outside, boys."

Rutherford swore under his breath, then used a short chant to light the pipe in his mouth. As he slowly took a whiff of smoke, he mulled the situation over.

He'd kept an eye on Louis during their trip from Dangrotes to Minerva's. The boy was an incredibly fast learner and a quick thinker. He was skilled at figuring out the most logical, efficient way to do things.

Louis was *also* as careful as a wild animal. He never, ever let himself fall asleep before Rutherford at any of the inns they'd stayed at. He'd get up earlier, too. He was so cautious, and yet for some reason, he was also reckless. Was it because of his upbringing? His environment? Rutherford wondered if the stupid brat, who had nothing to lose, incorrectly saw that as a strength.

*In any case*, thought Rutherford, *he's not the type who needs praise to grow. He needs the whip*.

At that moment, he decided he'd give the boy as much punishment as he needed, without holding back. And so he picked up another box stuffed full of assignments.

"You've got a lot of energy, brat," he said. "This should fix it. Here's a present. And no food for you until tomorrow morning, got it?"

"Pfft. This'll be no problem."

"Really, now?" Rutherford dropped the box on Louis's back.

Louis wailed, roaring like a dragon, as he flailed madly around on the floor.

* * *

Carrying the extra box of assignments back to his dorm room, Louis idly wondered if Owen Wright would beg the faculty to change his roommate, too. He probably would.

*Well, I can always grab a storage closet, right?* he thought as he kicked the door to his room. He figured the boy would pretend to be out, but the door opened fairly quickly.

Owen said nothing. Silently, he held the door open to let Louis inside. Louis didn't say anything, either; he just stomped into the room and placed the box on his desk.

Once Owen closed the door, he glanced at the box. "What's that?"

"More assignments, apparently." Louis cracked the box open to check, and as expected, the contents were once again randomly arranged. He clicked his tongue, then started to take them out.

"I heard you were a scholarship student." Owen sounded exasperated.

"Yeah, and?"

"I was just thinking. If your behavior is too poor, won't they take your scholarship away?"

"If so, I'll deal with that when it happens."

Louis wasn't all that attached to his current status. He could always find some grunt work to do if he was kicked out of Minerva's. And even if he had to sleep on the streets, he wouldn't have to worry about freezing to death.

*Ugh, I sure am hungry, though…*

He'd missed lunch, and now he wasn't getting any dinner. He'd messed up—he should have eaten that luxurious meal when he had

the chance. He decided he wouldn't throw another fit until his stomach was full.

As he thought about his lost lunch, stomach grumbling, he sensed eyes on his back. He turned around. Owen was looking at him like he had something to say.

"If you wanna say something, spit it out," said Louis.

*I don't want a dangerous roommate. Please leave.* If the boy wanted to complain, Louis would rather he bother a teacher instead. After all, he didn't have the right to choose what room he was in.

But that wasn't what Owen said. He pursed his lips, then mumbled, as though letting the words tumble out of his mouth. "I doubt you meant to help me."

"Eh?"

"But you *did* help me in the end, so…" Owen opened his desk drawer. Reaching in, he took out some bread wrapped in paper, along with a single small jar. Then he held them out to Louis.

The jar was filled with orange jam.

Louis's eyes went wide. "Hey, is that marmalade? It is, right?! Are you sure? That stuff's expensive!"

He took the bread and the jam jar and held the latter up to the sunlight. It sparkled, and he could see the thinly sliced citrus peels sitting at the bottom. The oranges that went into this jam had been raised with plenty of sunlight, the likes of which you never saw up north. And the jar was *full* of it!

"Where did you even get this?" he asked. "Did you steal it from the kitchen?"

"…No. They just sell it here. It's normal. A lot of kids have tea parties. You didn't know that?"

Louis was only half listening as he took a handmade wood-carved spoon out of his bag and plunged it into the jam. Then he spread some of the glowing, goopy matter onto the bread and bit into it. When he opened his mouth, his cheek hurt from Rutherford's punch, but the taste of the jam fully canceled out the pain. It was so sweet as it flowed over his tongue. It stirred his very soul.

"Mmmm!" Letting out a happy noise, Louis put some more jam on the bread and bit into it. He finished the slice quickly, then let out a

blissful sigh. “Ahh, the jam’s sweetness is reaching every part of my body…”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Oh, shut up.” He’d left his homeland with one goal in mind: this jam. What was wrong with savoring his joy? Louis licked the jam off the corners of his mouth.

With this, his goal to eat marmalade had been achieved.

“As for my next objective—I’ll outsmart the old rat and get all these assignments done. Yeah.”

“…The old rat?”

“You know. Old bushy-brows,” said Louis bitterly, recalling Rutherford’s thick eyebrows.

He glared at the assignments before him. Textbooks and worksheets had been thrown into the box at random. By now, Louis had figured out why. *I hate feeling like the old man has me in the palm of his hand… But the only thing I can do right now is finish all these assignments.*

Louis rubbed his swollen cheek, then turned to face his roommate. “Owen Wright. I’ve got a request for you.”

When Owen heard Louis say his full name in such a formal tone, he was secretly disappointed.

*…Great. He’s gonna ask me to help him with his homework, too.*

Owen’s father was a commoner who worked for the government. In order to make his son’s dream come true, he’d paid the very expensive school fees to get Owen into Minerva’s.

Owen studied like a boy possessed, both in order to live up to his father’s expectations and to achieve his own dreams. Now he was an honors student—and the perfect pawn for his classmates of nobler birth to toy with.

When they told him to do their assignments, he should have refused right away. He’d wanted to, but the others had used their social status to compel him, and in the end, he’d swallowed his complaints and agreed. And once it began, there was no end. They made him do every single one of their assignments from that point

forward.

*To tell the truth, I wanted to cause a fuss. Make a scene. Tell them I didn't want to.*

When he'd seen Louis beat those boys up for a totally nonsensical reason, Owen had felt refreshed and relieved. After everything Louis had put them through, Owen doubted they would ask him to do their homework again. They were all bark and no bite; they wouldn't want to get anywhere near Owen, now that he had such a dangerous roommate.

*But I guess now I'll have to do work for* him, Owen thought, eyes going dark.

Louis held out his hand and said, "Let me borrow all the textbooks you've ever used. Just for a bit."

"…Huh?"

Owen blinked, then looked between Louis and the pile of assignments stacked on his desk. There were textbooks next to them. They'd been in the boxes, or so Owen had thought. Why did he need more?

"…You're not going to ask me to help you with your homework?" said Owen.

"Huh? I'm supposed to be *outsmarting* the old rat. That wouldn't count." Louis frowned, then set his jaw. "The bastard mixed all the textbooks and assignments together. They're not ordered by increasing difficulty. I figured I could just start from the top, but I can't follow the material. And also…"

Louis plucked one of the books off his desk and held it up for Owen to see. It was for an introductory mathematics course at Minerva's. Except the part where it said what grade it was for had been blacked out with ink. What's more, certain subjects might use two or three textbooks in a single year, but even the numbering used for that had been covered up. There was no way to tell what year the book was for, or where in that year it belonged.

"See?" said Louis. "He made it so I *can't* put the textbooks in order. If I'm gonna get through it all, I need help. Help from someone who has textbooks with all the grades and numbers on them. That's why I want to borrow yours."

Owen looked at the pile of books on Louis's desk. There were quite a few. And he could easily put them all in order pretty quickly.

"…Want me to help you arrange them?" he offered.

Louis raised his eyebrows. "What? No. Don't you have exams?"

He made it sound so obvious. Owen was flabbergasted. Louis had made such a big deal over a little jam and didn't hesitate to get violent with strangers. Clearly, he was a delinquent. And yet he was taking these assignments very seriously.

*…What a weirdo.*

Owen opened his desk drawers and took out his old textbooks. They were all the beginner course books, which was quite a lot. Owen dropped the whole pile on Louis's desk.

"Thanks." Louis proceeded to flip through their pages and check their contents, using them to put his own textbooks in order. And he did it *very* quickly.

Curious, Owen hesitantly asked, "Are you even checking what's inside them?"

Louis answered flatly, without stopping. "I remember what's in them from the first time I looked at them."

"Huh?"

When Louis first came to the room, he'd spent a long time looking through the boxes and categorizing the contents. Was he saying he remembered it all? *But there are so many books*, Owen thought. *In just a couple hours, he…?*

Louis opened another of Owen's textbooks, flipped through its pages, found the equivalent book he'd been given, and put it in order with the rest. As he did, he quickly picked out the assignments and worksheets for those textbooks and put them with the proper lessons.

"It's not hard, you know," said Louis. "I mean, I can't remember every single letter. But I remember what they're about, at least."

"Even though you don't understand them?"

"Well, I committed them to memory anyway, since I might understand them later."

*That's not normal*, thought Owen, stopping himself before he said it out loud.

Louis's grayish-purple eyes traced the words in front of him as he checked the numbering on Owen's books and continued organizing. It was simple to describe the process, but the speed at which Louis was finding the right books and worksheets was astounding. This jam-obsessed delinquent was actually taking in the contents of all these assignments.

Before thirty minutes had passed, Louis had rearranged the contents of the boxes into the order he'd learn them in. But for some reason, he'd left a few books—ones Owen didn't recognize—out of the pile. He pulled them toward him, then said, "Figures. These are the ones meant for classes *after* I enroll."

"Why would he give you those?" asked Owen.

"He wants me to prepare for them. Definitely something that geezer would do." Louis returned all of Owen's books in the same order he'd received them. "Thanks. The jam really helped me get through that."

"…You know…" A whole lot of questions came up in Owen's mind, but he couldn't put any of them into words. In the end, he just asked the first thing that came to mind. "Did you make a fuss in the cafeteria to help me?"

Louis snorted. "Nah. Figured if I went crazy right away, nobody would bother me. Seems like the nobles at this school really like to throw their weight around, you know?"

In a way, he was right. Most of the students at Minerva's were the children of either nobles or wealthy families, and a lot of them acted like tyrants around those of less fortunate circumstances. Some considered it only proper that the lower classes do their busywork for them. But now that Louis had gone wild on the very first day, nobody would want him to do any of their errands.

*It makes sense, but it's insane…* At the very least, Owen—an honors student—would never be able to imitate him.

"…Hey, why did you come to Minerva's anyway?" Owen asked.

"To eat marmalade."

*Come on, you're joking.* That was what Owen wanted to say. But Louis had just caused a huge incident in the cafeteria in a frenzied hunt for jam. Maybe it *wasn't* a joke.

As Owen sat there at a loss for words, Louis shrugged and grinned. “And I got to eat it, all thanks to you. Now my goal is to show that old man Rutherford who’s boss. And that’s all there is to it.” With that, Louis pointed at the open exam prep book in front of Owen. “Don’t mind me. Start studying, honors student.”

“…You really are a weirdo.”

But Louis wasn’t listening to Owen anymore. He’d already begun reading the lowest-difficulty textbook and tackling the questions in the worksheets. Their little chat was over. Owen should get back to studying himself.

*Oh, but before that…* There was one thing he wanted to say properly. Owen turned and spoke to Louis’s back.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Breakfast is at seven.”

Louis stopped midway through turning a page and whipped around, a grin on his face. “Turns out you really are a good guy.”



CHAPTER 3

# An Interesting Girl and Louis's First Souvenir

Aside from the main school and student dorms, Minerva's comprised three other buildings: an annex for research, a library, and a large lecture hall. The main school was for regular classes, while the research annex was for students who remained after graduating from the advanced course. The library and lecture hall were also used by mages belonging to the Mages Guild. Occasionally, a famous mage would give a talk in the lecture hall and make a contribution of valuable research materials and magecraft books to the library.

Louis had just stepped into the lobby of the library. It was normally very quiet inside, but as soon as Louis entered, whispers spread like waves through the other students in the facility.

When he took a seat, the other students around him—regardless of age or gender—all immediately stood up and moved to other tables. Apparently, his infamy had reached even the girls' dorm.

*Not that I care*, he thought. Ignoring them, Louis set his study tools on the table and got to work on a question sheet. He still wasn't an official student, having moved in only one week ago, but as he was expected to enroll soon, he was allowed to use the library.

There were a little under five months left until the first day of Fuere, when he'd start school. Louis had to finish the mountain of assignments Rutherford had given him by then. With the help of his roommate, Owen Wright, Louis had finished ordering all his assignments by difficulty. He'd been quietly but persistently tackling them ever since.

The assignments weren't very difficult. As long as you actually read the textbook, you'd know how to answer them. Ridillian history involved a lot of essay questions, though, and he often found

himself needing extra references to answer them. For that reason, Louis usually spent over half the day here in the library.

After getting dressed in the morning, he'd head out to study. Before lunch, he'd slip out of school and work at an eatery in the nearby town. Once the lunch rush died down, he'd take a midday meal there as part of his wages, then he'd head back to the library to study some more. When dinner came around, he'd eat in the dorm cafeteria, then he'd work at the eatery again until late at night. Finally, just before midnight, he'd return to the dorm, quickly wash himself while nobody else was around, and go to sleep.

That was how his days went. As a scholarship student, he was exempt from paying for classes and textbooks, but he still had to buy consumables—feather pens, ink, and notebooks—himself. He also needed money for any meals not provided by the dorm cafeteria—particularly lunch. Even if he ate at school, it wasn't free. And besides that, it never hurt to have money for the other, less important things he needed, like luxury goods and underwear.

The large silver coins stuffed into the jam jar he'd brought from Dangrotes were his important secret savings. As long as nothing sudden came up, he wanted to avoid using it as much as he could.

Owen seemed to think that studying while working kept Louis overly busy, but, compared to all the odd jobs he'd done at the brothel, this was like heaven. And in any case, having time to study at *all* was an unimaginable luxury to Louis.

*I'll focus on these history assignments today and finish them up.*

As he turned the pages of his textbook, Louis cracked his neck a couple times. That noise alone sent the girls at a neighboring table into a fit of muffled, fearful cries. He could easily hear them whispering about how he was a delinquent, and how scared they were. One of the girls was almost in tears.

*Must be hard to be such a delicate lady.* Louis, who had grown up surrounded by the tough women at the brothel, chuckled.

* * *

"Ey, Li'l Lou, go take their orders, will you?!"

"Already did! Table four wants the chicken stew and ham combo platter and two ales. Table seven wants salted pork, bean soup, and three pieces of bread."

"Louis, could you wash some things? Sorry!"

"Sure thing!"

The eatery where Louis worked was called Goah's Place. It was aimed at the masses; during the day they had food, and at night they served booze. The tall, bearded man calling him "Li'l Lou" was Goah himself, the owner. There was also a skinny, short, middle-aged man named Lowe. The restaurant was run mostly by these two, plus Goah's daughter, Sally. But Sally, who was thirteen, went to school in town, so they'd been understaffed during the day. That was why they'd hired Louis to help out.

Goah's Place was cheap and tasty, which meant it turned a good profit. Lunchtime always saw a flood of customers. Louis, who had removed his uniform's cape and vest and donned an apron over his shirt, went to the sinks and hesitantly reached for the faucet.

Lowe, drying dishes nearby, looked at him with surprise. "Louis, you still don't like running water?"

"I can't help it," Louis replied. "They didn't have it where I grew up. Are you sure it's okay? It's not gonna make people sick, right?" Louis had once gotten ill from river water back home. He pursed his lips, then—with much consternation—he twisted the faucet.

Lowe laughed, shaking his sunken cheeks. "You don't care much when you eat your meals, though."

"Yeah, but…"

"You wanna be a mage and you let a little water scare you?! Lou, bring this to table two!"

The restaurant was packed; at work, everyone generally shouted.

"Got it, boss!" Louis yelled back to Goah, leaving the dishes for later and heading to table two.

Once lunchtime was over and the rush had died down, Louis stood behind the counter, eating his meal—which was mostly leftovers.

Today, that meant salted pork and bean soup.

As Louis shoveled the soup into his mouth, Goah grinned in satisfaction and began preparing for the night shift. "Just look at you go. That's how kids like you should eat."

"Yeah," said Louis. "Your food is really, really good. If only there were jam, then it would be *perfect*."

"One comment too many, fool! And here I was, thinking I'd give Sally to you once you graduated!"

"Sally says she's not into younger guys."

Goah's daughter, who wasn't there, claimed she liked older, handsome men with long legs. Louis was of average height, but because he'd been malnourished, he was very skinny. And far from handsome—his face was quite effeminate. He took after his mother, according to the prostitutes who had raised him.

A lot of people back home had underestimated him because of his face, which only made his life harder. The brothel's owner had once even threatened to put him in a dress and make him take customers if he didn't pull his weight. Thinking of the owner tired Louis out.

"Aren't you popular at school?" asked Lowe as he wiped down a table. "If you groomed yourself properly, you'd look pretty cool."

"Unfortunately, I've got all the girls *and* boys terrified. It's only been a week, and they already call me 'Miller the Jam Hunter.'"

Goah immediately broke into a guttural laugh. "What a nickname!"

"Oh, shut up! I know it's dumb. Damn it!" Louis yelled back, wolfing down the rest of his soup.

Once he was finished, it was back to the library for more studying. The other students would probably give him a wide berth. He didn't particularly care about that, but he did spend some time mulling over how to make them drop that dumb nickname.

* * *

After leaving Goah's Place and returning to the library, Louis found most of the seats occupied. Until yesterday, it had always been empty at this time on weekdays. But now that exams were only a week away, classes had been shortened, and all the kids had swarmed into the library to study.

*Oh, right. Owen said it's almost exam time, didn't he…?* Louis could have gone back to his dorm room to study, but he wanted to get those history assignments done by the end of the day if he could.

He looked around to see if there were any empty seats. Then he saw a spot open up at a table that had previously been full. The table faced the wall and sat two people. Louis pulled out the empty chair, then looked to his right at the other seat.

A girl about his age was sitting there, studying. She had dark-brown hair, neatly tied back, and there was a very earnest air about her.

*Wonder if she'll run away if I sit down*, Louis thought. He didn't particularly care if she did. Still, he asked, "Can I sit here?"

"Go ahead," she replied, glancing at him before turning back to her own question sheet.

She hadn't smiled, but she wasn't scared, either. Maybe she didn't know about him. Either way, he'd been lucky to find a seat. He quickly got out his history assignment. Louis was confident in his ability to memorize, but he wasn't very interested in history. He really doubted the deeds of all the past Ridillian kings would matter much to his future. But *why* did such people always have super-long names? It was so annoying to have to write them all out every time.

"Just give all the old kings the same name. Ugh," he mumbled, scowling.

He heard a quiet puff of laughter from beside him. He looked and saw the girl covering her mouth, her shoulders twitching. Louis rested his jaw on his hand and watched until the girl noticed him. She quickly constructed a stiff expression.

"…They'll arrest you for lèse majesté, you know," she said.

Louis grinned—her utterly earnest response amused him. "Hey, the people would like them better that way. Who cares about the

guy's stupid policies? They'd be, like, *Our king is wonderful! His name is so short!*"

"Oh, geez," said the girl, looking at Louis's assignment. "Algernon the Third's reforms to the Assembly, huh…? There's a lot of material on that, so it must be rough going for you. Hold on a second." The girl stood up, took a book off a shelf, then returned. "This should be a good primer."

Louis blinked slowly, looking at her.

The girl continued to hold the book out to him, then she began to look anxious. "Sorry. Should I have kept my nose out of it?"

"No." Louis took the book before she could pull it back. "… Thanks," he mumbled.

"You're welcome," she replied, smiling with apparent relief.

* * *

When Louis got back to his room, Owen was at his desk, studying for his exams. That was fine, but the state of their bunk bed was another matter. Louis was using the top bunk, with Owen on the bottom—and Owen's bed had a bunch of textbooks open near the pillow.

"Why do you have all those books on your bed?" asked Louis.

"Who cares? They're not on *your* bed. And I'll clean up if we have any guests."

Owen seemed to think that studying on his bed as well as at his desk was more efficient somehow.

"You know," said Louis, "for such a hard worker, you can be *really* lazy."

"And for someone who's so irresponsible, *you* can be really fastidious."

Louis generally kept his desk neat and tidy. It was simply easier to work that way. He didn't have much in the way of personal possessions to begin with, and he kept all his assignments in order,

lined up in the sequence he planned to complete them.

He dug the history assignment he'd just finished out of his bag, went over it to make sure he hadn't missed anything, then put it in the box of completed assignments. He'd finished all his Ridillian history up through the third year of the Beginner Course. Since he was doing a grade's worth of assignments at a time, his next task was to go through the other Beginner Course third-year subjects, and a bunch of those wouldn't require any visits to the library.

And yet Louis's hand reached for the fourth-year history assignments.

Owen stopped studying for a moment and looked at him. "Why not leave history for later? The library's packed right now, isn't it?"

"It's fine," said Louis brusquely, before putting his assignments for the next day into his bag. He wondered if that girl would be at the library again tomorrow.

*…You know, I never asked her name.* He lay down on the top bunk, holding the book she'd chosen for him. He remembered most of what was in it at this point, but for some reason, he wanted to take his time rereading it.

* * *

The next day, after finishing his work at the eatery, Louis went to the library—and there she was, sitting in the same seat as before. Louis's lips pulled up into a little smile as he looked at her dark-brown hair, tied neatly in the back. The seat to her left was open. Louis quickly moved to it and sat down before anyone else could.

She glanced at him. "Hello."

"Hey."

That was all they said to each other, but Louis was satisfied. He got to work.

They didn't talk much after that, either. She was studying for her exams, and Louis had a ton of assignments to get through. He

hadn’t come here for conversation in the first place.

After studying in silence for a little under an hour, the girl got up. She seemed to be after a book. Louis decided to ask what she was working on when she got back. How would he go about it? She *was* studying for exams, so he couldn’t let it drag on… No, wait. He needed to ask for her name.

As he mulled this over, he heard whispers behind him. Louis had a pretty good ear, and he tended to unconsciously listen in on any malicious voices. Better to spot hostility as soon as possible so that he could quickly decide on his next plan of action.

“…You shouldn’t hang around him. I’m telling you, he’s bad news. You heard what he did in the cafeteria, didn’t you?”

Louis recognized the voice. It belonged to Terrence Abanethy, his original roommate. Louis knew Terrence had been talking trash about him since the day he’d moved in, but he hadn’t done anything about it—he figured it was better to be feared than to be underestimated.

There was no need to stop it here, either. The girl sitting next to him would probably get scared of him, too, and find another seat.

*…Not that I care. I guess.* He was resting his chin on his right hand, and he moved it slightly to cover his ear and block out the voice. That alone made the whispers fade away.

He continued to write in silence, the feather on his pen dancing to and fro, until he heard a clattering in the seat to his right. The girl had come back. Probably to gather up her things and leave in haste.

But to Louis’s surprise, she just sat back down like nothing had happened and opened up the book she’d checked out. Louis cast a sidelong glance at her. Her gaze was on the book. She didn’t seem to be bothered at all by him. He stayed quiet for a few moments, but eventually, he couldn’t resist asking the question on his mind.

“…Didn’t he tell you not to get close to me?”

“If you were making a mess of the library, then I would move.” She brought her head up, a white fingertip holding down the book’s page. Her eyes were cool and intelligent as she looked straight at him. “But there’s no reason to complain about someone taking their studies so seriously.”

Her tone was flat and casual. No coldness, no trying to push him away. Louis sensed a strength and kindness deep inside her.

"By the way," she said, "since you sat next to me again, I figured you had something to ask me…" She pushed her bangs behind her ear, then traced a sentence in his assignment with a finger. "The part about the makeup of the Mages Guild, right? It's deeply linked to laws on magecraft control; you should study it alongside the law."

*That wasn't my question*, thought Louis sulkily.

"…Name," he said.

"The name of the Mages Guild founder? Or the king who put the magecraft control laws into practice?"

"Not those. *Your* name."

The girl blinked. She seemed caught off guard. She acted mature, but her current look of surprise was a better fit for her age. "Rosalie Verde," she said. "I'll be in the first year of the intermediate course starting this fall."

"…Louis Miller. Same for me—first year in fall."

Rosalie smiled at the gruff self-introduction. "I see," she said. "It's nice to meet you."

They continued their studies in silence after that. And they did the same the next day, and the next day. They sat side by side, studying their own subjects, maybe whispering a sentence or two during pauses. There wasn't much else going on between them.

And yet Louis found those quiet hours very pleasant and comfortable.

* * *

Once exams were over, the students at Minerva's had a long break for the social season, which started in early summer. But even the commoners with no connection to high society would go back home to see their families. The only ones who stuck around were the

students busy with research, or those with strained familial relationships. Those without any family, like Louis, were probably rare. Owen and Rosalie were no exception; they'd both gone home at the start of the long break.


MINERVA'S MAGE TRAINING INSTITUTION
BEGINNER COURSE
Rosalie Verde



Louis's life didn't change much at all, however. He worked afternoons and nights at the eatery and spent the rest of his time studying. A week before the new school term began, Louis, having completed all the work in the four boxes, headed to the faculty room.

"How do you like *that*, you old rat?" Louis stacked up the boxes and puffed out his chest.

Rutherford nodded, his pipe in his mouth. "Great. Good work."

That was it.

*Come on, that's all? Shouldn't he be more…more…?* Louis certainly hadn't done all this to be *praised*. He'd wanted to surprise the man. He'd wanted him to say something like, *Oh, there was still time before the deadline! I can't believe you finished it all so early!*

Rutherford flipped through all the submitted assignments, scanning them over. His pipe bounced up and down. "That's a surprise," he said. "You've got good handwriting."

"I always wrote things for the ladies," replied Louis.

"Ah, so *that's* why you write like a woman."

"You're dead, old man!" Louis swore to himself that the next time he turned in an assignment, he'd make sure it was in the sloppiest handwriting he could manage.

Rutherford took something out of a drawer. "Here," he said, handing it to Louis.

It was a short staff—the kind used by apprentice mages. It was long enough to reach from his elbow to his fingertips and engraved with a magecraft formula. Louis accepted it, then gave it a good look. Mage staffs were engraved with magecraft formulae and imbued with mana, classifying them as magical items. Such things were *beyond* expensive. He'd heard some were worth enough to buy a house in the royal capital.

*This is an apprentice's staff? I'd say it's worth four large silver coins, at least*, he thought, seriously considering how much he could sell it for, if push came to shove.

"Louis Miller," said Rutherford in a dignified tone, "I hereby permit your official enrollment at Minerva's. I expect you to take to your schoolwork earnestly in order to become an outstanding mage."

"…Right."

"I expected more excitement out of you."

To tell the truth, Louis had only done all those assignments to get back at Rutherford. He never considered his enrollment at Minerva's all that important.

Well, the work was done, and he'd gotten into school just fine. What would be his next objective? Rutherford had told him to become an "outstanding mage," but Louis couldn't quite wrap his head around that. He'd never given much thought to his dreams or goals or what he wanted to be when he grew up. He looked down at the short staff in his hands, idly wondering.

*An outstanding mage, huh? What does that mean, exactly?* The only magecraft he was even aware of were the spells he'd learned and the ones he'd seen performed by the man in front of him.

With the staff from Rutherford in his hand, Louis wandered around, taking a long route to the library.

The sun was still hot even this late in the summer, so he walked through the shade. He wasn't used to this heat yet—it was so different from up north—but it was better than being cold. He'd had to shovel snow day in, day out, always scared of freezing to death at night, lapping up a bit of cheap spirits to get to sleep. This was *way* better than being side by side with the fear of death every single day.

As he looked up with darkened eyes at the sunlight peeking through the leaves, he heard a clear voice from behind him say, "Louis."

Someone walked toward him—it was Rosalie, her uniform tidy and her dark-brown hair done up.

"Rosalie! I didn't know you were back!"

"Yes. I just arrived this morning."

Louis left the shade and ran over to her. Rosalie wasn't exactly sociable, so people assumed she was cold and brusque. But she was smiling a little now, as if happy to see him again after so long.

"I'm glad I ran into you," she said. "I have a souvenir for you

from home."

A souvenir. Louis's heart pounded. He had never received anything he'd call a souvenir before, not even once. *For me! A souvenir! For me!* The edges of his mouth twitched as Rosalie took a cloth bag off her shoulder and handed the whole thing to him. It was stuffed full of thin volumes.

"They're my old workbooks. I brought them from home."

"……"

"I thought they'd help with your studies."

"…Yeah. Thanks."

Well, he had a new goal now, if nothing else. During the next exams, he'd get the best grades in their year and make her say how amazing he was.



CHAPTER 4

# A Problem Child's Surefire Strategy for Winning Magic Battles

Louis stood at the lectern in front of the practical magecraft classroom and lightly lifted the short staff in his hand.

Macragan, the old practical magecraft teacher, stood beside him and quietly announced, "Fireball. Power five. No upper limit. Fixed coordinates."

He was instructing Louis to make as many small, low-powered fireballs as he possibly could.

Louis concentrated, then chanted. Chants were the blueprints of magecraft. They defined the factors of a spell, such as its power, form, quantity, position, and range of travel. First, you decided these factors, then you wove your mana into the corresponding shape accounting for them, and your spell was complete.

*Coordinate position fixed, attribute conversion, partitions, molding…* While deploying his magecraft formula, he used a shorter chant that cut out some of the unnecessary stuff.

That caused a stir to ripple through the classroom.

"Hey, is that…?"

"Quick-chanting?"

"No kidding. He just enrolled this month!"

A quick-chant was a shortened version of a normal chant. It was a difficult technique to use, requiring deep, fundamental knowledge of magecraft formulae.

*…Way too early to be impressed, folks.* Louis grinned fearlessly, then cast his spell.

The point of this practice session was to produce fireballs. Inexperienced students might only manage one, while those more familiar with the technique could hope for two or three. The best so

far had been a boy named Adolph Faron, who had produced ten.

But with a wave of his staff, Louis created fifteen of them around himself. And *then*, while keeping them all in place, he did a second quick-chant and created *another* set of fifteen.

It was said that in general, mages could maintain only two spells at a time—but in truth, just keeping two going was no easy feat. Neither quick-chanting nor simultaneous maintenance were things a kid who just enrolled a month ago should have been able to pull off.

His classmates' faces were full of shock, fear, awe, and envy. But Louis ignored them all and looked over at Rosalie, who sat by the windows. *How do you like that?!* Louis sniffed pridefully.

For some reason, Rosalie's mouth opened and closed. She was moving her hands around, apparently trying to tell him something. And clearly not "Amazing!" or "Wonderful!" In fact, she looked panicked.

*…That's cute. But why's she doing that?* Louis narrowed his right eye and read her lips.

*…"Look up"?*

Maintaining his fireballs, he tilted his head back. Above him was a large sphere of water, big enough that it would take two adults to encircle it. Macragan's specialty—water magecraft.

"Hmph," the old teacher grunted. With a wave of his staff, he brought the water crashing down on Louis, extinguishing all the fireballs he'd created.

"*Blurbh*—ahh?!" Since he'd been looking up, the water caught him right in the face. The force of it sent Louis to the floor on his backside.

"Watch it, lad. If you're going to do something major like that, do it outside. We wouldn't want to start a fire in here."

"But you *said* no upper limit!" shouted Louis, soaking wet and throwing spittle.

Macragan continued calmly. "In this classroom, half of that is enough. Part of being a mage is having the ability to alter your magecraft based on the situation."

The bell chose that exact moment to ring, marking the end of class. Textbook and staff in hand, Macragan headed toward the hall.

"Oh, and one more thing. Miller, I want you to write a report on the quick-chanting you used today."

"Why only me?!" His spell had been better than anyone else's. But now he was sopping wet *and* he had more homework. This was ridiculous.

As Louis yapped and yelled, Macragan simply said, "I'm looking forward to that report" and left the classroom.

Louis, still soaked from Macragan's ball of water, cleaned up the floor, then went outside for a moment to wring the moisture out of his uniform. Even so, it was still damp and heavy as he headed back to class. Up north, wearing wet clothes like this would have been tantamount to suicide, but it was warm here, so he didn't have to worry about dying.

*I'm sure they'll dry eventually. I think.* He was optimistic as he stepped into the classroom.

All of the students inside turned to look at him. And yet none of them spoke to him. A month after his official enrollment at Minerva's, Louis's classmates treated him like he might explode at any moment. He was the commoner scholarship kid and the barbarian who went crazy in the cafeteria. Best not to interact with him. That seemed to be how they looked at him.

But Louis had always intended to make that impression. That was why he acted the way he did, so he didn't really care. It was way better than being underestimated.

…Or so he'd thought, anyway. But as he walked among the desks, one of the boys stuck his leg out into the aisle. The boy had black hair and an unyielding expression. It was Adolph Faron, the next best magecraft user in class after Louis. His bangs were always parted right down the middle, exposing his forehead; Louis secretly thought it looked like a snowfield. Up north, people compared large white things to snowfields a lot.

Adolph probably wanted to trip him. Going around it would be easy, but Louis purposely stumbled over it.

The boy's grin deepened. "Oh, sorry," he said. "My foot slipped."

As Louis staggered, he put a hand on the table to his left, then jumped. He landed on Adolph's foot, stomping on it with all his might.

"Gyah?!" the boy yelped.

Louis smiled back. The expression was fierce and wild, like a carnivorous beast's. "Sorry," he said. "My foot slipped."

Adolph glared at him with tears in his eyes, but Louis acted like nothing had happened and went back to his seat. *That one's gonna be trouble.* His little rampage on move-in day had encouraged most of the other students to keep their distance, but it seemed as though today's show of skill had made some of them envious.

Adolph was nobility. He had excellent grades, especially in practical magecraft, where he was first in their year. He was always acting arrogant in class. Today, he'd created ten fireballs. Louis had created thirty *and* had quick-chanted them, *and* he had maintained two spells at once. It was more than enough to wound Adolph's pride. *At times like these, the ones with a little skill are always the most trouble.*

"Ugh, what a pain," he muttered, getting ready for their next class at his desk.

A shadow fell across his hands. He looked up to see a dark-brown-haired girl—Rosalie—staring at him.

"Why didn't you change?" she asked.

"Huh? Who cares? I'm not cold enough to freeze to death. I'll dry off soon."

"But what if you catch a cold first?" she said harshly.

Louis sulked a little. His magecraft had been the best in their class, and yet he'd been soaked, had to write a report, *and* Rosalie was scolding him. This sucked. "Yeah, yeah. I just have to take these off, right? Fine."

He removed his cape and vest and hung them on the back of his chair. While he was at it, he took off his shirt, too. He had almost no fat on him, but he was well-built. He had a sinewy body, like skin pulled over compressed muscle.

It was a terrible mismatch with his effeminate face, and the female students averted their gazes at the sight, while the boys he'd

beaten yelped. Adolph let out a disgusted groan.

Rosalie, however, did none of those things. Her eyebrows arched in anger. "If you're going to change, do it in your dorm room!" she snapped.

"But if I go back now, I won't make it in time for our next class!"

"I don't care. Just go get changed. I'll talk to our next teacher about it, so don't worry."

Rosalie wasn't budging an inch. Reluctantly, Louis got up. He was a troublemaker, to be sure, but he never cut classes or arrived late. He felt like it would be a waste to miss anything.

*Fine. Guess I'll take a shortcut.* He picked up his wet uniform and moved, not toward the hallway but toward the window. This second-story classroom was on the same side of the building as the covered walkway running to the lecture hall, and from here, he could drop down onto its roof.

Louis set his foot on the window frame, then nimbly jumped out.

* * *

Gideon Rutherford was grading quizzes at his desk in the faculty room. Macragan, who sat next to him, sipped his tea and said, "About Miller…"

"What *about* him?" asked Rutherford, looking up. "What's he done now?"

"Well, I'd heard he could use all the beginner-level spells. But I didn't realize he knew how to do simultaneous maintenance and quick-chanting. Would you mind telling me things like that in advance next time?"

Rutherford stopped grading and frowned. Mages were divided into ranks—beginner, intermediate, and high; there were only a small handful of high mages. Simultaneous maintenance was on an intermediate level, and quick-chanting—why, that was something you couldn't necessarily expect even *high* mages to be able to use.

"I never taught him either of those things," he said.

"…You didn't?"

Rutherford picked up his unlit pipe and twirled it around his fingers. He tended to do that whenever he was lost in thought. After the pipe had made about two full rotations, he dropped his voice. "He used simultaneous maintenance and quick-chanting, did he?"

"He divided a fireball with quick-chanting into fifteen smaller ones. And he produced two sets at once. His formula connection was perfect, as were the fireballs' stability and duration… I put them all out right away, of course."

An impressive apprentice mage could maintain fireballs for maybe three seconds. Maintenance was always more difficult than the actual casting of a spell. It certainly wasn't something a kid who'd only enrolled a month ago should be able to pull off.

"When you told me he'd learned all of the beginner magecraft in the book," said Macragan, "I almost didn't believe you… He certainly isn't an everyday apprentice, that boy."

Everyone was evaluated for their strongest element, as well as for their mana capacity, upon enrolling at Minerva's. Louis's best element was wind, and his capacity was around one hundred—which was spectacular, considering the boy had only just started using magecraft. Mana capacity tended to increase the more you practiced, capping out at around twenty years old. Plus, Louis was in his growth spurt right now, so his capacity would only get higher.

Macragan seemed to be thinking the same thing as Rutherford. "Wind element users are particularly suited for combat. Maybe it's best we got him started on magic battle training early."

"…You may be right."

Magic battles were a type of combat that allowed the use of mana-based attacks, including both magecraft and magical items. Matches took place inside a special barrier that protected the participants from physical harm. Damage manifested only as a loss of mana.

Some mages just wanted to do research, so magic battle classes were elective. Still, many students chose to take them anyway, since even prospective researchers could find work more easily if they had

combat ability.

Judging by Louis Miller's disposition and talents, he was well-suited for magic battles. One day, he might even find a place in the Magic Corps, a group of elite mages who specialized in combat.

"Oh! Are you talking about Miller?" someone said, interrupting their conversation. It was Allison, the law teacher. The cheerful man was in his early twenties, young compared to most of the faculty. He ran a hand through his blond hair and smiled amicably. "I was worried about him, what with all the rumors saying he was a terrible problem child. But they couldn't have been more wrong! He takes to his schoolwork earnestly. I wish the other kids sneaking naps in the middle of class would learn something from him!"

Many young students seemed to find law class boring. A lot of them would nap at their seat or play hooky. Allison must have taken a shine to Louis, since he was so zealous about his studies.

"He does all his homework so well, too," the teacher continued. "I praised him for it once, and do you know how he replied? *Gotta know the law to find all the loopholes.* What a gutsy joke!"

"……"

Rutherford closed his mouth, pipe in one hand. Louis must have been hoping to find a way out of trouble for the next time he caused problems. What an impure motive for studying.

At Allison's cheerful praise, a red-haired man of around thirty nodded—the magical creature studies teacher Redmond. "We copied drawings of dragon models in class recently, and Miller was quite passionate about it. He drew the shapes of all the scales between their eyes—their weak point—with particular detail, as well as the spots where scales could be more easily torn off."

*He obviously wants to hunt them!* thought Rutherford.

Still, the teachers generally seemed to have a favorable impression of Louis. The boy misbehaved on a regular basis, but he had a ravenous appetite for learning. Minerva's was the top mage training institution in the Kingdom of Ridill. How could anyone who taught there dislike such a studious kid?

Even Macragan, who had just warned Rutherford about Louis, nodded, stroking his beard. "He writes a good report."

Allison, Redmond, and Macragan continued their lively discussion as Rutherford silently twirled his pipe. Meanwhile, a short old woman —Maeger, the instructor for barrier techniques—straightened a pile of assignments on her desk with a *clap-clap*. "I cannot bring myself to think highly of him," she said, with a hint of disgust. "A scholarship student must be a model, a good example to other students. Throwing a fit, as he did on his first day here, is simply unacceptable."

Maeger wore round spectacles and a robe over a navy dress. If not for the robe, she would have been the image of a strict teacher at a girls' school. But even here at Minerva's, she was the harshest instructor regarding the students' behavior. Because of all of Louis's delinquent acts, she now viewed him as an enemy. In all honesty, Rutherford was glad to have a teacher like her around. The brat would get far too big for his britches otherwise.

"Earlier today," she complained, "Louis Miller jumped out a window and ran down the roof of the connecting passage. Just unbelievable…"

Maeger trailed off as her eyes fixed on something outside the window. The other teachers followed her gaze. And there he was—the impish boy himself, racing across the roof of a connecting passage, half-naked.

Maeger opened the window. "Louis Miller!" she screamed, voice shrill, face bright red. "Get down from there this instant! And what are you wearing?! P-put on some clothes!"

"I'll be late to class otherwise! Let me off the hook!" Louis shouted back, before running the rest of the walkway roof.

Rutherford tapped the ash out of his pipe and sighed. *He's got so much energy. Maybe we* should *get him doing magic battles.* That brand of mock combat certainly seemed right up Louis's alley. Rutherford still had reservations, though.

He had a bad feeling about it that he couldn't shake—even in combat class, Louis was bound to cause problems.

* * *

It was the afternoon after Louis showed off his quick-chanting in practical magecraft class and got soaked. He'd just returned to his room after school. There, he found Owen with a bunch of unfamiliar tools laid out before him: a glass pot, a conical cloth bag, and a kettle with a small spout. As Louis wondered if the boy was doing some sort of experiment, Owen stopped and looked at him.

"Welcome back," he said.

"Thanks. What the heck is that? Stuff for an experiment?"

"No. These are used to make coffee. My mom sent me some beans, and I haven't made any in a while, so…"

"Coffee?" asked Louis. "…Oh, that black stuff?"

Louis knew *of* coffee, but he'd never had an opportunity to drink it before. To him, the stuff was just black bean soup. *I hear it really wakes you up when you drink it, though.* He looked back at the items in front of Owen, curious.

"I like coffee better than tea," Owen went on, his voice quite a bit more cheerful than usual. "I only ever make tea when I have guests over."

"…Huh."

Tea was much more common than coffee in Ridill. The only kind Louis had ever gotten, though, was boiled with cheap leaves and wasn't very good—it was always too bitter. He could only drink it with jam mixed in. What about coffee?

Louis turned his chair around, perching on it backward, with his elbow propped on the seat back and his head in his hand as he watched Owen work. Owen first used a mill to grind up the black beans, then transferred the powder to the conical bag and set it inside the glass pot. He'd already filled the kettle with water. Owen put the kettle on a tripod, then chanted, producing a flame. The flame wasn't too strong or too weak, and its strength was stable. Though it was small, it was tricky to keep a flame's power consistent like that.

"Hey, you're pretty good at magecraft," said Louis.

"I want to be in the Magic Corps one day," explained Owen.

Louis's eyes immediately widened. The Magic Corps specialized in combat magecraft; they were an elite group that only the finest mages were selected for. He'd heard that, among commoners, those good at combat dreamed of joining the Magic Corps, while those who wished to do research sought employment at the Royal Magic Research Institute.

"I figured you'd want to be a scholar or a researcher or something like that," said Louis.

"…A long time ago, while on a trip, I was caught in a dragonraid. But the Artillery Mage, one of the Seven Sages, saved me."

The Seven Sages were the best mages in the kingdom. Their magecraft was equivalent to miracle-working, and all mages idolized them. Not only that, but the Seven Sages were granted a special title—count of magic—and it was said that not even the Noble Assembly could interfere with their business. They also served as advisers to the reigning monarch.

"You know how they say you can't beat a dragon unless you aim between the eyes?" Owen continued. "Well, the Artillery Mage is so strong, he didn't even have to do that. He used magecraft strengthened so many times over that it just blew the creature away. It was amazing."

He spoke with a lot of pauses as he focused on maintaining his flame. His voice was as monotone as ever, but Louis could sense a passion within it, quietly simmering just below the surface.

"That's why I want to be a mage, and strong enough to fight dragons, too. The Seven Sages are probably out of reach, so I figured I'd aim for the Magic Corps instead… I'm not from a noble family or a mage family… My mom and dad are cheering me on, though."

Owen must have been deeply grateful to his family for supporting his dream of joining the Magic Corps and for sending him coffee beans like this. Louis knew that the price of an education at Minerva's was high indeed. *He wants so badly to be an incredible mage. I must be a real eyesore for him.*

Louis was aware of his own skills and confident in the hard work backing them up. He had talent, and he strove to further refine it—nobody else had a right to complain about that.

Still, he was inferior to Owen in one aspect: Louis didn't have a clear goal for the future like his roommate did. *I mean, I've never even thought about it before.* Eating marmalade, outwitting Rutherford, getting good enough grades on his exams to astonish Rosalie—those were all short-term goals. They weren't *dreams*.

While Louis sat mulling this over, Owen extinguished his flame and picked up the kettle. Then he gently poured the hot water over the ground beans in the cloth bag. The beans expanded as they took in moisture and created a light froth at the top. Under the bag, black liquid began to drip into the glass pot.

"Huh. So that's how you make coffee," said Louis.

"You don't *make* it. You *brew* it," Owen corrected.

"But it's just bean soup, right?"

"No, it's not." Owen removed the bag and poured the coffee in the pot into a cup. "Here," he said, handing it to Louis.

Louis's eyes widened. He stared closely at the cup filled with black liquid. "…Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It's called sharing."

Owen had given him marmalade before, and now he was sharing his coffee. Louis couldn't help but feel guilty.

As he hesitated, Owen continued in his usual monotone. "Just think of it as celebrating your enrollment. Even though it's a month late."

"All right, then. Let's celebrate." Louis reached over the back of his chair and took the cup of coffee.

First, he brought the cup to his face to give it a few whiffs. It didn't smell delicious, exactly, but the scent wasn't bad, either. He blew on the hot coffee a few times, took a sip—then leaned backward.

"Grah?!" he moaned. "What the…? What the heck *is* this?! It's so bitter! Like you took the darkness from the underworld and boiled it!"

"I don't think I made it *that* strong," said Owen, taking a drink

from his own cup and seeming to enjoy it.

Owen almost always wore the same sullen expression, but today he looked much more relaxed. Surprised, Louis took another sip of coffee. *Still bitter.* He went into his desk drawer and pulled out the jar of marmalade Owen had given him. Using a spoon, he scooped some into his coffee.

As he took his third sip, his face scrunched up in despair. "Nope. Not even jam can fix that… What kind of drink is this anyway?"

"I didn't expect your palate to be so childish."

"Oh, shut up."

He'd put his precious jam in the coffee. He couldn't just leave it. Scrunching up his nose, he drank the rest. His face must have been a sight to see, because Owen, for once, laughed out loud.

* * *

One early autumn morning, a month and a half after enrolling, Louis stood in the laundry room, arms crossed and a frown on his face. In the dorms at Minerva's, students brought their dirty clothes here to have them washed, then came back the next day to pick them up.

But when Louis arrived, he found all his clothes missing, for some reason. Laundry was kept folded in baskets with room numbers on them, so maybe Owen had picked his things up for him.

*No, Owen didn't have any laundry to pick up today.* And besides, when Louis left, he'd told his roommate he was going to get his clothes. If Owen had already gotten them, he would have said something.

*Which means one of two things: Either someone took mine by mistake, or…*

On the other side of the line of laundry baskets was a middle-aged woman, hard at work. "Any idea where my laundry went, miss?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry. I don't generally pay attention to who takes

which basket. Maybe a friend of yours picked it up for you?" The woman spoke quickly, glancing at the laundry baskets.

*Figures*, thought Louis, looking back at his already empty basket. You were supposed to place it to the side once you got your clothes. Louis had arrived at a relatively early hour, so not many baskets had been emptied. In fact, there were only three.

And when he saw the room number on one of them, his eyes immediately narrowed.

Terrence Abanethy sat on his bed in his dorm, hugging his knees.

*Bam. Bam.*

He could hear someone knocking on the door. No, that wasn't a knock. That was someone violently kicking the bottom of it.

Terrence's face tensed as he covered his ears. *It'll be okay. I'll be fine. If I stay quiet, he'll never know. I'll be okay…* The room was locked, and Terrence didn't have any roommates, so he could stay in here as long as he wanted. He could even skip classes for the day.

The sound of kicking ceased, and the footsteps grew distant. Nevertheless, Terrence sat perfectly still on his bed for a while longer. Time passed, though he wasn't sure how much.

*I think it's okay now…* He slowly exhaled. As he moved to get off the bed, he heard a rattling at the window. The window, which had been slightly ajar, flew open all the way, shaking the curtains. And there, sitting right on the frame…

"Hey."

…was the very boy who had once been assigned as his roommate —Louis Miller.

"This… Um, uh, this, this is the s-second floor…!" Terrence stammered.

"Eh? Yeah, not too high. Easy to climb up." Louis squinted his right eye as he sat on the window frame. On his effeminate face, he wore a dangerous, toothy grin that showed his canines. "So you *were* pretending to be out, huh? That means you're guilty."

Terrence whimpered and backed away. "Y-you don't have any evidence… I don't… I don't know what you're talking about!"

Louis got down from the window, lithe as a cat, then grabbed Terrence's collar with the strength of a bear. "What, are you such a kindhearted noble that you thought you were doing a commoner a *favor* by throwing out his ragged clothes? Is that it?"

"It was Adolph! Adolph asked me to! He said you were being too cheeky and you needed to be reminded of your place!"

Adolph hadn't ordered Terrence to do this. He'd asked him to. Adolph was his friend, so he'd readily agreed. Besides, teaching Louis a lesson would benefit all of Minerva's—that's what Adolph had said, anyway, and Terrence felt the same.

Louis was unfit to be at their school. He was an impurity. Terrence, a noble, had a responsibility to take care of his environment.

"So where'd you put my uniform?" asked Louis.

"In, uh, the garbage…"

"Weak. I thought for sure you'd at least *burn* it, to cover up the evidence," murmured Louis, still grasping Terrence's collar.

For a moment, Terrence faintly hoped Louis would let him go. After all, he hadn't burned the uniform, he'd just tossed some garbage into the dump, where it belonged.

"Right, I'll go get it… But first." Louis dragged Terrence over to the window.

"Huh? Wait, no! Stop! What are you doing?!" the boy cried out, tearing up.

Louis flashed him a dangerous grin.

"Garbage goes in the dump, right? Then where should I leave a garbage human, you think?"

* * *

As Adolph Faron sat in his classroom, happily turning the page of a novel, a classmate—one of his hangers-on—came running in, his face white.

"Adolph, it's Terrence! He…!"

*Oh. The dimwit must have messed up*, thought Adolph, thinking no more of it. Terrence seemed to expect things from him, but he didn't expect anything from Terrence. The new kid was probably threatening him as they spoke.

"The new guy threw him in the cesspit!"

"……"

Now *that* was a more wicked retribution than Adolph had expected. "Ugh, poor people. They do the most vulgar things."

"Then tell me how a noble would do it."

A rough voice with a thick northern accent spoke from behind Adolph. He turned around in surprise and found exactly who he'd expected—Louis Miller.

Adolph maintained a calm tone and forced a sardonic grin. "Shouldn't you have stayed home? Isn't there magic battle class today?"

Today was the first magic battle class of the year. Adolph had been training for them since the beginner course, so he was pretty confident in his abilities. Louis had been showing off in practical magecraft class lately, but a little skill in mana control didn't make one accustomed to magic battles. And he couldn't even use barriers to defend himself yet.

Louis squinted his right eye at Adolph's arrogant demeanor and grinned wickedly. "Yeah. Can't wait for it."

Terrence had gotten Louis angry, so Louis would probably restrict his aim to Adolph during class. And Adolph had already come up with a plan for that.

*I'll make you regret ever coming to Minerva's, Louis Miller.*

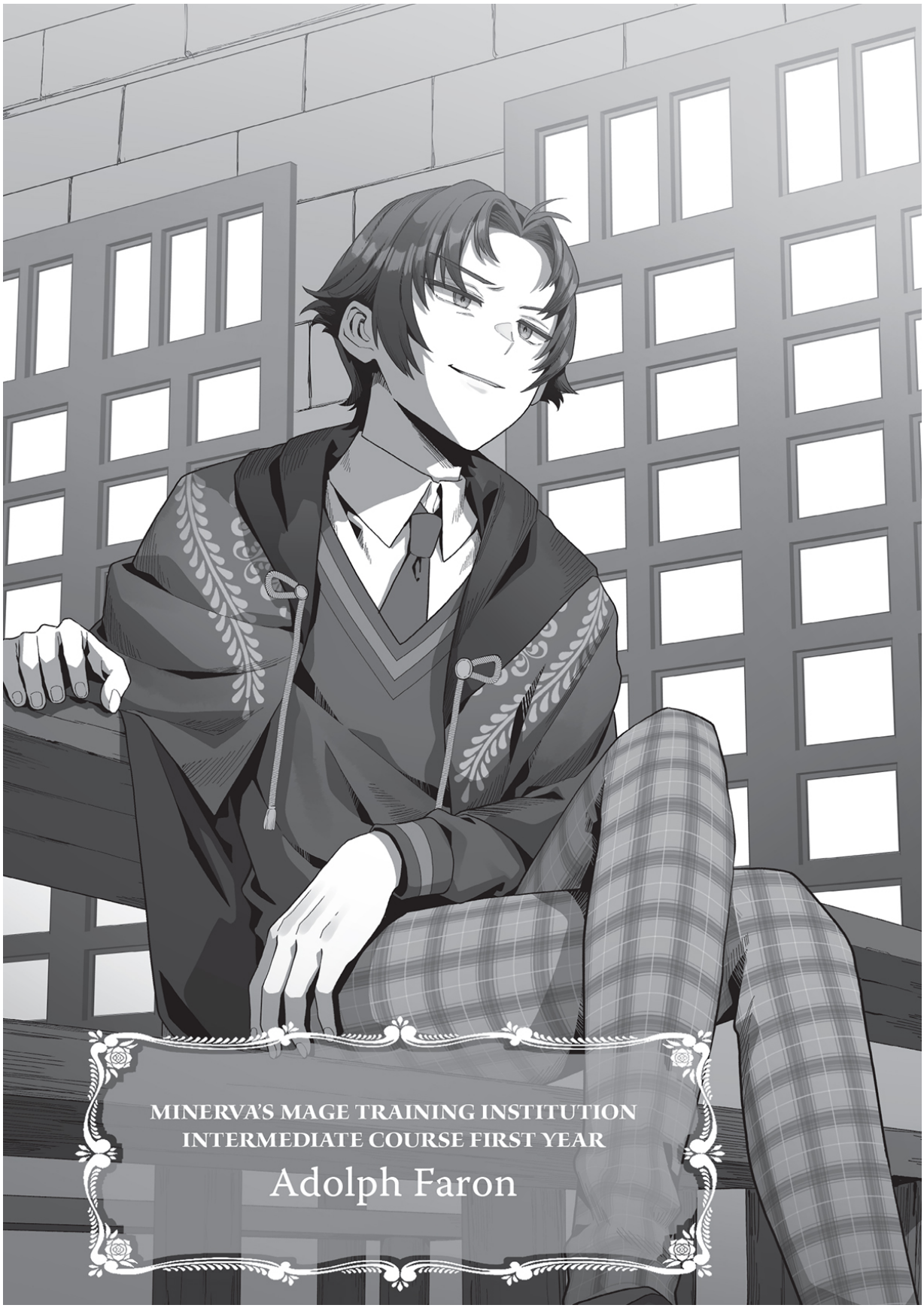
* * *

In the forest, a short distance from the main building, was a training facility used for magic battles. A special barrier set up there

safeguarded the people and their environment from any attack magecraft used.

To tell the truth, Louis was more interested in *that* than in the fighting itself. The advanced technique could protect humans from physical damage and deplete a target's mana instead, while *also* shielding the surrounding trees from harm. And over such a wide area, too. How complicated a formula did that require?

*They must have dug up the ground and buried a magical item in it. Or more than one, and they're all working together… You probably can't have magic battles just anywhere, but only in certain places.*


MINERVA'S MAGE TRAINING INSTITUTION
INTERMEDIATE COURSE FIRST YEAR
Adolph Faron



Louis looked around at the other students in line. Magic battle classes weren't mandatory—they were an elective—but more than half of the students here took them. Even if they wanted to go into research, achieving feats in magic battles would work to their benefit when trying to find a job.

Rosalie, however, was nowhere to be found, which relieved Louis. You couldn't injure your opponent in a magic battle using magecraft, but he'd heard that combatants still felt pain. Privately, he didn't want her to suffer like that.

"We will now form teams of four and begin the battle," announced a clear voice.

It belonged to a woman of around forty with handsome features. Her blond hair was tied into a neat ponytail. This was Solow, the magic battle teacher.

Standing next to her was an old man with bushy eyebrows—the Mage of Violet Smoke Gideon Rutherford. Rutherford taught advanced formula application, and while he normally never oversaw intermediate-level courses, it seemed he'd be acting as Solow's aide today. Both teachers wore mage robes over loose-fitting clothing and held high mage staffs in their hands.

In Ridill, as the rank of a mage increased, so, too, did the length of their staff. Low mages and apprentices had short ones that reached approximately from their elbows to their fingertips; middle-ranking mages used ones the length of an umbrella handle or a walking stick; high mages had even longer staffs, though they were still less than the height of a person. Only the Seven Sages, at the pinnacle of their craft, were permitted to use staffs longer than they were tall.

Louis looked at the two teachers' staffs, which marked them as high mages. *If I wanted to use one as a blunt weapon, those are pretty much the perfect length.* In his eyes, an apprentice's short staff was little more than a twig. Thin, unreliable, only good for poking someone in the eyes.

As he was looking at the staff in his hand, mulling over its potential combat uses, a box of paper slips was passed to him. These slips would determine which group a student would join. Louis

picked out a folded piece of paper and looked at the number on it. He felt eyes on his back.

*…Someone's watching me.*

Pretending he didn't notice, he unfolded the paper in front of him, making it easily visible.

Several people moved—Adolph Faron's underlings.

Louis stifled a laugh. "Looks like I'm in group three," he said, as though to himself.

Groups one and two both ran out of time, with no clear winner. In general, it was difficult to actually hit an opponent using attack magecraft. These battles also demanded good judgment; you had to juggle offense and defense, and first-year intermediate course kids weren't quite up to the task.

Whenever one person used an attack spell, the others would panic, throw up defensive barriers, and try to flee. And then someone else would fling a spell with terrible aim, causing the others to deploy barriers. It happened over and over again—that was essentially how the two fights had gone. You could learn the rules and tactics of magic battles, but putting that into practice was *hard*. Especially since very few students had been training since the beginner course.

The groups swapped out, and Louis, along with the three other students in group three, stood in a square pattern in a slightly more open section of the woods. Their opponents to either side were about twenty paces away.

Adolph was there, standing directly to Louis's left, and the other two were most likely his henchmen.

"Ready! Set! Begin!"

Solow's voice rang out, and Adolph and his underlings began chanting.

Louis was pretty sure he knew Adolph's plot. He probably wanted to work with the other two to teach Louis a painful lesson.

So, as soon as he heard the signal to start, Louis ran.

First, he went for the one on his right. Before the boy could finish

his chant, Louis closed in and kicked him in the stomach.

"*Guh!*"

The boy let out a muffled grunt and fell. As he did, Adolph and the other one set off an attack spell in Louis's direction—the underling with a flame arrow, and Adolph… Louis couldn't see what Adolph had used. *Invisible wind blades?* he guessed. Their coordination was impressive. The goal was probably to distract him with the flame arrow, then hit him with those wind blades from another direction. That would make it hard for Louis to defend, since he couldn't use barriers.

Instead, Louis yanked up the boy he'd just knocked out and started running.

"Not so fast!" he cried.

He blocked the wind blades he couldn't see with the unconscious boy, then ran out of the way of the visible flame arrow. Apprentice-level magecraft didn't have homing capabilities, so if you could see it, dodging it was pretty easy.

After getting in closer, Louis flung his makeshift shield to the side and buried his fist in the gut of the boy who had shot the flame arrow.

That left only Adolph, who watched Louis with a baffled grimace. "Are you a moron?! This is a *magic* battle!"

"You're the moron, Adolph Faron. If you're up against a mage, why *wouldn't* you try to shut them up before they finish chanting?"

"It's against the rules! It's… It's unfair!"

Now *that* was definitely something a sheltered rich boy would say. Louis cackled, holding his belly. "You want me to beat you up with magecraft, then? Well, don't worry. I've got just the spell for that."

Still laughing, Louis burst into a dash. Adolph's face drew back in terror, but he started chanting anyway—the incantation for a shield-shaped barrier.

Once it came up—it was about the size of a kite shield—he sighed in relief. "I made it!"

"You did?"

Louis moved around him, then brought the short staff in his right hand close to Adolph's eyeballs.

"Gyah!"

Adolph leaned back so far that he lost his balance. Louis nimbly jumped, then roundhouse kicked Adolph's huge forehead. The boy's eyes boggled in astonishment as he toppled over backward.

Louis landed with the grace of a cat, then chanted the finishing blow. All three enemies were on the ground. Aiming was easy when your targets weren't moving.

*This'll do it.* Using a quick-chant, Louis created a large fireball above his head. He swung the short staff, meaning to slam his spell down toward the earth.

Then he noticed the white haze that had appeared around him.

*Oh, crap!* The next thing he knew, his whole body was numb. He couldn't move. The smoke was imbued with a paralytic effect—Rutherford's specialty.

Louis's short staff fell from his hand as he crumpled to his knees. He heard the man's voice from overhead.

"You little brat!" the teacher roared. "Use some common sense, boy!"

As Louis grunted in annoyance, Rutherford's heel came down on the crown of his head.

And that was how Louis's first magic battle came to an end. He'd disabled all three of his opponents in as many minutes, before Rutherford stopped him from finishing them off.

"But I used magecraft at the end like I was supposed to!" yelled Louis as he was being lectured back in the faculty room.

Rutherford promptly slapped him, told him to submit a letter of apology, and ordered him to clean the bathrooms for a month.

Stories about how Louis had violently put down Adolph Faron and his friends while they were still chanting spread through Minerva's in the blink of an eye. From that day forth, Louis found himself with another nickname:

The Problem Child of Minerva's.

It was just as awful as Miller the Jam Hunter, and after he finished writing his apology, he sulked in bed, muttering, “not another lame nickname.”



CHAPTER 5

# The Grotto Mage

"This is an unprecedented situation!"

No sooner had the faculty meeting begun than Maeger, the teacher for barrier techniques and a woman of about fifty, made a strong declaration.

"Committing such acts of violence during a magic battle is beyond belief! Louis Miller *must* be expelled this very moment!"

A little under a month had passed since magic battle classes started in the intermediate course. There had been five classes so far, and in every single one of them, Louis Miller had caused some sort of problem.

In the first, he'd won his match through physical violence, punching and kicking his fellow classmates. In the second, he'd gone up to another student and pretended to trip and fall, using his body to strike the boy as he did. According to Louis, it had been an unfortunate accident.

In his third battle, he'd grabbed one opponent by their clothes and flung them at another. "I didn't punch them. Or kick them!" Louis had insisted.

During the fourth class, after being strictly forbidden from using physical violence against his classmates, Louis took out an opponent using a leg sweep. According to him, those didn't count.

Finally, during his fifth match, Louis—after seeing a classmate cast a fireball spell—had picked up a stone at his feet and hurled it with all his might at the flame. Fireball magecraft had a special property: The fireball would explode when it made contact with something else. But Louis threw the stone so hard that not only did it blow the fireball up, it went straight through the resulting blast of air and struck a classmate in the forehead.

Additionally, most of the opponents—or rather, victims—featured

in these recollections were either Adolph Faron or his underlings.

Every time Louis caused a problem, Rutherford rushed in and used his smoke to restrain the boy. But Louis was, apparently, trying to find a way around *that*, too. He'd tried squatting and holding his breath, covering his mouth with a damp handkerchief, and all sorts of other ideas. None of them had been very effective, though.

"But he's trying so hard," said Allison, arms folded in front of his chest. "The boy has ambition."

"I've urged him to use magic in these battles over and over," Solow said in a hard voice. "But every time, he insists that punching his opponents is faster."

Rutherford could easily imagine it: Louis, eyes clear and focused, insisting his strategy was the natural choice.

As they all fell silent, Headmaster Remington folded his hands on his desk. "I've seen Miller's grades," he said. "Excellent in every subject. His practical skills are more than a cut above the rest. I hear he's already mastered beginner magecraft of every element, as well as several intermediate spells. His grades are a credit to his scholarship status." Remington directed a pacifying smile at Maeger. "That said, there are obviously many issues with the way he lives his life. As his teachers, we must keep guiding him toward a better path."

"…Understood," said Maeger reluctantly.

Remington continued in a gentle tone. "Either way, we'll need to improve the barrier we use for magic battles. Problems have been pointed out to us in the past anyway. Ms. Maeger, how are things progressing on that end?"

As the barrier techniques instructor, Maeger was responsible for maintaining various barriers, including the one used for on-campus magic battles. She let go of her displeasure at the decision regarding Louis and answered with the clarity and wisdom she was known for.

"My master, the Watermirror Mage Sammes Horayson, tells me he's already devised a new magic battle barrier."

"Then, since our winter solstice break is coming up, let's have the Watermirror Mage update the barrier a little early."

The mage in question was one of the greatest masters of

advanced barrier techniques in the Kingdom of Ridill. The barrier at Minerva's used several formulae he'd come up with. But Sammes wasn't one to sit on his laurels—he'd continued his research and had apparently developed an even better version.

After giving his instructions on the new magic battle barrier, Headmaster Remington moved on to the next topic of conversation.

"Now, regarding the first term's exams…"

* * *

About three months had passed since Louis's enrollment at Minerva's. By the time the first term's written exams were over, autumn had deepened, and a cold wind blew, heralding winter.

Winters in central Ridill were warmer than those in his freezing-cold homeland, but they were still pretty chilly. Though Louis was used to low temperatures, he nevertheless hated them. Back home, it was normal to drink spirits to warm oneself up. Poor-quality liquor was even cheaper than firewood, and the storage closet he'd lived in hadn't had a heater.

And so, with winter setting in, Louis began to prepare. For the last several days, he'd been stocking up on cheap alcohol and mending his clothes and boots.

When he returned to the dorm with a load of bottles, his roommate Owen had been completely perplexed. But if you asked Louis, Owen's love of coffee was *much* more incomprehensible.

After a few more days, the school posted the results of the first term's written exams. Students flooded the hallway, but they all made way when Louis arrived, so he didn't have to stand on his tiptoes to see the bulletin board.

After receiving all those workbooks from Rosalie as a souvenir after summer vacation, he'd studied very hard in order to surprise her. Normally, everyone called him a delinquent or a wild child or a

problem student. But Louis had purpose and a good memory. He felt confident about his performance on the exam.

*Let's see*, he thought, looking at the posted rankings. A scowl crossed his effeminate face. *Intermediate course, first year… Fifth place overall.*

Considering that when he'd first arrived here, he couldn't even answer beginner course questions, he'd progressed by leaps and bounds. Louis couldn't bring himself to be happy about the achievement, though.

"Oh?"

Hearing a familiar voice from behind him, Louis whipped around. Rosalie was looking his way, a textbook and a sheaf of paper clutched to her chest.

She glanced at the rankings, and a smile crossed her cool face. "Fifth place overall? Congratulations."

"…Thanks."

Rosalie didn't typically smile. Louis was happy that she was doing so now, and that she'd congratulated him. But he had a reason for being disappointed in his results. He jutted out his lower lip, then glanced sidelong at the top of the rankings.

*First place overall: Rosalie Verde.*

A large point gap separated her from the second-place student. She had an almost perfect score. Louis knew that people generally paid attention to her because of how good her grades were. But she was even more talented than he had thought.

"Guess you're pretty amazing," he said.

"…Book smarts are all I have," said Rosalie, lowering her gaze to her feet at Louis's plain praise.

She wasn't trying to hide embarrassment. The way she smiled—she was trying to hold something in. Louis was curious but didn't know how to ask about it. As he tried to figure out what to say, Rosalie's head quickly came back up.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "We have winter break soon. Are you going home?"

"Nah."

Winter break in Ridill lasted from the winter solstice until the new

year. Usually, people spent that time quietly with their families. Minerva's was no exception; its winter break started a little before the solstice. Apparently, most of the students returned home during the vacation. The only ones who remained were special cases like Louis and research students keeping an eye on their experiments.

Rosalie didn't pry into Louis's circumstances. "Oh. Then I'll bring you some more workbooks and reference materials."

"…Thanks."

It was good to receive useful books. Back when he'd lived in Dangrotes, he'd have been overjoyed.

But now, his feelings were…complicated. He was grateful, but dissatisfaction scratched at his chest, like something was missing. Louis groaned to himself, unable to understand his emotions.

"I was just in the faculty room," said Rosalie suddenly, as if remembering something. "Mr. Macragan was looking for you. He says you still haven't turned in the questionnaire about your plans for the future."

"Oh. Right…"

This questionnaire was an important task for first-year students in the intermediate course. It would determine what classes they took going forward.

Most students responded that they wanted to continue into the advanced course, but their plans after that varied. Some wanted to work in research, others wanted to craft magical items, and still others wanted to join the Magic Corps or the Knights' magecraft unit. In addition, a few wished to stay at Minerva's to become research students, while those from prestigious families had to return home and take over their family's title or business.

Three months after officially enrolling, Louis still didn't have a clear idea of what he wanted to do. Most of the other students were nobles who stood to inherit or had clear goals of their own.

*I bet Rosalie is a noble girl.* She sure wasn't a commoner here on a scholarship like Louis was, that was for sure. Even disregarding her spectacular grades, he could tell her classmates and teachers treated her with courtesy.

Their classroom was clearly divided between those of noble birth,

those of nearly noble birth or from families with enough wealth to rival them, and everyone else. Rosalie didn't belong to any of these groups, however. She was always on her own, studying in silence.

That said, she didn't stick out like Louis did, nor was she shunned as he was. She spoke with that same flat, calm tone to noble kids and commoners alike, just as she did with Louis.

"Have you figured out what you want to do yet?" Louis asked her, thinking the reply would come as quickly as if he'd asked her a math problem.

For some reason, though, Rosalie looked surprised. Her eyes, always so straightforward and unwavering, drifted for a moment. "… I suppose if I can get into the advanced course, then…well, I'd like to do that."

"With your grades? Wouldn't that be easy?"

Rosalie smiled vaguely. "Get to the faculty room, okay? Don't forget," she said, then walked past him.

Louis got the feeling that Rosalie was trying to be considerate toward him. She'd smiled the same way the prostitutes had whenever they told him "That's something you don't need to know" and gently changed the topic.

"…Ugh. Damn it." Louis scratched his dry chestnut hair and frowned.

His roommate Owen was trying his best to get into the Magic Corps, despite feeling guilty about his parents' struggle to pay his tuition. Rosalie studied hard enough to get the top spot on their written exams, and yet she seemed unsure of her future.

And here Louis was, blessed with a full scholarship, and he hadn't given any consideration to what he wanted to do at all.

He felt ashamed.

* * *

"Hey, Mr. Macragan, you think I could get into the advanced

course?”

When he reached the faculty room, Louis stomped up to Macragan’s desk.

The old man was busy putting all of the student questionnaires into an envelope. “If you keep your grades up, you should be able to advance with your scholarship intact. But you need to watch your behavior a little more.”

“I’ll do my best to get rid of all the evidence.”

“You shouldn’t be doing anything that requires getting rid of evidence… I’ll put you down as wanting to progress into the advanced course, then. Have you thought about what you might like to do after that?”

Louis thought for a few seconds, wondering if he should pick some random answer, then gave up. “As long as I can earn my keep, I’m fine with anything. Except maybe putting on a fake smile and bowing and scraping to some noble. I’d rather die than do that.”

To Louis, it didn’t matter if he was a mage or not. He had been born in a remote village without any mages, and while he might find magecraft amazing, in his opinion, it was just another useful skill to have.

Macragan looked at the boy from under his bushy eyebrows. “You don’t have to be specific. Do you have any thoughts at all on what kind of mage you’d like to be? Or what kind of person?”

“Nope. None.”

“Despite all you’ve seen of Rutherford’s magecraft?”

Louis couldn’t help snorting. It seemed to him that all Rutherford could do was produce some tobacco smoke imbued with numbing properties. “What’s so good about that old rat’s smoke? Wouldn’t it be faster to just spread poison all over the place instead?”

“…It seems you still aren’t advanced enough to grasp its true potential.”

Louis’s face drew back in a scowl. He said nothing.

Macragan stroked his beard and ignored the problem child’s dangerous gaze. “I hear you recently learned how to use defensive barriers.”

“Yeah. Shields and half-spheres.”

Barrier techniques were a different branch of magecraft from normal elemental spells. There were several categories, including defensive barriers and sealing barriers, among others. But just learning how to use a barrier gave you a leg up in magic battles. A mage could only maintain two spells at once. So if you could protect yourself with a barrier *while* attacking an enemy with offensive magecraft, you'd have a better chance of winning.

However, while barriers looked simple, they were surprisingly difficult to handle. In order to put up the right barrier for the situation, you had to deploy complex magecraft formulae and weave your mana with the most delicate control.

Barrier techniques were frequently compared to architecture. If you wanted to make a house, you had to do a lot of calculations in advance, then build a solid foundation for it. The house wouldn't be sturdy otherwise. Barriers were the same.

Louis could only use two types of defensive barriers so far—one shaped like a shield, and one that formed a half-sphere around the caster. The former protected a smaller area but was tougher to get through; the latter could handle enemies from the rear, but it was weak.

"If I want to block that old man's smoke, I can just put up a half-sphere defensive barrier," he explained. Louis hadn't used it in a magic battle yet; he'd had to start preparing for exams right after figuring it out. What's more, the magic battle grounds would be sealed off until the end of testing.

After exams, there were still two weeks before the break. However, advanced course students would be holding intensive magic battle drills during that time, so the intermediate students' classes in the subject would be on pause.

In other words, Louis wouldn't have another chance to battle until after winter break. But just as he was thinking about how he'd use his newly learned barrier techniques, he heard a voice from behind him.

"Then would you like to give it a try right now? In a magic battle?"

Louis turned around to find Rutherford standing there, pipe in his

mouth. In his hand—as calloused from punching as Louis's own—was his mage's staff.

"Has the new barrier been set up?" Macragan asked the other teacher.

"Yes, not long ago. I was just thinking we should give it a test run." Rutherford lifted his staff, then tapped it against his shoulder, smirking. "I'm sure you're starting to get rusty by now. I'll give you a nice warm-up, brat."

"You're on, old rat."

This was the perfect chance to try out his new barrier technique. *I'll block his smoke and give him the shock of his life.*

* * *

It generally required two mages to maintain a magic battle barrier, though the actual number depended on its scope and strength. There were simpler kinds that used magical items, but Rutherford had asked Macragan and Maeger to handle the barrier for this fight.

Maeger loathed Louis for his bad behavior, and she kept a steady glare on him.

"We will now deploy the magic battle barrier," she said, her clear voice ringing. She placed a crystal ball on the ground, then began to chant.

Her staff glowed white, and when she touched it to the orb, the pale-blue light of the barrier expanded over their surroundings and disappeared in a flash.

*Feels different from the one they've been using*, thought Louis. *Like it's got some kind of annoying formula baked into it.* He squinted his right eye and stared at the crystal ball, but he couldn't make out the magecraft formulae within.

Maeger removed her staff from the ball and looked up. "I will explain the rules. Inside the barrier, you may only use mana-based attacks. *All* physical attacks will be nullified."

Louis could tell how she felt about his conduct by the way she emphasized the part about physical attacks.

"When a combatant's mana falls below one-tenth of their full capacity, they will lose," she continued.

*My latest mana capacity measurement was 110*, thought Louis. *So I'll lose if it gets down to around 11.*

In magic battles, the amount of mana you had was your lifeline. You needed to spend it to use offensive magecraft, too, which gave those with greater mana capacities an advantage.

*How much mana could that old guy even have?* Rutherford was a high mage, so he definitely had more than Louis. It might even be above 150.

Louis stood about ten paces from the teacher. Though he wanted to run up, say his foot slipped or something, and send a flying kick into the man's face, if Rutherford cast his violet smoke first, Louis would be plunging right into it.

*I said I could block his smoke with a half-sphere barrier just now, but…that type has a lot of drawbacks.* Using a half-sphere defensive barrier was like putting a big glass dome over yourself. It could deal with attacks from any direction, but it came with its own problems: It cost more mana than a shield-shaped one, wasn't as strong, and you couldn't move it around.

"Ready, set, go!"

As soon as Maeger gave the signal to start the battle, Louis and Rutherford began to chant. Both were quick-chanting, and they both finished at almost the exact same time.

*If I cast the half-sphere barrier first, I won't be able to move. I'll save it for a pinch instead.*

Rutherford took his pipe out of his mouth and exhaled. White smoke emerged, heading toward Louis against the wind.

*There it is! His so-called violet smoke!*

In order to combat it, Louis chose a spell that created a strong gust of wind. Not only would it drive the smoke away, it would knock his enemy off-balance.

"Time to blow you away, old man!"

He thrust his staff in front of him, and a burst of wind shot from

the tip, straight toward Rutherford. The wind was *packed* with mana. The drifting tobacco smoke was instantly dispersed—or, at least, it *should* have been.

But the white smoke ignored the gust and continued to fly right at Louis. That wasn't all, either. When the wind hit Rutherford, he merely stood his ground, a cool look on his face. All the wind did was cause his robe to flap around.

"What was that, brat? Fanning me?"

"Damn you, old rat!" groaned Louis as he turned and fled the smoke.

The tobacco smoke had neither a long duration nor a wide area of effect. Louis knew those things firsthand from all the times it had done him in. He was surprised the gust of wind hadn't worked, but he wasn't up the creek just yet. *Time for plan B. First, I'll get far enough away that he can't reach me, then I'll hit him with some attack magecraft!*

With a quick-chant, Louis created over a dozen small fireballs, then sent them flying at the ground a little in front of Rutherford's feet. He knew the man would just block them with a barrier if Louis aimed directly at him. Instead, Louis's attack hit the ground, whipping up the dirt.

And while the dirt blocked his opponent's view, Louis swiftly circled around him. "You're dead meat!"

Louis jumped—with such force, he couldn't claim he'd just slipped—and lashed out with his foot, delivering a wicked kick to Rutherford's temple. The tip of his worn boots connected with the man's head. But to Louis, it didn't feel like he'd actually made contact.

It was a strange sensation, like all the momentum had just *dispersed* right before hitting Rutherford. Louis stumbled as he landed back on his feet.

"What was *that*?" he demanded.

"Weren't you listening? Physical attacks are nullified."

Louis jumped backward with the speed of a wild animal, putting distance between them. But Rutherford didn't attack. It was the perfect opportunity to strike back, yet he simply pulled at his pipe,

savoring the taste.

"This new barrier incorporates a physical attack nullification formula designed by Sammes Horayson, the Watermirror Mage. That brand of violence you're so good at won't work anymore."

"What. *Whaaat?!* Are you kidding me?!"

Rattled, Louis picked up a nearby stone and threw it at Rutherford. The rock was about the size of his fist, and it slammed into the teacher's cheek with clear force and intent. But once again, it was as though nothing had happened. It had no effect whatsoever.

"The only things that can deal damage inside this barrier are magecraft and weapons imbued with mana," explained Rutherford. "Though I'm somewhat put out that I can't punch *you*, either."

The wrinkled skin around his mouth turned up in a very intimidating smile.

"But I'll give you something much better instead."

Louis felt a chill run down his spine. He knew his way around a brawl, and his instincts were warning him that something bad was coming.

*I should use a barrier—but which one? A shield or a half-sphere?* The shield would hold out better. But he didn't know where the strike would come from. Speaking even more quickly than usual, he quick-chanted a spell, erecting a hemispherical barrier around himself.

Rutherford used a quick-chant to manipulate his usual smoke, and then—while maintaining it—he stuck his staff into the ground and began a longer chant. The smoke was meant to buy time for lengthy incantations. The real attack would be whatever the other spell was.

*But I can block it*, thought Louis, keeping up his barrier while chanting an attack spell.

Then he realized his fatal mistake. "Oh," he grunted.

Macragan, who was watching from a short distance away, spoke up, his voice more carefree than it had any right to be. "You fell for it, Miller."

The half-sphere barrier was like a glass dome around him. In other words, it would block his *own* attacks, too.

*Wait. I could use that other thing—uh, remote magecraft…!* If he set off a spell at a distance instead of from his hands, he could attack even with his barrier up.

But Louis hadn't learned remote magecraft yet.

*Not good*, he thought, just as Rutherford finished his chant. Once it was done, the teacher began another, ritual chant.

"Radiant king who sleeps on the Hill of Vezelda, answer my call and display a fraction of thy might."

These words were meant to show reverence to the being about to be summoned and to make that being's greatness known to others. Glowing particles of orange light gathered before Rutherford's eyes, then formed the shape of a large gate.

"In the name of Gideon Rutherford, the *Grotto Mage*, I command this gate to open."

The gate swung open, and more light flowed out from within, streaming into the ground, permeating it.

"Come forth from the pit of severance—Archraedo, King of the Earth Spirits."

This was a spirit king summoning, one of the greatest magecraft techniques known to man. Only a select few high mages could use such spells, which called forth a fraction of a spirit king for the caster to manipulate.

The ground at Louis's feet rumbled and bulged. That was when he realized something else too late. Using a hemispherical barrier was like putting a glass dome over yourself—leaving the caster defenseless against attacks from below.

The ground rippled and twisted. Louis lost his balance and fell to one knee. The earth all around him swelled in little hills, which then struck upward like pillars, one of them catching him in the jaw.

"Grah?!"

Normal piles of soil would be nullified by the barrier as physical attacks, but these were wreathed in powerful mana, which meant they were treated like magecraft attacks. In a magic battle, you lost mana equivalent to the damage taken, and the pillar's strike had wiped out a decent chunk of Louis's.

"Gyah?! Argh! Blech!"

One after another, the earthen pillars rose from the ground to strike him, beating him raw at the same time as they locked him in. They had easily shattered Louis's barrier from within; it was gone now, as if it had never even existed.

In less than a minute, Louis's mana reserves ran dry, and he collapsed. The dirt pillars, extending haphazardly, had trapped him.

A sudden and drastic decrease in mana gave a person symptoms akin to anemia. Most passed out, but Louis clung to consciousness with nothing but grit. Pillars sprouted from the ground, enclosing his neck from either side. He ground his teeth.

"Your mistake," announced Maeger in an icy voice, "was in how you used your half-sphere barrier. I'll expect a report on it, Louis Miller."

Louis growled in response. Right now, he was essentially a wild animal in a cage.

"You see, Rutherford used to be with the Royal Knights," explained Macragan as they disengaged the magic battle barrier. "A captain, actually. They called him the 'Grotto Mage'…and he was rather incredible, I must say."

When it came to mages specializing in combat, most people these days would think of the Magic Corps. But that group was only founded a few decades ago. Before that, the Knights' magecraft unit was more famous. If Rutherford had been a captain, it made sense that he was powerful. This old man with a bad attitude used to be a soldier.

"Those who can use earth-based attack magecraft are invaluable," Macragan went on. "Rutherford here was said to rival even the Roseburgs, a prestigious family of mages specializing in that element."

"But earth magecraft, as a whole, is mana inefficient," added Rutherford. "So, when I left the Knights, I switched to using tobacco smoke. It's much more convenient." He squatted down in front of Louis. "I almost never use the spirit king summoning these days. It wreaks havoc on the ground, and cleanup is a pain. To bind a runt like you, my smoke is all I need."

At the word *runt*, blue veins popped up around Louis's temple,

and he dug his fingers into the dirt. He was so mad, he felt like an artery in his head might burst. But the fact remained that he was now on his hands and knees in the dirt.

Rutherford tapped his pipe on Louis's head in a rhythmic beat. The magic battle's barrier was already down, so he could feel the pain and heat. "And you seem to think you can block my smoke with a barrier. You're mistaken, by the way. It can pass through them."

"Wait, what?!" Louis's eyes boggled. That wasn't possible. He looked over at Maeger—she taught barrier techniques.

The older lady nodded firmly. "Even my barriers cannot block Professor Rutherford's smoke."

Maeger was the best barrier user at Minerva's. If even *she* couldn't protect herself from the old rat's smoke, then *nobody* could.

"To add to that," said Macragan in a relaxed tone as he stood next to Maeger, "he's the only one who can use the spell to imbue smoke with mana. If you don't believe me, then give it a try. No one else has ever managed it."

Spirit king summonings were always a surprise, but it wasn't as though only one person in the world could use them. And yet it turned out that the smoke Louis had always decried as cheap and uninspiring was a miracle technique nobody else could imitate.

Louis looked up at Rutherford in disbelief. The man took a slow pull from his pipe, then exhaled, making a ring with the smoke. It vanished into the air within moments, unimbued.

"Doing *that* is much more difficult for me, however," he said.

"……"

At last, Louis understood. There was a gulf in ability between him and Rutherford, and it was *enormous*.

Louis had lost completely.

* * *

The day after they'd test run the new magic battle barrier, Maeger

sat in her research room, writing a letter. It was addressed to Sammes Horayson, the Watermirror Mage and her former master. He was one of the greatest barrier users in Ridill, and the one who had developed the new barrier that nullified physical attacks.

As she was writing out her appreciation for his work and for his patronage of Minerva's, she heard a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened. Standing there with a thick pile of papers was Louis Miller, the very scholarship student Rutherford had beaten to a pulp the day before.

"You've finished your report?" she asked.

"Yeah, and I wanted to ask you something."

Maeger didn't think highly of the rough-and-tumble child, but she did have her pride. She'd been a teacher for a long time, and it was her job to answer students' questions with sincerity.

"Is there something you don't understand about the half-sphere barrier?"

"No… Well, yes. But I actually wanted to ask about the new magic battle barrier," he said, dropping the stack of papers in his hands onto her desk.

Tiny letters filled the pages—it was the magecraft formula for the magic battle barrier, including several possible formulae for the physical nullification effect, which hadn't been made public yet.

"When I kicked the old man, it didn't feel like my foot hit a brick wall, but more like the impact was being displaced somewhere else. Also, you said it nullified physical attacks, but I wanted to know more about where the line is. So I researched a bunch of formulae related to that, but none of them seemed to fit. I wanted to get your thoughts on the matter, Ms. Maeger."

Maeger was baffled. Yes, Louis had been part of the previous day's magic battle, but he hadn't directly seen the item creating the barrier, much less the formulae. When he wrote the report, he must have thought about how *he* would design such a formula. But even high mages had a hard time understanding magic battle barriers, and the one from yesterday hadn't even been formally unveiled yet!

Maeger pushed her spectacles back up and looked over the

report. It was still rough in many sections, but he grasped the essence of the matter, and he was very perceptive. Not only that, but underneath the report about the magic battle barrier was a second report about his ideas for improving the half-sphere barrier. And underneath *that* was a report on the duration and strength of defensive barriers in general—including ideas for how to improve existing formulae to deal with Rutherford's tobacco smoke.

There were so many ideas and formulae, all packed tightly onto each sheet of paper. Things like *"One weakness of a half-sphere barrier is its vulnerability to attacks from the ground. What kind of formula would one need to cover the ground inside the barrier?"* and *"The Mage of Violet Smoke Gideon Rutherford's smoke couldn't be redirected with a beginner-level gust of wind. But what about an intermediate one or higher? How much directional force can he imbue into his smoke?"*

Maeger finished reading the reports. These would take a long while to correct; he'd crammed so much into them.

But as she opened her mouth to tell him that, Louis spoke first, his tone uncharacteristically polite. "Ms. Maeger, you teach a supplementary lecture class on barrier techniques from tomorrow until winter break, right? Let me attend it."

"…It's meant for students who didn't get passing marks."

"I know. That's okay. Please? I want to spend a little more time training so I can boost the strength and duration of my own barriers. Otherwise, I'll never be able to stand up to that old rat Rutherford."

Maeger put a finger to her wrinkled brow, discord raging within her. The teachers at Minerva's all had the same weakness: They couldn't resist impassioned entreaties from their students. This boy had submitted a full, complete set of reports, and now he wanted to attend her supplementary lectures? The idea rather pleased her.

*His behavior is still problematic, true, but if he's had a change of heart since yesterday…* A teacher's mission was to guide promising students. That said, she couldn't allow him preferential treatment so easily. As she put on a reluctant expression, if only to keep up appearances, Louis brought something out of his uniform's cape. It was a bottle, somewhat large.

"Please? I brought you a gift, too."

Maeger readjusted her crooked glasses. "And what is that?" she asked.

"Alcohol."

Maeger lectured Louis for a full hour straight, then corrected his report and gave him permission to attend her supplementary lectures. She confiscated the alcohol, of course.

From that day forth, Louis spent almost all his time in Maeger's lab, researching barrier techniques from sunup to sundown.

He had set his heart upon a wonderful goal: to bring down that bushy-browed old rat.



CHAPTER 6

# The Problem Child Learns the Weight of Responsibility

"There's one job I hate more than anything else in the world."

A dark loathing crept into Louis's expression as he rammed his shovel into the snow at his feet. Then he used all his strength to heave it up and throw it to one side of the path.

"And that's shoveling snow," he grumbled. "Cold. Boring. Never-ending. Just try to name a more pointless job."

Owen, beside him, continued to shovel meticulously as he spoke. "It's not never-ending. It doesn't snow that much here… And for all your complaints, you're pretty good at this."

"Heh. That'll teach you to underestimate a northerner," Louis said, sniffing with pride and deftly lifting his shovel again.

The first snow arrived at Minerva's a week after the end of winter break. It fell all night and stopped in the morning, but there was enough to come up to the students' knees.

Those born and raised in the south found the snow a great curiosity, but when Louis woke up and saw the scenery outside his window, he cursed. Loudly.

At Minerva's, shoveling snow fell to whichever students were on outside cleaning duty that day. Louis and Owen just happened to be among their unlucky number. After working with the others on duty to clear out the snow, they headed back into the school building.

Louis was by no means frail. A little snow shoveling hardly strained him. But it was still an annoying job first thing in the morning.

*…Ugh. There are so many things I'd rather be doing right now.* That day, during the breaks between classes, Louis took a folded-up

map out of his pocket and stared at it. It contained a simplified layout of their campus.

Minerva's was surrounded by forests, with the student dormitories to the northeast of the school building and the library to the northwest. A large road led south, connecting to the town of Ragliszilbe. Louis used that road all the time to get to his part-time job.

To the east of the school were the training grounds used for magic battles and practical magecraft. That was where Louis had fought Rutherford before winter break.

*Considering where the off-limits area is*, he thought, *the most likely spot is to the north of the training grounds.*

"You have the look of a schemer."

Louis gave a start at the sudden voice from right next to him. He immediately folded the map and looked up. Rosalie had a hand on his desk and was staring closely at him. She met his gaze. Her eyes weren't big and round like those of some girls, but were sharp and cool. And that made her glares especially intimidating.

"It's nothing," said Louis, quickly tucking the map under his textbook.

Rosalie continued to look at him with suspicion.

Louis chose his next words carefully. "I've been studying barrier techniques with Ms. Maeger lately. I got curious about how the one for magic battles works. I was just checking the map to see how far it reaches."

That wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the full truth.

Rosalie maintained eye contact for a few more moments. Then she sighed. "I see. That's all well and good. But don't do anything dangerous, all right?"

She withdrew, but not before glancing once more at the map he'd slid underneath his textbook.

* * *

After school, Louis went back to his dorm and threw a cloak over his uniform. Then he wound some rags around his boots and tightened them with a string. While he didn't expect to be out until dark, he also grabbed his lantern and hid a bottle of spirits in his cloak's pocket for warmth, just in case.

*The sun sets early in winter*, he thought. *I should hurry. I have to find it.*

He left the dorms, kicking the leftover snow on the path out of the way as he headed for the forest to the north of the training grounds.

*It has to be somewhere in that off-limits area… A piece of land that's thick with mana.*

While studying barrier techniques under Maeger, Louis learned that the bigger you wanted to make a barrier, the more mana you had to expend. It didn't take much for a small shield for personal protection, but the magic battle barrier was both complicated and had to cover a very wide area. No single mage would have enough mana to make it work. He assumed they were using a magical item of some sort as an aid, but you could only imbue an object with so much mana.

That was when Louis began to wonder. Did the barrier draw mana from somewhere else, just as he had drawn water from the river back home? *Ms. Maeger said they can't put up the barrier just anywhere… If the condition is that it needs to be placed in a mana-rich area, it would all make sense.*

Unlike ancient times, when mana density had been high, the modern era had seen a waning in the land's mana reserves. These days, people had less resistance to it, too. If you stayed in a mana-rich area for too long, you risked contracting mana poisoning. Because of that, many places with high mana density were designated as off-limits. Minerva's had cited the danger of wild animal attacks and getting lost as the reason for cordoning off the deeper part of the woods. But in Louis's estimation, it was *also* because of the area's high mana density.

As he stomped through the snow, powder fluttering around his feet, he eventually reached the rope tied between trees that sectioned off the safe zone from the dangerous one. *It must be past this rope.* Louis lifted it, slipped underneath, and headed deeper into the woods without a shred of hesitation.

There was a reason he was looking for an area with a lot of mana.

His magic battle against Rutherford before the break had been a painful lesson in the importance of mana capacity. Currently, Louis's capacity was 110. Nothing to scoff at, certainly, but Rutherford had said his was around 180. Normal people generally had less than 50, whereas the measure of a high mage was around 130. The Seven Sages, the best mages in the kingdom, were said to require at least 150, no matter what. That put Rutherford's incredible mana capacity into stark perspective.

So Louis, his mind set on a rematch, wanted to increase his own capacity at any cost. To do so, it was important both to come into contact with mana on a regular basis and to expend it.

While it was by no means a recommended method, spending time in a mana-rich area could also increase one's capacity—or so Louis had heard. Plus, being in such a location would make his mana regenerate faster, allowing him to get more out of his practice.

*If I want to have a higher mana capacity and hone my skills, practicing in a mana-dense area should be the quickest way.*

He'd heard that mana capacity peaked in one's teens, and by around twenty, it stopped altogether and began to slowly decrease. Louis wanted to use his growth spurt to train as much as he could and exceed Rutherford's capacity.

About twenty minutes after passing the rope, he keenly sensed the change in mana density. It wasn't as though the scenery was any different, but his pulse sped up, and he felt a seeping warmth behind his heart. Louis had never gotten drunk, but he wondered if this was what it felt like. Checking how much mana you had left was a lot like checking to see how hungry you were. It was difficult to assign a precise value, but you could make a general guess. And Louis could feel the mana he'd expended during that day's training

recovering faster than usual.

*Found it. The perfect spot to train magecra—*

"Stop right there, Louis Miller."

Suddenly, a sharp voice rang out behind him.

He turned and saw a figure heading his way—Rosalie. She stepped through the snow, her gait uncertain as she approached him. The cloak she wore over her uniform was covered in white. She must have tripped and fallen a few times.

"How did you—?"

"I followed your footprints. This place is off-limits. You need to leave. Now."

Cheap lies would never get past Rosalie. Maybe it would be best to simply explain his reasoning honestly.

But before he could, Rosalie lowered her voice. "I bet you were planning to practice magecraft here where the mana is dense."

"How did you figure it out?" Students weren't supposed to know about this place. Louis hadn't, at least, and it wasn't written on the maps at school. He was quietly shocked.

Rosalie frowned, and her gaze turned dark. Her tone was self-deprecating. "…Because I understand. I've thought about the same thing."

Louis hadn't expected *that*. Rosalie was an honors student—always so fussy when it came to rules. And yet she'd considered doing the same thing he was attempting now? He would have never guessed.

Rosalie grabbed her cloak at the chest and squeezed. "…Twenty," she said, lips pale.

"Eh?" replied Louis.

"That's my mana capacity. It's barely increased at all since my first year in the beginner course."

The average for intermediate course first-years at Minerva's was 70. It was said that a lower-level mage required a capacity of at least 50. Rosalie wasn't even close to that minimum line.

Of course she wasn't taking magic battle class. She didn't have the mana for it. Louis figured the most she could manage was a few spells during practical classes, before she was tapped out for the

day.

A chill wind blew, knocking small piles of snow off the trees. Rosalie pushed her hair behind her ears, bitterness coming over her face.

"First in our grade on written exams, and last in mana capacity," she said. "That's all Rosalie Verde, the daughter of a Sage, can achieve."

"A Sage?" repeated Louis. That would make her parent one of the greatest mages in the kingdom, wouldn't it? He was dumbfounded.

Rosalie nodded. "My father is Bartrand Verde, one of the Seven Sages. Also known as the Aquamancy Mage."

Now Louis understood why all their classmates and teachers treated Rosalie with such respect. But at the same time, he felt as though he'd just swallowed a big clump of cold snow.

She was the daughter of one of the greatest mages to ever live—naturally, those around her expected a lot from her. And she was doing her best to live up to those expectations, but mana capacity was a constitutional trait. Though it was said one could increase it through training, many never saw results.

"I thought about it so many times," she said. "If I trained in a mana-dense area, maybe I'd increase my mana capacity. Maybe I'd catch up to everyone else."

With every word, white puffs of air leaked from her mouth, then vanished. The sun was about to set behind gray winter clouds. It was already starting to get dark.

"I could break the rules and push myself to train," she continued. "But what if it had lasting aftereffects? What if it caused problems for those around me? What if it brought shame to my father's name? …When I thought about all that, I couldn't bring myself to cross the rope line."

Rosalie was usually so calm and collected. But now she was desperate—almost grievously so. Louis felt like a piece of his heart was being gouged out.

"I don't want you to have those regrets."

All he had to do was talk back. Tell her he was different. That he didn't have a father to cause problems for. He could just laugh it off.

But the words wouldn’t come.

Rosalie had stopped herself in front of the ropes, not wanting to make trouble for others. And yet she’d crossed them now in order to persuade Louis to turn back. He felt the weight of that truth settle onto his shoulders.

He knew what it was—the weight of his responsibility for dragging Rosalie into this. And her burden was many times heavier than his.

As he stood there, speechless, Rosalie hung her head, covering her mouth with a hand. Her cheeks, which had been flushed red by the cold, had suddenly lost their color. Now they were pale white.

“Rosalie?!” cried Louis, running over to her.

She dropped to her knees, still covering her mouth. Her slender brows were knotted in pain, and an awful sweat covered her forehead. She shut her eyes tight.

“…I feel sick,” she said weakly.

That was only natural. This place was off-limits. Its mana density was too high. A person could only take in so much mana before reaching capacity. If they took in more, the mana would accumulate inside other organs, potentially causing serious symptoms. It could even be life-threatening. The lower someone’s mana capacity, the less mana they could absorb at once—and the easier it became for them to contract mana poisoning.

Louis removed his cloak and threw it around Rosalie, then picked her up on his back. She was already freezing—her whole body was cold. To make matters worse, she’d worn normal shoes, not meant for walking through snow. They were a mess now that she’d trudged this whole way. At this rate, she’d get frostbite. This sheltered girl, this daughter of a Sage, had probably never walked for so long through the snow before.

And it was all Louis’s fault.

*Argh, damn it. Damn it, damn it!* he thought. His swears were all aimed at himself. He’d been so stupid, dragging Rosalie into this.

Cursing himself with every foul word he knew, he began walking through the snow, Rosalie on his back.

* * *

Woodman, the resident doctor at the school's infirmary, was a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, stubble, and a tired countenance. His worn-out white coat seemed to hang over his thin body as he leaned lazily against the back of his chair, then turned to look out the window.

"I'm an old man, you see," he said. "You kids are always finished with your classes at the same time. So shouldn't the rest of us get to stop working for the day? I'd really rather not do any extra."

Outside the window, it was already past sundown. Louis had dashed through the darkness with an unconscious Rosalie on his back and barged into the infirmary. He glared at Woodman, panting.

*What's the best way to threaten this man into doing his job?* Louis earnestly considered a few possibilities.

But soon, Woodman stood up with a grunt. "If you'd just gotten into a fight, Mr. Miller, I'd tell you to take care of yourself. But I can't leave mana poisoning to an amateur. Lay her down right there," he said, gesturing toward a bed with his chin.

Louis let Rosalie off his back and laid her down. "Why's someone like you working in Minerva's infirmary, old man?"

"Well, this old man just happens to know both medicine *and* magecraft," Woodman replied. "I'm quite an impressive old man, you see."

"Quit calling yourself an *old man*. It's creeping me out."

"It's a gesture of humility. I'm demonstrating that I know my age. You'll understand when you're older."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

Woodman tossed some more firewood into the stove, then set a kettle of water on it to boil. After that, he unlocked a medicine cabinet and took out several fluids and a gemstone that looked like a magical item.

In the Kingdom of Ridill, imbuing a living thing with mana in any way—whether to cure or to manipulate—was forbidden. Human

bodies had relatively low resistance to mana, and doing so could easily induce mana poisoning.

Louis had heard that modern magecraft required an immense amount of mana just to heal a little scrape. And what was the point in healing a scrape when the person could die of mana poisoning in the process? For that and other reasons, curative magecraft was not really an established field of study in Ridill.

Nevertheless, there were plenty of people suffering from mana-related conditions. Mana poisoning, mana deficiency, mana hypersensitivity, mana hyper-absorption syndrome, spirit possession, and so on and so forth. Such things required people with training in both magecraft and medicine to treat. And at Minerva's, that meant this aging man in a frayed white robe, who seemed less than enthusiastic about his calling.

"You see," said Woodman, "as a fundamental rule, humans mustn't absorb or release too much mana at once. It's like pouring too much water into a tube. It bursts from the inside."

Woodman took off Rosalie's shoes, skillfully wiped down her freezing feet, then wrapped them in a cloth he'd soaked in the hot water. Afterward, he placed a blue rock into her hand and closed her fingers around it.

"What's that?" asked Louis. "A magical item?"

"Yes, indeed. It can absorb mana. Back when I was a researcher, I could barely afford one. Minerva's sure is generous. These things are incredibly expensive."

The blue rock in Rosalie's hand glowed faintly with the mana it absorbed from her. Woodman had compared the flow of mana to water in a tube, but the thickness of that tube apparently varied from one person to another. The less mana capacity someone had, the thinner their tube. Rosalie could only let her mana out at a trickle.

"Training in mana-dense areas can force the tube through which mana flows—and the container it accumulates in—to widen and grow larger. But it puts a huge strain on the body."

Woodman glanced at Louis. The man must have realized where they'd been.

"It'd be a huge hassle to report this to the school, so I'd rather not," he continued. "But don't do it again, all right? I hate it when people make more work for me."

"…Thanks," mumbled Louis as he dipped another cloth in a bucket of hot water and then wrung it out.

Her head hurt. But it wasn't an easy-to-understand, stinging sort of pain. Instead, it felt like different parts of her skull were being gently compressed.

*Where am I…?*

Rosalie lifted her heavy eyelids and saw curtains. Not window curtains, but the fabric partitions between beds in the infirmary. That must be where she was.

Then it all came back to her: She'd chased after Louis, trespassed into an off-limits area, and collapsed—likely with mana poisoning.

She found herself lying on a bed, wrapped up in thick blankets so she wouldn't freeze. Her socks were off, so she'd probably come close to getting frostbite. She clenched and relaxed her fingers and toes a few times, making sure she could move them, then she turned over in bed.

A familiar uniform greeted her. Slowly, she looked up and locked eyes with Louis, whose face was twisted into a scowl.

Louis pursed his lips, then frowned even more deeply. He looked grim. He hated other people underestimating him, so he usually assumed a threatening expression to drive others away. This time, though, it seemed more like he was trying to keep his emotions from coming to the surface.

"You awake?" he asked gruffly. He sounded angry.

*I can't blame him for that*, thought Rosalie, directing a wry smile inward as she remembered what she'd said to him.

He'd been trying to work on his magecraft in a mana-dense location—an extremely attractive prospect for anyone who wanted to increase their mana capacity. And Rosalie had stopped him.

With a childish excuse, too. *She* was holding herself back, so *he* needed to as well.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What are *you* apologizing for?"

"I told you not to cause trouble for others…but I just caused trouble for you instead."

When Louis's expression grew increasingly bitter, Rosalie sat up.

Woodman, the resident doctor, yawned. He'd been sitting in a chair, reading a book. "Your mana poisoning was minor," he said. "Your extremities aren't frostbitten, so you can go now. In fact, I'm kicking you out. I want to go home already."

"Sorry for causing you trouble, Mr. Woodman," said Rosalie, bowing deeply.

The doctor closed his book and looked at Louis. "You should learn from her example, Mr. Miller."

"Aw, shut up."

Rosalie's cloak and shoes were drying next to the stove. She quickly put them on, then reached for the door. Louis followed her quietly.

"…I'll walk you back," he said.

"All right. Thank you."

As the two of them left the infirmary, Woodman waved after them. "Take care," he called.

The path back to the dorms that night still had snow on it, and the air felt especially cold. The snow had been shoveled, of course, but what had melted during the day had frozen in the nighttime chill, making the surface very slippery. Rosalie struggled on the frozen ground.

Louis walked next to her, a lantern in one hand. He extended his other toward her and grunted.

"…Thanks," she said, taking it.

Louis gave her hand a firm squeeze, then he started walking again. For a while, they didn't say anything. Louis still seemed to be sulking.





"Hey, I…," said Louis, looking ahead angrily. "I don't think you caused me any trouble."

He must have been talking about Rosalie's apology in the infirmary. While she was struggling to come up with a reply, Louis's parched lips turned down, and his voice lowered to a mumble.

"…I won't go that deep in the forest anymore."

"Mm. You don't need to push yourself like that. I'm sure you'll keep improving."

Rosalie was certain he'd become an incredible mage one day. He quickly absorbed and applied everything he learned. In terms of practical skills, he already knew quick-chanting, simultaneous maintenance, and defensive barriers. Despite enrolling at Minerva's less than half a year ago, he was already on the verge of knowing just as much—and of being just as skilled—as a high mage.

He wasn't like Rosalie. All she was good at was studying.

*…He makes me jealous.*

She envied his magecraft skills, of course, but more than that, she coveted his lack of inhibition. He had the strength to stomp all over everyone else's envy and jealousy, then grin like he was invincible. To Rosalie, he was radiant—almost blinding.

Rosalie always worried about what others thought; her status as the daughter of one of the Seven Sages constricted her. She could never be like Louis.

"Hey, are you still unsure about continuing to the advanced course?" asked Louis.

"Yeah. The classes will require more practical skills, so…"

To tell the truth, she *wanted* to progress into the advanced course. She wanted to study more, to learn more. But her mana capacity was just so low. Capacity peaked in a person's teens, so she still had a chance to grow, but she was already below average, even among non-mages. No matter how high it rose in the future, the best she could hope for was the lower end of middling.

She hung her head, and Louis squeezed her hand again. She felt a comforting warmth transfer through their gloves from his hand to hers.

"Magic battle class is tomorrow, right?" said Louis.

"Um, huh? But I take formula application…"

"So skip it. Come watch."

"What?" Rosalie looked up in surprise.

Louis was wearing that invincible, toothy grin of his. It was the smile of a mischievous brat who had just thought up the perfect prank.

"Tomorrow, I'll prove that you can win even without a high mana capacity."

* * *

Now that winter break was over, magic battle class featured more one-on-one matches. And among the first-years in the intermediate course, Adolph Faron was undefeated.

That said, he still hadn't faced Louis Miller, the scholarship student.

Today, their matchups would be decided based on grades. That pretty much guaranteed he'd fight Louis.

*Last term, he kept breaking the rules. It was awful… But now we have a new barrier in place.*

Inside the new barrier, all physical attacks were nullified—in other words, Louis's old strategy of kicking and punching wasn't going to work anymore. In a pure contest of magecraft, Adolph would win. He'd always been number one in practical skills, ever since the beginner course. Some random country bumpkin could never beat *him*.

As he rallied himself, excited to finally take Louis down, the boy in question approached him. His effeminate face held a vulgar smirk.

Suddenly, Adolph glimpsed something sticking out of Louis's pocket—a filthy rag.

"Hey. What's that?" he demanded.

Louis pushed the cloth deeper into his pocket. "Whoops. Could you see that?" he replied. "It's a handkerchief. That's all."

"A handkerchief? Is that what you call that filthy old rag?"

For some reason, at Adolph's taunt, Louis's smile deepened.

Seeing the two of them talking, the teachers quickly activated the magic battle barrier. Once that was up, they didn't have to worry about Louis lashing out.

The teachers for today were Solow, the magic battle teacher, and Rutherford, acting as her assistant. Both had military experience and keenly understood how wicked Louis could be.

And it wasn't just the teachers, either. Everyone here was sweating, wondering what the problem child would pull next.

Louis eyed the barrier around them closely. Adolph wasn't sure why, but when Louis observed something, he had the habit of squinting his right eye. He was doing so now, too.

*What's he up to today…?* Louis was a wily schemer. To fight him, Adolph would have to be even wilier.

As Adolph carefully watched his opponent, Louis smirked again, then shrugged. "Don't be so guarded," he said. "Let's have a good match, Adolph Faron."

Then Louis held out his right hand.

*He wants to shake hands? Now I'm* sure *he's up to something.*

Just to be sure, Adolph looked closely at Louis's palm. He didn't see any needles between his fingers, or anything pasted to his hand. And even if he had a concealed weapon, the barrier would nullify it.

Adolph took Louis's hand, and the other boy tightened his grip. *Really* tightened it. Like he wanted to crush Adolph's fingers. It was painful.

*Why, this little…!*

Not wanting to lose, Adolph returned the squeeze. All the while, Louis watched their hands.

"We will now begin the magic battle," announced Solow. "Both of you, to your marks."

The two of them walked away from each other until they were twenty paces apart, then they turned back around.

"Begin!"

The moment Solow signaled for them to start, Louis took off at a full sprint. Adolph was chanting an attack spell, but Louis was confident he could run out of the way of most attacks.

Adolph pointed the tip of his short staff at Louis and yelled, "Take this!"

A powerful gust of wind blew from the staff. Adolph's invisible wind arrows, no doubt—he loved those.

But while you couldn't see the attack, Adolph's gaze always gave away its trajectory. *My feet, huh?*

Louis dodged just by jumping to the right. Then he closed the remaining distance between them in a flash and shoved his hand into his pocket.

Adolph remained still and began chanting his next spell. There was no fear on his face. Punches and kicks wouldn't affect him.

"You idiot."

Louis scoffed, his face the picture of wickedness. Then he threw the *sand* in his right hand straight into Adolph's face.

"Gyah?!" Adolph cried out and leaned backward, stopping his chant.

Louis took the opportunity to get behind his opponent and put him in a headlock. Adolph, blinking his bleary eyes against the sand, desperately tried to peel the other boy's arm away.

"What…? What are you…?" he started to say, before croaking against the pressure.

"Hey. Don't struggle. You're my classmate. I'm just giving you a nice little hug. We're friends, aren't we?"

Ever since losing to Rutherford inside the new barrier, Louis had secretly been searching for a way to get around its effects.

It nullified physical attacks, but what, exactly, counted as an attack? He'd tested all sorts of things, and his efforts had led him to a realization.

Punching, swinging a weapon, and throwing stones all triggered the barrier. But if the rock was small enough, a tiny pebble, it didn't register—which was why his sand attack had been effective.

And the barrier *also* couldn't detect handshakes, or even squeezing a hand tightly enough to crush it. He'd just proved that.

That meant grappling techniques would work just fine.

Adolph tried his best to claw at Louis's arm. But because of the barrier, his scratches didn't even leave a mark. Once his resistance weakened, Louis released him and took a few steps away.

The boy heaved and panted. His breathing was ragged, but he still managed to turn a hateful glare on Louis before beginning to chant once again.

*An intermediate-level flame spell*, thought Louis. *The kind that shoots a fire spear, right?*

Louis began chanting as well. Adolph finished first.

"How about this?!" shouted Adolph.

Flames erupted from his short staff, forming a spear. Magecraft that took the form of a spear was more powerful than spells that divided their strength to form multiple arrows. A hit from that would *hurt*.

As the flame spear approached, Louis remained firmly in place. He dropped his weight slightly and clenched his fist.

And then he put up a small, shield-shaped barrier in front of his fist and *punched* the flame spear.

"Raaahhh!"

The smaller the barrier, the easier it was to increase its strength and duration. This one was only slightly bigger than his open palm. It wasn't large enough to cover his whole body, but in return, it was insanely tough.

Louis's barrier-wreathed fist scattered the flame spear. Beyond it, Adolph's eyes widened in shock.

Keeping the barrier on his right hand, Louis ran up to Adolph and *punched him with it*.

One strike to the gut, and one to the face. Adolph wailed, teary-eyed, as his face twisted. It was working. Strikes like this wouldn't injure anyone inside the barrier, but they still hurt.

And because the barrier was made of mana, just like any flame or wind attack, it meant that punching someone with it counted as a mana-based attack.

Punching Adolph until his mana ran out would be slow going, though. Instead, Louis decided to settle things quickly. He knocked

Adolph to the ground, face up, got on top of him, and took out his handkerchief—or rather, the sand-covered rag. Then he rolled it up and stuffed it inside Adolph's mouth.

"*Mrrgh?!*"

"If you can't use magecraft anymore, you lose, right? That makes things easy. All I have to do is cover your mouth so you can't chant."

Louis took another rag out of his pocket and shoved it into Adolph's mouth to gag him. Now he just had to tie up the kid's hands and feet, and this match would be over.

He glanced into the trees. Rosalie was watching him from behind one, glancing around nervously.

*See that, Rosalie? Even without a high mana capacity, there's all kinds of tricks you can use to get the job done!*

He grinned proudly. Rosalie was waving her arms at him. She had panic on her face—she was trying to tell him something.

*…"Look up"? This happened once before, didn't it?*

But the moment he realized that, the magic barrier vanished without a sound, and Rutherford's sole crashed into the crown of Louis's head.

"How many times do I have to tell you to *use magecraft*, you little brat?!"

Louis rubbed the bump on his head, tears in his eyes. "I punched him with a *barrier*!" he wailed. "I followed the rules!"

"You know what I mean! Use attack magecraft, you blasted child!"

"Shut up, you old rat! Now that the barrier is down, I've got you. Take this!"

Louis used his whole body like a spring, leaping to his feet and using the momentum to swing his fist. Rutherford twisted out of the way, then buried his knee in Louis's stomach.

With a grunt, Louis stumbled. Then a fist slammed into his nose.

Louis went soaring, then tumbled across the ground. Fresh blood from his nose bloomed like flowers upon the lingering snow.

Rutherford turned to one side and spat, then twirled his pipe. "Maybe next time, brat."

* * *

"I'm an old man, you see. Treating wounds is such a bother. I'd rather not. Just clean it up and get some good rest. That's always best."

When Louis walked into the infirmary with a nosebleed and covered in dirt, Woodman, who was busy reading a book, met him with a look of utmost annoyance.

Louis held his nose—it was still bleeding—and let out a muffled groan. "Just do your job, *old man*."

"There's some cotton, cloth, and water around here somewhere. You're free to use them," the doctor replied, before turning back to his book. Louis clicked his tongue and put on a terrifying expression, but Woodman just ignored him.

Resigned, Louis borrowed some cloth from one corner of the room and sloppily wiped his face. When the cloth came away, it was a total mess, riddled with blood and dirt.

Then a student called "Excuse me" and came into the room. It was Rosalie. She hastened over to Louis, her expression a mix of anger and exasperation.

"…You really are a handful." She looked fed up, yet her voice was gentle. Was that just his imagination?

Rosalie briskly soaked a cloth in a bucket of water, then used it to wipe Louis's face. Up close, she looked dead serious.

"That was pretty cool, right? What I did?"

"Cool? You have a nosebleed." Completely ignoring Louis's boasting, Rosalie silently continued to clean his face.

*Did I go too far?* wondered Louis, realizing as he did how out of character it was.

Rosalie was on the verge of giving up on the advanced course because of her low mana capacity. He'd wanted to show her that mana capacity wasn't the only thing that mattered. But she was an honors student. Maybe he'd only made her angry. Louis mulled this over, unsure of what to say in such a situation.

Then Rosalie mumbled something: "…Cause too many problems, and we won't be able to attend the advanced course together."

Louis's eyes shot open. He looked at Rosalie, but she turned away, as if fleeing, and washed the dirty cloth noisily in the bucket.

Wiping his still-bleeding nose with the back of his hand, Louis flashed her a fearless grin. "By that time, I'll be getting better grades than you on our exams."

"Oh? I'll take that challenge."

As Rosalie wrung out the cloth, Louis noticed her expression had brightened, as if she'd been released from some of her burdens.



CHAPTER 7

# The Barrier Witch

At Goah's Place one day during lunch, two middle-aged men were having a debate. It was more like an argument, actually—the pointless kind, over who spilled their booze on who when someone bumped into them, or over who splashed soup on whose clothes. Evidently growing heated, one of the men grabbed the other's collar, and that man grabbed the first's hair.

"Sirs! Please, you can't do that here!"

The blond girl working there as a waitress looked quite disturbed as she tried to stop them, but her pleas were in vain.

Then a boy with a girlish face came out from the back dressed in an apron, his chestnut hair tied back with a kerchief.

As he moved to get in between the two men, one of them sputtered, "Don't get in our way, missy!" flinging spittle everywhere.

"What was that?" rumbled the boy, grabbing both patrons' faces in his hands.

The two men made a fuss as they tried to peel off the boy's fingers, but they wouldn't budge. The boy dragged the two men toward the shop's front door.

The waitress, picking up on his intent, circled around in front of them and opened the door. "Two guests, now *leaving*. We'll put your meals on your tabs."

"Finish your stupid fight outside, jerks."

The boy flung the men out of the store, and the girl closed the door with a smile. The other patrons guffawed at the sight, then began to tease the two workers.

"You two are in perfect step!"

"I ain't been here in ages. You've grown so tall, Li'l Lou!"

"Back then, Sally was taller."

"Just marry her already!"

The blond waitress, Sally, responded to the teasing earnestly. "What? Louis? Not happening."

"Wow, harsh. I don't even get a chance?" groaned Li'l Lou—real name Louis Miller—with a scowl.

It had been almost three years since he'd started working at the eatery. He'd grown into his old apron, and now it fit perfectly. He still had feminine features and found it difficult to build muscle, but he'd gotten taller as he approached his midteens.

It had only been a few years since he'd come to Minerva's to try and nab some jam. The boy from that frozen village would be fifteen soon. And in autumn—half a year from now—he'd be a first-year in the advanced course.

After the lunch rush, Louis shoveled his own meal—soup and bread—into his mouth. Goah, the owner, and Lowe, his helper, were cleaning and preparing for the evening, while Goah's daughter Sally sat across from Louis, nibbling on her own piece of bread.

"You're *so* gross when you eat," she said to him. "Why do you have to stuff your face like that?"

"Why do you care? I'm not spilling any."

Despite how long ago he'd left home, Louis hadn't quite shaken his habit of wolfing down his food—it was precious, and he didn't want it to be taken.

"Ugh. *This* is why you're not popular with girls."

"Like *you* have room to talk. I know all that modesty of yours is fake."

Sally didn't flinch at his insult. She wasn't like the proper young ladies at Minerva's; she was used to crude men. She was Goah's daughter, after all—and he had as mean a face as anyone.

Sally put a hand up to her fair cheek and pursed her lips. "I'm just trying to get the guy I like to think I'm cute, all right?"

"Then do that act with *him*, not me."

Sally shot him a look like she thought he was hopeless. She was only a year older, but day in, day out, she acted like his older sister. "I can't do it *only* in front of him. I have to make it a habit.

Otherwise I might slip up."

"Wow, that's some impressive determination."

"Oh, please. As soon as you find a girl *you* like, you'll want to act cool around her, too."

"Yeah, yeah."

When Louis brought his empty dishes to the sink, Goah—who was busy cooking some meat—spoke up. "That reminds me, Li'l Lou. We'll be at Minerva's festival again this year. Give us a hand, would you? The pay'll be great."

Louis clenched his fist and gave a whoop.

While the event was called a school festival, it was more like a day where everyone got together to show off their projects and research results. Normal schools in town apparently put on singing performances and plays on such occasions, but Minerva's was the greatest mage training institution in Ridill, so they would be presenting magecraft research instead.

The presenters were mainly teachers and research students. A few talented kids from the lower courses were sometimes selected to join in, but they were always from the advanced course; it was basically unheard-of for an intermediate course student to present.

On the day of the festival, the regular students would instead act as guides for visitors or listen to presentations in their fields of interest. For the past two years, Louis had simply attended whatever presentations he wanted to, collected any materials the others distributed, and helped Goah. A lot of people would be coming in and out of the school, so townspeople would ask Minerva's for permission to open stands selling drinks or light fare.

As Lowe wiped down a table, he looked at Louis with concern. "You help us out every year," he said, "but aren't festival days busy for students, too?"

"Hey, I can handle it," replied Louis. He was busy washing dishes, all the while keeping a wary eye on the faucet. "What are we serving this year? We did skewers last time."

"There's been quite a chill lately, so we may go with warm soup instead."

"Oh, that's good. Bet that'll make a lot of money."

The festival at Minerva's would take place in three weeks, on the last day of Romalia. It would still be cold at that point—the month marked the end of winter—so people would be grateful for something warm.

Louis did some mental calculations. He'd make a nice sum helping with the festival booth. If sales were good, he'd even get a bonus. He'd finally be able to buy new boots; his current ones had been feeling tight lately.

*Now I just need to think of something to wear.*

While Minerva's didn't forbid its students from working off campus, it wasn't regarded very favorably. This went double during the festival; it was a good chance to see valuable research results, and Rutherford had commanded him to listen in on as many as possible—and if he was going to work, to do so quietly and unobtrusively.

So for the last two years, Louis had changed out of his uniform into street clothes, wrapped a bandanna around his head, and worked mainly in the back. But whenever he wanted to see a presentation, he'd have to change *back* into his uniform, and carrying around a change of clothes all day was annoying.

He was mulling over how he would do things this year, when Goah, now dividing slabs of meat, spoke up. "I decided to let Sally run the booth this time."

"We want to keep this place open, after all," added Lowe, still cleaning.

Sally looked at Louis with a wide smile. "Yeah. That means I can get an outfit ready for you, if you want."

"Really?" said Louis. "Sure. Thanks."

Louis would later come to bitterly regret his casual agreement.

After finishing his lunch at Goah's, Louis rushed back to school in a flurry. He was headed for the research building. Afternoon classes wouldn't begin for a little while yet, but Rutherford had told him to come to his laboratory at some point during lunch.

*Why the lab, though?* wondered Louis, cocking his head. If he

wanted to lecture Louis on something he'd done wrong, he would've called him to the faculty room instead.

Louis knocked on the door to Rutherford's lab, but he didn't get a response. Then he tried the door and found it unlocked. That was careless, given the precious research materials kept inside.

*Perfect. Since I'm here, maybe I can find something good on the old man…*

He first walked over to the desk, where he noticed something unusual. A wood carving sat atop it, about as big as his fist, shaped like a star with twelve faces. He picked it up and shook it, but he didn't hear anything rattling around inside.

*What's this?* he wondered. *A magical item? No, wait. A puzzle?*

He pressed one of the triangular sides and felt something shift slightly within. Interest piqued, Louis turned the carving over and over in his hands, looking at all the faces, using his fingertips to solve the puzzle little by little.

While he had started with only a vague sense of curiosity, as time went on, Louis found himself having fun. He'd never had much opportunity to fiddle with toys for entertainment like this.

In less than a minute, he'd solved the puzzle. Then he reassembled it.

"There. I did it," he said to himself.

"Color me impressed. That took you no time at all," came a voice from behind him.

Louis nearly dropped the puzzle. He whipped around to find a female student a few years older than he was standing in the doorway. She had brick-colored hair, tied back in a casual ponytail. She seemed frank and unaffected—easy to get along with.

Rather than criticize him for playing with one of Rutherford's possessions, she simply watched him, seeming somehow amused. *Is she in the advanced course…?* Louis wondered cautiously.

Then the girl strode over and plucked the wooden puzzle from his hand. "I gave this to Mr. Rutherford as a little souvenir from my vacation. It's supposed to take a lot longer than that to solve, though. Is this your first time trying one?"

"…Yeah."

"Now that's really amazing. You must have an excellent aptitude for barrier techniques and formula application." The girl narrowed her eyes and smiled. The expression reminded Louis of a cat dozing in a patch of sun.

Louis knew he was infamous even among the advanced course students. This girl wasn't acting cautious around him, though, so he assumed she didn't know that he was the Problem Child of Minerva's.

Just then, the door opened and in came Rutherford, his pipe in his mouth. He glanced between Louis and the girl, his eyes widening.

"I didn't realize you were here, Carla," he said.

The girl—Carla—frowned slightly and scratched her head. "So, these school festival presentations… Do I *really* have to take part?"

"The bigwigs at the Mages Guild were very insistent," replied Rutherford. "You just have to get onto the training grounds and, well, do your thing."

"I feel like that's gonna make me stick out like a sore thumb… But it's better than having to whip up all that paperwork, I guess."

Not many people acted so casually around Rutherford, but even more than that, Louis was curious what they were talking about. *… So she's not a regular student?*

Noticing Louis's eyes on Carla, Rutherford pointed the tip of his pipe at the boy. What a rude old man. "Carla, this is Louis Miller, a scholarship student in the intermediate course."

"Yeah. I kind of figured as much." Carla didn't seem particularly put off, even after hearing his name.

Rutherford scratched the back of his neck. Then he turned to Louis. "This is Carla Maxwell," he said. "She's a scholarship student in the advanced course, and the only student associated with my lab."

"Louis Miller, was it? Master Rutherford's told me a lot about you. I'm graduating from the advanced course this year, so we'll have just missed each other. But I plan on sticking around as a research student after that. It's nice to meet you."

At Minerva's, you were allowed to join a research lab once you

were in the advanced course. Naturally, you couldn't simply choose one for yourself; you needed permission from the teacher in charge. Gideon Rutherford, the Mage of Violet Smoke, was famous for almost never taking on research students. The sole current student he'd approved—his only apprentice—was Carla.

Rutherford was ex-military, but Carla wasn't very soldier-like. She appeared to be an ordinary, rather friendly girl. *If she's a scholarship student, she must have good grades. I wonder what kind of magecraft she uses.*

As Louis continued to watch her, Rutherford emptied the contents of his pipe into an ash tray. "Ah, yes. And as for why I called *you* here, brat… The school finished screening you for progressing to the advanced course—and you've been given a special assignment."

"Excuse me?!"

Louis was currently a third-year in the intermediate course. In order to progress to the advanced course, you needed to score well enough on the written test and either pass a magic battle exam or submit an essay.

While he still couldn't measure up to Rosalie, he'd done very well for himself on the written test. And during the magic battle exam, he hadn't tried to exploit any loopholes in the rules; he'd fought seriously, nothing underhanded, and had passed.

That didn't mean he'd stopped thinking it was annoying to have to mutter a bunch of chants and try to hit his opponents with attack magecraft when it would be so much faster to punch them. But if he put his mind to it, Louis could easily bring his opponents down with his magecraft, too.

In short, Louis had already fulfilled all the requirements to progress to the advanced course. His face seemed to say "I don't understand."

"…You *do* know what the reason is, don't you?" asked Rutherford.

"Eh? How the hell should I?"

"It's your behavior, you nitwit! Your awful behavior!"

"Come on, Master. You're acting like a child," Carla said, placating him. She didn't seem to mind being caught in the foul mood between this ill-mannered old man and his ill-mannered student.

"Ugh," spat Rutherford. "Anyway, we decided at the faculty meeting that you'll be doing a research presentation for the school festival. Your progression to the advanced course will be decided based on the results."

"The festival? That only gives me three weeks, you jerk!"

"Sure does, brat. Better set to it like your life depends on it."

Louis was dumbstruck. To begin with, intermediate course students almost never did research presentations. Plus, it would take at least a week just to prepare the materials for it. Some people had been preparing since the *previous year*.

"Want some help?" A hand of salvation reached out from an unexpected direction—Carla. "Once you decide on a topic, I can show you how to draw up all the materials."

Louis couldn't sense any ulterior motives or condescension from her, so he decided to simply bow. "…Thanks. I would appreciate that."

"No problem. If you need anything, just drop on by."

* * *

"I need to ask you for something, Louis," said Owen, once Louis had returned to their room. His tone was awfully formal. The boy had still been in the beginner course when they'd met, and he'd been smaller even than Louis. He'd gone through a recent growth spurt, though, and now they were about the same height.

"What do you need?"

"Well, my parents will be visiting Minerva's on the day of the school festival."

The festival was one of the precious few days the public was allowed to visit; not just the Mages Guild but even the students' parents would be coming to observe. According to Owen, his were excited to see what sort of environment their son had been studying in.

"And they said they want to see my dorm room, too…"

"Guess you're in trouble, then," said Louis, immediately looking at their beds. Owen was as untidy as ever, and even now his bunk was littered with textbooks and other personal items.

Owen's voice sped up. "Of course, I'll clean on the day of. But I didn't know if you would want them coming in, so I figured I'd ask you, just to make sure…"

Louis didn't exactly *like* the idea of letting strangers into his room, but after three years of sharing his space with Owen, he was open to a little compromise. Besides, Louis knew how grateful Owen was to his parents for sending him to Minerva's.

"Nah, I don't mind," he said. "I'll be busy giving a presentation that day, anyway. Won't have time to come back here. So you and your parents can take a load off."

"…A *research* presentation?" asked Owen, eyes widening.

His surprise was only natural considering how uncommon it was.

Louis sat down backward on his chair; Owen was sitting sideways in his. If they both sat normally at their desks, they'd be back-to-back, so they'd settle into this position whenever they wanted to talk while sitting down.

Louis propped his elbow up on the back of his chair and rested his chin in his hand. Then he gave Owen the short explanation of what had happened: He'd fulfilled the requirements to get into the advanced course, but because of his bad behavior, he'd been ordered to do a presentation at the festival.

Owen shot him an exasperated look. "You kind of had this coming, you know."

"Oh, leave it."

Just like his untidiness, Owen's scathing remarks hadn't changed since the day Louis had met him. Louis set his jaw into a pout.

But Owen went on, his voice lowering to a mumble. "You had it coming, but…"

"Eh?"

"It's *incredible* to be chosen to present at the festival. It's not something just anyone can do. Just like participating in the tri-yearly magic battle tournament."

This time, Louis had been chosen for the former. The latter was a special competition held only once every three years between members of each research lab. The last one had been held at the beginning of the previous year.

"I'm way more interested in the tournament than some stupid presentation," said Louis.

The tournament pitted selected students in the advanced course who belonged to a lab against one another. Obviously, Louis wasn't allowed to participate; as an intermediate student, he couldn't join a research lab.

"Come on," he continued. "I know you're more interested in the tournament, too. You're trying to get into the Magic Corps."

"Well, yes…"

"For the next one, I'll be in my second year of the advanced course, and you'll be in your first. We might end up fighting each other." Louis grinned.

"When that happens, I'll be sure to win," Owen muttered. Despite its low volume, his voice was thick with determination. Classic Owen.

"Heh. I'll look forward to it."

*But come to think of it, that old rat Rutherford's lab didn't join in last year. I heard he didn't have the numbers.*

Rutherford currently had only one student. Louis found himself suddenly curious.

"Hey, Owen," he said, "you ever heard of a *Carla Maxwell*?"

"The Starspear Witch? She's in the advanced course, and she's a genius. I think she's even more famous than you."

Mage titles were mostly awarded to high mages and above—ones with achievements under their belt and the Mages Guild's approval. Not all high mages got a title, either. That meant Carla, despite being a student, had already been acknowledged by the Mages Guild for her accomplishments.

"If she's got a title, that must mean she's pretty good," remarked Louis.

"Yeah. You do, too, of course, but it'd be rude even to compare them—Jam Hunter, Problem Child…"

"Leave it."

"I hear she can maintain seven different spells at once."

"What the heck? Is she even human?" Most mages could only maintain up to two spells at a time. If that rumor was true, she wasn't just on another level—she was in a class of her own.

"Everyone's saying she'll be the youngest Sage ever appointed," added Owen.

At the word *Sage*, Louis thought of Rosalie. Her father was one of the current Sages—the Aquamancy Mage.

Unlike Louis, who had no interest in the group, Owen had been saved by another Sage known as the Artillery Mage, and the event had inspired him to pursue the path of a combat mage. Maybe that was why Owen seemed so much more talkative all of a sudden.

"Among the Seven Sages, there are two hereditary seats reserved for members of specific families—the Witch of Thorns for the Roseburgs, and the Abyss Mage for the Albrights. That means there are really only five openings. A lot of the current Sages are pretty old, too, so people are wondering if they'll step down soon."

"Huh," said Louis, purposely keeping his tone casual as he asked his next question. "Hey, tell me about the Aquamancy Mage."

"He doesn't have any crazy achievements like slaying dragons or anything, but he's amazing all the same. He can calm flooding rivers and hold back landslides. He's a splendid mage who has saved many lives."

*Rosalie must be proud to have him as a father*, Louis thought idly, before catching himself with a bitter smile. Back in Dangrotes, being proud of one's father had been a completely foreign concept to him.

* * *

The day after he was assigned to present at the festival, Louis paid a visit to Maeger's lab. He'd chosen barrier techniques as his topic, making her help indispensable.

"Yes, I heard about your presentation at the meeting," said

Maeger, pushing up the rim of her glasses and looking over the presentation summary Louis had spent all night putting together. "I'm surprised, to tell you the truth. That you would choose barrier techniques as your theme, I mean."

"Why? I can't think of a more interesting topic," said Louis candidly.

Maeger blinked behind her glasses.

Louis hadn't thought it that surprising, so he continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "Especially the mage battle barrier. It's brand new, and there's so much room for research. If I have to do a presentation, I want this to be my topic."

The technique used mana-dense land to erect a large-scale barrier that could discern physical attacks and nullify them. Plus, it could automatically deploy a spell to displace impacts. The barrier employed a lot of advanced, complex techniques. And since it had just been created, it made for the perfect research topic.

Maeger finished looking over Louis's summary. "There is something I must tell you," she said. "The magic battle barrier was created by the Watermirror Mage, my master. However…he passed away three months ago."

Her tone was gentle—a calm remonstration, rather than a lament of her master's death.

"He was an expert when it came to barrier techniques," she continued. "And with him gone, there is no one left who is capable of improving such a complex barrier."

"Huh? What do you mean? If the guy who made it dies, the ones who come after just have to continue his research and figure out how to improve on it. Isn't that how these things go?"

Louis had always figured the barrier used in magic battles would only continue to improve and develop, but Maeger seemed resigned—exhausted, even.

"You can only say that because you don't know how great the Watermirror Mage truly was."

"Yeah. I don't." Louis sniffed.

He wasn't very interested in modern magecraft history, so it made sense that he'd never heard about the Watermirror Mage's

achievements. To Louis, he was just the talented old man who'd created the magic battle barrier.

"All I know," said Louis, "is that *you're* the one who knows the most about barrier techniques at Minerva's."

There were several other teachers and research students specializing in the subject, and Louis had seen those mages in action—he'd read their papers, too. Even then, Louis had decided that Maeger was the most talented among them. Hence his visit and request.

Maeger cleared her throat. "There's no point flattering me," she said.

"I hate buttering people up."

Louis was telling the truth. Threats and bribes were much easier than flattery. Maeger knew his character well enough to realize that. She exhaled a long, slow breath, then nodded.

"All right. But if we're doing this, I will be uncompromising."

"Yeah, yeah. I already knew that."

Borrowing a desk in the corner of her lab, Louis started hammering down the details as Maeger supervised.

First, he looked at the magic battle barrier's weaknesses—and because of all his independent research into the subject, he could name quite a few. At the same time, he drew formula deployment diagrams, wrote down methods for improvement, and thought about potential spells to add.

The magecraft formula was *really* long. He had filled his desk with paper and was writing letters as small as grains of rice, and yet he was already running out of room.

"Clauses nineteen, fifty-seven, one hundred seventy-seven, and four hundred thirty-nine are incorrect."

"Gah. Seriously?"

Louis hadn't even finished writing the whole thing down before Maeger began pointing out mistakes one after the other. He scratched his dry hair, then brought his face closer to the desk to stare at the letters.

"Mr. Miller, could it be that your eyesight is poor?"

"Never compared it to anyone else's, so I don't know. I definitely have a tougher time with my right eye, though."

Louis's vision was pretty unbalanced. Nothing had happened to one or the other eye in particular; he'd just always had a bit more trouble seeing out of his right. It didn't get in the way of his life at all, though, so he hadn't ever worried about it.

"Have you considered eyeglasses?" Maeger suggested.

"Glasses? Those are for classy people."

And besides, eyeglasses were expensive. Far more expensive than anything Louis could afford. At the moment, he could barely pay for his own underwear and socks—and he was still growing.

Louis looked back at the paper as Maeger pointed to part of the formula. "Your correction for line fifty-seven here. I taught you a more efficient, more stable method of formula connection in class, remember?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, you're right."

Maeger's indication made Louis realize something. The Watermirror Mage's formula was extremely advanced, but it was a little bit outmoded.

*…Bet it's because it was made by a stubborn old man*, he thought.

Maeger, on the other hand, was a teacher—she was always studying the latest developments in order to teach her students. As a mage, she was flexible enough to accept new information. Louis had a lot of genuine respect for her.

"Hey, don't you have a title, Ms. Maeger?" he asked. "You're a high mage, right?"

"I do not," she replied. "I never accomplished anything grand enough to deserve one. I can't compare to my master."

"Huh. Well, you really seem like a Barrier Witch to me."

Maeger's eyes widened at the casual remark. Then she smiled a little, her stern face growing uncharacteristically soft. "I'm afraid that only a mage with the requisite dignity and knowledge of every kind of barrier could ever call themselves a name like that," she replied.

"I know. And that's basically you, right?"

For the first time Louis could remember, Maeger barked a laugh.



## CHAPTER 8

# A Busy School Festival

Adolph Faron, now in his third year of the intermediate course, seethed with rage and dissatisfaction.

Today, Minerva's would put on its school festival, and the best of the best would be presenting their research findings. And one of those presentations would be led by that awful Louis Miller!

Intermediate course students rarely ever presented. And festival presentations drew not only those from Minerva's, but also mages from all over the Kingdom of Ridill, including from the prestigious Mages Guild.

An unworthy presentation would mar the school's very name. That meant the teachers *trusted* Louis to be successful.

*Why him?! Why not me? I'm a Faron! And he's just some nobody from the countryside!*

Just remembering his impertinent face made Adolph's guts boil.

At first, Louis Miller had just been some kid Adolph didn't particularly like. He was a country bumpkin who thought he was hot stuff, so Adolph had wanted to put him in his place. But then he'd thrown Terrence into a cesspit. And when Adolph razzed him—only a little, of course—the upstart had punched him in the nose so hard, he'd *bled*. The kid was running wild, acting however he pleased.

For some reason, though, the teachers liked him. They treated him differently. *Sure, he gets decent grades. But his behavior is awful. I behave properly all the time, so* my *good grades should count more than his. I could give a much better presentation than he could, too.*

That prickling irritation had piled up until it became a deep-rooted loathing.

Adolph hoped Louis would screw up his presentation and thoroughly embarrass himself. And yet he had a feeling that wouldn't

happen. Not only was Louis well-practiced with magecraft, he was near the top of their grade on the written exams, too. Whenever the teachers used well-written reports as examples, Louis's name *always* came up.

*There has to be a way to humiliate him somehow, right…?*

A little under an hour remained until the beginning of the festival. The people from town were already setting up their booths and stalls.

Just then, Adolph stopped. He'd spotted a familiar head of chestnut hair.

"Hey, Sally… What is this?" rumbled Louis.

"Isn't it cute? Now you and I match."

As Sally went about setting up the stall, she lifted the hem of her skirt. It was long, cute, and wide. Sally's was blue, and the one she'd given Louis was red—a color variation on the same design, apparently.

Since it was bad for Minerva's reputation if its students were seen working at a stall like this, Louis needed to dress in a way that wouldn't stand out.

And *this* was the outfit Sally had chosen for him: a blouse with a ribbon at the collar, plus a long skirt and a neat, plain apron. She hadn't stopped there, though—the outfit came with a lengthy wig that closely matched his hair color.

"I borrowed the wig from a friend who does theater," Sally explained. "Take good care of it, all right?"

"I'd rather throw it directly in the trash."

"You break it, you buy it. And it's going to be quite expensive."

It was true that Louis had a feminine face. He'd always been self-conscious about it, ever since his time working at the brothel. The owner had used it to threaten him, and he was constantly being underestimated because of his looks. Nothing good had ever come of them.

Anger was radiating from Louis's body, and his expression would make most people shake in their boots. Sally, however, simply

cackled and paid him no mind. She was used to her stern-faced father and had built up a resistance to such looks.

"Papa said you'd be paid handsomely for this," she told him, before lowering her voice and stating the amount.

Louis clutched his breast, looking anguished.

It was a *very* handsome sum. With that much, he'd be able to do more than buy new boots and underwear—he could get a new bag to replace the one with a hole, and a new feather pen, too, since his was almost broken. He could even buy a big jar of his favorite jam.

He considered zooming back to his dorm room and changing into his regular clothes. Owen's parents would be visiting today, though, and Louis had already told him he wouldn't be back until the festival was over.

"No slacking, now," said Sally. "Hurry up and get ready. There are some bushes over there. Be quick about it!"

"I don't know if you realize this," said Louis, "but you're basically shoving a knife into an old wound of mine—and *laughing* about it."

"Wow. Isn't that how you act all the time, though?"

"……"

Unable to respond, Louis took the clothes and wig and moved behind some bushes.

Having put on the beribboned blouse and apron over his long skirt, Louis scowled. He could feel a draft between his legs. Sally helped him with the wig, parting the long chestnut-colored hair down the middle, tying it, and then topping it with a kerchief. With that, the look was complete: He was a normal town girl—plain but cute.

His chestnut hair swayed to and fro, and long eyelashes framed his grayish-purple eyes… His clothes, homely yet charming, brought out his lovely facial features—but his hands were conspicuously red and calloused from punching. He ground his teeth in rage and stomped around, just like an angry earth dragon.

"Okay, now you have to smile. Smile! What's the point of wearing a cute outfit if you're going to look at everyone like some kind of ferocious dragon?"

"I'm not *capable* of smiling and pretending to be friendly while dressed like this."

"Then learn from me. I *always* have a smile on."

As Louis was trying to come up with a good retort, the bell rang, marking the start of the school festival. He clicked his tongue, then put his back to the main thoroughfare and confronted the pot of soup.

"I'm not talking to anyone, okay? I watch the fire, make the soup, and wash the dishes. That's it."

"All right, all right."

Louis's research presentation would come relatively late that day—it was the fourth one in the afternoon. He'd promised to help Sally at the stall until then.

His preparations were in perfect order. Under Maeger's instruction, he'd asked the kindhearted Carla to help him gather materials, brawling with Rutherford now and then whenever the man butted in. And somehow, he'd managed to pull it all together within three weeks.

He was interested in one or two of the other presentations, but he'd asked Rosalie and Owen to collect the distributed materials for him.

The biggest surprise, though, had been that Woodman, the schools' resident doctor, would be giving a presentation, too.

While magecraft that affected the human body was totally forbidden in the Kingdom of Ridill, there were ways to use magical items to treat several mana-related symptoms and syndromes without leaving any aftereffects. Woodman would be presenting on the methodology of such techniques.

*I wish I could go around the festival with Rosalie…*

Louis squatted in front of the stove and checked the heat level. There was a slight breeze that day, so he needed to pay careful attention to the fire.

Even after the festival began, it took a little while for guests to arrive. As noon drew near, however, things really picked up. The soup sold well, likely because of the strong winds and chilly air.

Their customers were a fifty-fifty split of students and guests, but

nobody seemed to have recognized Louis yet. Sally, with her curly hair and bright, clear eyes, was considered a beauty in town. She was friendly, too, and was managing to monopolize the customers' attention. She would take the orders and the money, Louis would dish out the soup, and Sally would hand it to the customers.

Stalls like these had somewhat higher prices compared to their parent establishment; the convention was to pay a little extra to cover the cost of your dish and utensils, then collect the deposit when you returned them. It was Louis's job to take those dishes and utensils and wash them.

He had gone to rinse some in a basin a short distance away, and just as he snuck back, Sally leaned over and said, "I need to go to the restroom. Will you mind the stall while I'm gone?"

"…Sure. If we get any kids from Minerva's, I'll just tell them we're getting things set up and shoo them away."

It would be embarrassing for *anyone* to see him in this outfit, but his greatest fear was that Rosalie would spot him. Rutherford, too—if the old rat caught a glimpse of him, he'd have to pummel the man's withering body right into his coffin.

Louis stirred the soup. *Please no customers. Please no customers*, he repeated to himself.

His hopes were dashed, however, when a voice came from behind him.

"Hello. Could we get two bowls of soup?"

Louis looked up slightly and glanced at the customer. There were two of them, both boys about his age, but they weren't wearing Minerva's uniforms.

The speaker had blond hair and a stern face. He was muscular all over and wore well-tailored clothing.

Louis recalled a large animal he'd seen at the circus in town a while back. *What was that thing called…? Oh, that's right. A gorilla.*

He looked at the blond-haired boy again. Yes, his excellent build and round eyes were more than fitting for a golden gorilla.

Standing behind him and to the side was a black-haired boy of average build and plain features. He wore loose clothes and had a sword on his belt.

Louis assumed they were some noble kid and his bodyguard—not an unusual pairing around here. Many of the students at Minerva's were the children of nobility, and Louis suspected this boy was the same.

But since they weren't from the school, he figured it was all right to serve them. Without a word, Louis took their money and gave them some soup.

The blond-haired boy reached out and took the bowl and spoon from Louis. When he did, the black-haired boy stopped him.

"Let me taste it for poison first," he said quietly.

*Poison.* The word instantly filled Louis with irritation.

He snatched back the bowl of soup, then put a spoonful of it in his mouth so they could both see. Goah had done a good job preparing it, and Lowe had added delicate seasoning. It was good soup.

Louis held the bowl out again and glared at the boys. "See? You satisfied now?"

The blond one looked taken aback and quickly bowed. "I'm sorry!" he shouted. "I apologize for my servant's rudeness!"

Louis scowled. Why was he yelling?

"Let me start over," the boy continued, his tone polite and formal. "May I have this soup?"

"Sure thing. Here you go."

The boy's stern features softened at Louis's rough demeanor. "Thank you," he said.

The two customers, bowls in hand, started sipping their soup next to the stall, conversing in between sips.

"Nate. I know it's important to taste test my food. But you can't bring it up in front of the server."

"…I'm terribly sorry, sir."

"This soup is exquisite. Why, it's perfect for warming up our cold bodies, isn't it?"

"…It is, sir."

Though the blond-haired boy made sure to remonstrate his servant, he didn't drag out his criticism and quickly went back to complimenting the soup at every opportunity.

Eventually, once their bowls were empty, the blond-haired boy began to fidget. “Nate. What do we do with our bowls? Do we take them with us?”

“No, we return them, sir. Allow me.”

Nate—the black-haired boy—put one bowl inside the other, then returned to the stall.

“I apologize for my previous rudeness.”

His voice was like a whisper on the wind. At first, Louis had thought the boy simply had a quiet voice, but he could hear a whooshing of air every time he spoke. He must have had a bad throat.

Without a word, Louis took the bowls, then shot the boy a cold glare to get him to leave at once.

Nate met his dangerous gaze and continued, his voice faint. “…By the way, are you wearing that outfit because you like it?”

“Get lost unless you want me to rip out your eyeballs.”

Nate said nothing more. He bowed to Louis, then said “Let’s be off, sir” to his master.

The other boy’s stern features broke into a jovial smile. “Thank you for the meal,” he shouted at Louis. “That soup was incredible!”

“Thanks. I’ll tell the guy who made it.”

*Just stop yelling. You’re gonna draw attention*, thought Louis wearily as he watched the two of them go. *A naive kid who thinks he’s incognito and his servant, probably.*

Once they were gone, Louis turned back to the simple stove. The flame had grown weak for a little while, and he’d been slightly concerned. Too strong, and you’d boil the soup; too weak, and it wouldn’t stay warm.

He squatted, legs spread under his skirt, and adjusted the flame’s strength.

That was when he noticed something. He’d piled his things in one corner of the stall, but when he glanced over now, his uniform was gone. It had been at the top of the pile, and he’d placed a large rock on top of it to make sure it didn’t blow away in the wind. The stone was still there, though; only the uniform was gone.

Louis had been working almost exclusively in the back all day,

and he'd kept one eye on his things the whole time. His uniform had been there right up until Sally went to use the restroom.

If someone had taken it and snuck away, they would have had only one chance—while Louis was selling soup to the two boys. In other words, not much time had passed since his uniform was stolen.

"Thanks for minding the place, Louis."

Just then, Sally returned. Louis pushed the box containing the day's proceeds into her hands. "Sorry, but we gotta swap," he said. "Someone stole my uniform. I have to find the criminal and strangle them."

"Huh? No way. That's awful… For the criminal, anyway." That last part perfectly encapsulated how Sally thought of Louis. "Do you know who it is?"

"He didn't touch the valuables, aside from my uniform. That means this is just a prank. And for the most part, there's only one person at Minerva's who'd stoop to something this petty."

Louis grinned wickedly, baring his canines, and cracked his knuckles.

* * *

Bursting out of the stall, Louis first checked the nearby bushes.

In truth, it would have been quicker to seize some random student and demand to know where Adolph Faron was, but then he'd be exposing himself in girls' clothes. He needed to avoid that at any cost.

*The grass around here has been crushed*, he noted. *He was hiding, waiting for a chance to steal my uniform… Judging by the footprints, he headed toward the school building.*

Like a veteran hunter stalking his prey, Louis followed the subtle traces, not missing a single one.

Naturally, he did so while choosing lesser-traveled paths,

occasionally jumping from behind one tree to another, clinging to walls or hiding in narrow confines—all to escape the eyes of the other students.

*I have less than an hour until my research presentation*, he thought. *Not much time…*

In a corner of his mind, he started to mull over which would be less embarrassing if worse came to worst: presenting in his underwear or doing so in girls' clothes. The former would be less emotionally draining. But it was still cold this time of year, and if he wanted to stay warm, the latter would serve him better. Neither choice was ideal.

Either that, or he could threaten some random male student and strip him. Now he was thinking like a regular highway robber.

As he walked next to the school building, he spotted the one he was after right beside the hallway leading to the lecture hall. A tall, pretentious boy with black hair—Adolph Faron.

He was talking to someone, laughing indiscreetly. It was a brown-haired girl. *Wait, that's Rosalie.*

In that moment, Louis felt so angry, the blood vessels in his head seemed about to explode.

*That… That little… Bastard! He knows I can't show myself in front of Rosalie dressed like this!*

Apparently, Adolph was inviting her to go with him to the lecture hall. He put an arm around her shoulders in an overly familiar way, bringing their faces close.

*I'm going to crush that huge forehead of his!* Louis picked up a rock near his feet and got ready to throw it. But then a bold voice interrupted him. It was far away, but he had no problem hearing it.

"Excuse me, but could I ask the way?!"

A blond-haired boy with stern features was speaking to Adolph and Rosalie—the same boy who had just bought soup from him. His black-haired servant was waiting behind him, sword still on his hip.

Louis couldn't make out Rosalie's expression from where he was, but Adolph was visibly rattled.

Rosalie and the blond-haired boy exchanged a few short words, and then she started walking with him toward the school building,

showing him the way.

Adolph tried to tag along, but at a word from Rosalie, he withdrew. Louis guessed she'd said something like, "Don't worry about me and go to the lecture hall. You wanted to listen to that presentation, right?" He felt sure that was how she would put it.

Louis silently cheered on the other boy. *Nice work, Gorilla! Great job!*

In truth, he was a little jealous, but this was still a hundred times better than Adolph putting his arm around Rosalie's shoulders as Louis stood and watched in his skirt.

Adolph stood there awkwardly for a moment, but he soon hastened toward the lecture hall. He probably thought that Louis wouldn't follow him inside.

Louis lowered his posture so no one would see his face and sprinted like a bear chasing its prey.

Then, a short distance away from the lecture hall, he rammed into Adolph. He didn't use any magecraft—the idea never even occurred to him. If he wanted to punish this kid, it would be easier and faster to do it the old-fashioned way.

Adolph let out a muffled grunt as Louis tackled him. He looked up, and sweat broke out over his face.

Louis threw the other boy over his shoulder, then moved behind some trees to get out of the way. A few people had caught sight of the incident, but he doubted any had seen his face, at least.

He tossed Adolph to the ground and stepped on the boy's stomach. And then, dressed in his pretty girls' clothes and baring his teeth like a wicked dragon, he smiled. "Where'd you put my uniform?"

"Urgh… Grah… I don't know…what you're talking about…"

"Tell me the truth and I'll have mercy. A little, anyway."





Louis twisted his heel, causing Adolph's breathing to grow pained and ragged. But even then, he flashed Louis a derisive grin and put on a strong front.

"Hah. Like I'd ever trust anything *you* said, Girlface!"

For a moment, just a moment, Louis felt all the sound in the world disappear.

His anger had crossed a line, and for a split second, his emotions calmed. But soon, he felt pure murder swell within him.

His effeminate face remained impassive, but his purple eyes, tinged with gray, glinted like the edge of a razor.

"Say that again, and I'll crush your balls."

Feeling bloodlust wash over him like a cold blade held to his neck, Adolph sputtered and wailed. "I, uh, I burned… I burned them. Stupid! Moron! It's over for you now. Go humiliate yourself at the presen—!"

"You're the one who's gonna be humiliated."

Louis straddled Adolph and reached for the buttons on his uniform.

* * *

The research presentations were held in the big lecture hall, and apart from the faculty seating was a section for special guests. Most of the ones sitting there were famous mages—high-ranking members of the Mages Guild or the Royal Magic Research Institute.

In one of those guest seats sat a beautiful woman. She'd put a fluffy cushion underneath her before sitting down.

She had gorgeous silver hair, tied back, and it was hard to tell how old she was. Her dress featured a plunging neckline, and over it she wore a luxurious robe covered in gold-thread embroidery.

Next to her was a boy, probably about six or seven, sitting up straight and proper.

He had green eyes and curly red hair that was as lustrous as a

crimson rose. He was beautiful, almost like a doll, and he wore a frilled dress shirt, a jacket with rose-shaped buttons on it, and a pair of shorts. He looked for all the world like the son of a good, prestigious family.

While the presentation was going on, the boy kept his back straight and proper, but once it was over and there was a short break, he leaned back against his seat and yawned.

The silver-haired woman spoke to him, her voice smooth and relaxed. "Has it gotten a little boring for you?"

"N-not at all, Miss Mary. I was listening, yeah! I promise! Umm, that Woodman guy was talking about using magical items for healing. My family is good at imbuement magic, so it's really relevant for us and…"

"Mm-hmm. I'm happy you were listening. There's a good boy."

The woman named Mary smiled and hugged the boy closer to her, his crimson locks falling against her cheek.

"Once we're done listening to the presentations, why don't we go outside?" she suggested. "There's a girl named the Starspear Witch at the training grounds. She's going to reveal an incredible spell. A very pretty one!"

"Wow, I want to go! I can't wait!"

The boy's fair cheeks flushed a rosy red, and his eyes seemed to sparkle. Because of his beautiful face, he seemed hard to approach at first. But when he smiled, he looked his age, and the effect was quite charming.

"I just wish Melissa could have come with us," said Mary.

"My sister told me not to go to the school festival. She says it will just make me jealous…" At that, he looked down and swung his feet. Saying it out loud must have brought on a wave of jealousy. Eventually, though, he went on. "I thought I'd be able to make lots of friends if I went to school… But when I told my grandma that, she said I didn't need school…"

The boy hung his head in disappointment. Then Mary smiled mischievously and whispered into his ear.

"Hey, Raul, why don't we slip away for a moment and go to the stalls?"

"Are you sure? Grandma said I shouldn't…"

Mary took off her robe and put on a fur coat, then winked at the boy. "Then we'll just have to keep it a secret, won't we?"

"Hooray!"

* * *

Yet another afternoon presentation had come to an end. Maeger, who had been listening to it from the faculty seating, exhaled and looked up at the clock on the wall. After a brief intermission, it would be Louis Miller's turn to present.

She'd taught him everything she could, but she was still uneasy.

As the break came to an end, she saw the people who had left their seats begin to trickle back in. Even so, there were a lot fewer people in the audience. But that was to be expected—a presentation from an intermediate course student was probably a low priority for most people.

"You look worried, Maeger."

Rutherford was sitting next to her, and he'd just gotten back to his seat. His tone was considerate.

Maeger grimaced. "I suppose I am. Several of the Sages appear to be in attendance, after all…"

She looked at the special guest area. So far, she'd noticed three of them. Two were in their seats at the moment—the Thunderclap Mage and the Aquamancy Mage. The Starseer Witch had left the lecture hall with the Roseburg child; there was no sign of them coming back.

Maeger turned toward the podium. "But I've done everything I can. And what a job it was… My last big accomplishment as a teacher."

Maeger would be retiring that year. She was feeling her age and had been thinking about it for quite some time. The death of her master, the Watermirror Mage, had convinced her.

The man was regarded as the preeminent expert in barrier techniques, but despite being his apprentice, Maeger hadn't accomplished very much. She'd always felt guilty about that.

Perhaps that guilt had made her want to keep up her work as a mage at the forefront of her field, at least for as long as her master was alive.

She would be retiring without leaving any legacy to speak of, but she'd made her peace with that.

"Mr. Rutherford," she said.

"Yeah?"

"I hereby recommend Louis Miller as a candidate to join the laboratory of Gideon Rutherford, the Mage of Violet Smoke."

Talented students, once in the advanced course, had the chance to become part of a research lab. That said, Rutherford was famous for almost never taking on any students. Right now, he only had one: Carla Maxwell, the Starspear Witch.

Maeger had always wanted to recommend Louis to him. She thought he was the best fit.

"I'm no barrier expert, you know," he replied.

"While Louis Miller is very skilled with barriers, he has many other talents. I think it would be best for him to build a broad, thorough base of knowledge."

"…Well, I guess he *is* a quick learner. And clever."

Many mages specialized in one specific field of study. Louis was a rare case—someone who could learn and master all systems and elements of magecraft.

Louis pretended to be modest, saying his knowledge was merely superficial. But he never stopped there—he had the grit and determination to use what he learned, and to solidify his skills with trial and error.

Rutherford looked conflicted. The fingers on his right hand moved, as if he were twirling his pipe, even though his hand was empty. He wasn't allowed to smoke inside the lecture hall, and he probably didn't know what else to do with his hands.

"I know I recommended him as a scholarship student," he said, "but that doesn't mean I can take him on as a research student, too.

Think of the extra work…"

"I'd like you to decide after seeing his presentation," said Maeger.

Eventually, the short break ended, and the presentations resumed. Louis moved up to the podium, papers in hand. For some reason, his uniform looked baggy, and he had the cuffs rolled up on both his shirtsleeves and pant legs.

*I can't believe it! Can't he dress properly for his own presentation?!* thought Maeger, privately fuming as the handouts made their way through the audience. Rutherford got them first, and when he saw them, he snorted.

*What could he be laughing about?* wondered Maeger. *I half expected him to get angry or exasperated, but to* laugh*?*

She had checked over the contents of the handout, but she hadn't seen the cover page. What in the world had that problem child written on the cover?

With much consternation, she looked—and her eyes widened.

The cover page listed the research theme and the name of the presenter. But even bigger and more conspicuous than the presenter's name were the words DIRECTION AND SUPERVISION: CLARIS MAEGER, TEACHER OF BARRIER TECHNIQUES.

* * *

Rosalie Verde sat near the back of the hall as she listened to Louis's research presentation. There were empty seats toward the front, but she didn't have the courage to sit up there, so close to the special guest seating.

Louis wasn't hiding his accent, and his attitude was just as brash as ever. But anyone who knew him could tell from the way he spoke that he was being *extremely* cautious about what he said.

"As you can see, the magic battle barrier shows an inherent weakness in the formula connection, starting with clause ninety. I have two proposals that could remedy this when incorporated. The

first is Astley's mana circulation formula, and the second is…"

Louis would never say "shows an inherent weakness." He'd say "This barrier is full of holes" or "This thing leaks like a sieve."

The presentation itself showed an incredible degree of talent. Those who had assumed an intermediate course student couldn't have much of interest to say now leaned forward in their seats, listening closely.

Magic battle barriers were extremely complex and difficult to use. They had to be calculated very carefully to accommodate imbuing a single barrier with multiple effects without causing it to collapse in the process. It was like balancing a plate on your finger, then piling food on top. If the food wasn't stacked just right, the whole thing would topple over.

Others had pointed out weaknesses and offered suggestions for improvement, but Louis took that a step further, proposing ways to incorporate new formulae into the barrier. In other words, he would stabilize the precarious plate on his finger, then put even more food on top.

Once the presentation was over, the question-and-answer session began. Several important members of the Mages Guild and researchers from the Royal Magic Research Institute raised their hands.

Louis, despite his obvious annoyance at having to answer, responded matter-of-factly. His face betrayed his thoughts—he wanted to tell the guests to shut up and use their heads, that a little research would answer all their questions for them. But he was being very docile today, maybe because his enrollment in the advanced course depended on this.

Once he'd answered all the questions, Louis's presentation ended with a booming round of applause. Rosalie joined in, putting her heart into it. Then she glanced over at the special guest seating.

There he was, remaining patiently in his seat, even after the presentation was over.

*If I don't go now…I won't get a better chance.*

He would never speak to her first. She had to be the initiator.

Clenching her fists—her fingers had grown cold—Rosalie stood up

and approached the guest seating.

Sitting at the very edge was a man in his midforties with dark-brown hair combed back. This was one of the Seven Sages: the Aquamancy Mage, Bartrand Verde. Rosalie's father.

"It's good to see you again, Father."

"Yeah."

The conversation dropped off immediately.

Her father was a busy man. When Rosalie went home for long breaks, he was frequently absent. She didn't want to take up his time with small talk. Chatting about her life at school seemed especially pointless. After all, Rosalie would never accomplish anything that would make a Sage like her father proud.

*But there's one thing I still need to tell him…*

She swallowed, then began moving her lips. "Father… I want to continue into the advanced course."

Her father gave her a hard look, then a subtle nod. "Do as you wish."

"Thank you." Rosalie bowed deeply and excused herself, leaving the guest seating behind.

The blood finally started to circulate in her cold fingers again. He hadn't stopped her—that was all it was, but it made Rosalie happy.

As Rosalie left the guest seating area, the short old man seated next to Bartrand spoke up, his voice soft and frail.

"Are you on bad terms with your daughter, Verde?" he asked.

"I doubt she thinks of me as her father."

"…Oh?" The old man stroked his long beard, looking closely at Bartrand, waiting for him to continue.

After several seconds of hesitation, Bartrand did just that. "Her mana capacity is rather low. And yet…I may have pushed my own ideals onto her. Been too strict with her."

"…I see, I see. And?"

"She must find me distasteful."

"…Mm-hmm?" The oldest of the Seven Sages—Graham Sanders, the Thunderclap Mage—tilted his head first to one side, then to the

other. “Communication is very important, you know.”

* * *

Finished with his research presentation, Louis went straight back to the stall. The soup had evidently sold out, and Sally was working on packing up the place.

“Oh, Louis, welcome back!” she said. “Listen to this. A little while ago, a super-pretty lady and an *incredibly* cute boy came by.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“And he was just so cute, I gave him an extra-big helping, even though I knew I shouldn’t have.”

“I thought you weren’t into younger guys.”

“That’s a completely different matter. By the way, what happened to the clothes I lent you?”

Without a word, Louis shoved the girl’s outfit and wig into her arms. “I’m *not* doing this again, got it?” he growled.

He tried threatening her with a ferocious expression, but Sally merely cackled at him.

Louis sniffed and got to work packing up. First, he did a quick tally of their sales, then he rushed through washing the rest of the dirty dishes.

As they were loading everything onto a cart, Sally turned to him. “You’re in a hurry, huh?”

“There’s something I wanna check out.”

They were sharing the cart with the next stall over, and the man in charge of it had promised to bring their things back to town for them. Once they got it all loaded up, Louis’s job would be complete.

With a grunt, he put the simple stove—now disassembled—up on the cart, then raised a hand to Sally. “All right, I’m going.”

“Sounds good. Thanks for your hard work.”

After Sally saw him off, Louis hurried toward the magic battle training grounds.

People were already packed into the surrounding area. Everyone at the festival had shown up, and they were all pressing in at once.

Just then, Louis saw a giant magic circle expand on the other side of the crowd. A huge spear of light appeared at its center, as thick as a log.

Maintaining the spear of shining white light was a female student with her brick-colored hair tied back—the great genius of Minerva's, Carla Maxwell, the Starspear Witch.

That spear—made of high-density light—was the origin of her title, the Starspear. It was a light spell—an element almost no one in the kingdom could use.

The Starspear's power was said to rival that of the sixfold-strengthened magecraft of Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage—a Sage said to possess the greatest firepower in the kingdom. There was no doubt it was one of the most powerful spells in all of Ridill.

Louis watched Carla from afar. Despite her maintaining such complex and powerful magecraft, her face still looked as relaxed as that of a cat dozing in the sunlight.

"Starspear, pierce," she said, her voice light and carefree.

At her command, the glittering spear shot up into the heavens. It pierced the thick cloud layer, and in the bright-red evening sky, it scattered starlike particles behind it.

*Whoa…* thought Louis.

The six main elements of magecraft used in the Kingdom of Ridill were fire, water, wind, earth, lightning, and ice. Light and dark magecraft existed in theory, but little was known about them. At most, one or two prominent mage families held tidbits of that knowledge. They kept them secret, though, passing them down through the generations.

And Carla Maxwell, the Starspear Witch, had independently developed such a spell and cast it, all on her own.

Carla hadn't come from any prominent mage family. In fact, she wasn't even a noble. The fact that such a girl had developed a light spell, in her teens, no less, had sent waves through the magecraft world.

She was the young mage *everyone* had their eyes on. They had

no doubt she would join the Seven Sages eventually.

*If I'd seen that back when I first came to Minerva's*, thought Louis, *I don't think I would have realized what was so amazing about it…* Back then, he probably would have thought it was just a flashy spell that sparkled.

But the more he studied, the more the awesome talents of those around him became apparent. As did the fact that he couldn't begin to compare.

Louis wasn't one to let that crush his spirit, though.

"There you are, Louis Miller."

Suddenly, a voice called out to him from the side. It was Maeger, his teacher.

"Did you see that, Ms. Maeger?" he asked. "The Starspear? That was wild. I could layer barrier upon barrier, and I doubt they'd protect me from *that*… I don't even think I could compete in mana density. If I was going to block it, I'd need a different approach, like dismantling the formula as it made contact with the barrier, or—"

"I've recommended you to Professor Rutherford's laboratory."

The abruptness of her comment made him freeze for a few seconds. "Eh?" he managed.

He knew about the laboratory system in the advanced course. But if Louis was going to join one, he wanted it to be Maeger's.

"I'd rather apply to join *your* lab, Ms. Maeger."

"Actually, I'll be retiring this year."

"What?!" Louis's jaw dropped. "You never told me that!"

"Well, I'm getting on in years. I don't have the energy left to keep on scolding problem children."

Louis knew Maeger was wearing out her throat yelling at him on a daily basis, so he shut his mouth.

It was an unusually prudent gesture, at which Maeger returned a gentle smile. "Your presentation today was marvelous. And I'm proud to have my name on your handouts. I doubt anyone will contest your wish to move on to the advanced course."

"……"

"Once you do, apprentice yourself to Mr. Rutherford. The Starspear Witch belongs to his lab as well. You will learn much."

Louis fell into a sulky silence. He didn't know what to say at times like these. He hesitated for a few moments, but in the end, he decided to be bold and act like the problem child he was. "I'm gonna become a pretty spectacular mage one day, you know."

"I'm sure you will. You have what it takes."

"And once I'm a high mage… I've got it—I'll call myself 'the Barrier Mage.' Then you can tell all the kids on your block about me. About how you're the Barrier Witch, and you taught me all I know about barriers."

Maeger raised a hand to her mouth, then let out a breathy laugh. "You talk a big game, Louis Miller. You'll need to change your ways and study even more diligently. Naturally, any destructive acts, violence against classmates, and petty theft, is out of the question…"

She trailed off as Louis, wearing that baggy uniform, averted his eyes. As she realized something, Maeger's brows lifted, and she peered into his face.

"Louis Miller, look at me. That uniform. Don't tell me…"

With the Starspear demonstration over, the spectators were dispersing. Someone came running toward them, weaving through the crowd. It was Rutherford.

"Hey, you brat. I heard about how you hung Adolph Faron from a tree half-naked and tortured him with smoke. Get to the faculty room. *Now.*"

"Huh?" said Louis, feigning innocence. "I guess someone was trying to make smoked meat out of him."

Rutherford's punch sent him flying as Maeger cast her eyes to the sky in resignation.



CHAPTER 9

# The Problem Child and the Golden Gorilla

It was the fourth autumn since Louis Miller came to Minerva's.

During his three years in the intermediate course, he'd overwritten his bad behavior with excellent grades—then almost ruined it with even worse behavior. Still, the problem child miraculously moved up into the advanced course.

The attempted smoking of Adolph Faron would go down as one of the worst incidents in Minerva's history, but since Adolph held part of the blame for burning Louis's uniform, Louis had just *barely* been permitted to advance.

And right this moment, as a first-year in the advanced course, he was…

"Go to hell, old rat!"

"Don't you misbehave in *my* laboratory, you little brat!"

…energetically rampaging in Rutherford's room until the teacher knocked him to the floor.

Carla, who had become a research student that year, looked down at the bruise-covered Louis as he rolled around, then she sighed. "Master, don't you think you're going a little too far?"

"Too far? Hah. There's no such thing where this whelp is concerned. The stick is the best way to get him to grow. I'm *instructing* him—in the way that suits him best."

It had been nearly a month since Louis had enrolled in the advanced course. In that time, he had learned one new spell after another, smoothly improving his abilities. He'd further strengthened both his spells' precision and their power.

Even joining Rutherford's laboratory had wound up a net positive

for Louis. The man didn't generally order him to do this or that. One could say he respected his students' autonomy, but the truth was, he just didn't want to do any extra work. Louis had to come up with assignments on his own. But Louis enjoyed pursuing his curiosities more than doing whatever tasks someone else might assign, so Rutherford's teaching style suited him.

Nevertheless, he brawled with his teacher on a daily basis, and his life now involved a lot more fresh bruises than before.

"Try not to fight so much." Carla pressed a moist handkerchief to Louis's swollen cheek. "I'll be away for a while, so I won't be able to stop it."

When the numbness finally wore off, Louis held the handkerchief himself and looked at Carla. "You goin' on a trip again?"

"Yeah. I wanted to travel to the eastern provinces next. Dragon's Peak is around there, too."

Carla, now a research student, wore neither a school uniform nor a robe but heavy clothing suited for working outdoors. The genius who had developed the Starspear seemed to prefer the open air to staying cooped up in her room. She'd even spent the long summer break out measuring mana density, large bags on her back.

"Oh, right," she said. "I heard the first year of the advanced course is getting its very own prince."

Louis remembered hearing something about that, too. Lionel, First Prince of the Kingdom of Ridill, would be enrolling, and the whole school was abuzz. Louis was curious why royalty would bother coming to Minerva's; complicated political affairs seemed to be involved. The original plan had been for the prince to enroll when advanced course classes began, but official matters had delayed him until the end of this month.

"Make sure not to pick a fight with the prince, okay?" said Carla. "Or say mean things to him. Or punch him."

"In fact, don't even get close to him, Louis," said Rutherford. "Make a mistake and you'll be executed for real."

Louis replied to their warnings with a sardonic grin and a shrug. "Hah. Nothing good comes from royalty anyway. I wouldn't get near him even if you told me to."

* * *

On his way back from the research building to his classroom, Louis encountered someone he really wished he hadn't—Adolph Faron, forehead bared, black hair parted down the middle.

During their time in the intermediate course, Adolph had picked many a fight with Louis, only to have the tables turned on him every time—and yet the boy *still* had it out for him.

He stopped in front of Louis. "Out of the way, uncultured bumpkin," he demanded.

"How about *you* move?" retorted Louis. "Exhibitionist."

"I've had enough of your crazy talk. Cross-dresser."

As violent rage welled up inside Louis and he balled his hands into fists, someone came running up from behind and got their arms around him.

"Fighting isn't the answer! I don't know what problem you have with one another, but take a few steps back, calm down, and talk it out!"

The arms restraining Louis were thick—muscular enough to hold him down. Whoever they belonged to had been through some kind of physical training.

Realizing his thoughtless flailing wouldn't get him out of the pinion, Louis brought his head down, then whipped it upward into the person behind him. "Don't get in our way!"

"Whoa?!"

A *crack* sounded at the back of his head, and the person restraining Louis let out a muffled grunt. He didn't release him, though. So Louis decided to do it again. But as he tilted his neck down, he heard a hoarse voice from behind him.

"Prince Lionel…!"

*Lionel?*

Wasn't that the name of the first prince who was supposed to be enrolling at their school? Louis looked at Adolph. The boy's face had gone pale, and he was trembling. He looked like he'd just accepted

his own imminent death.

A moment later, a black-haired boy wearing a Minerva's uniform ran up to them. "Sir, are you all right?" he asked the boy restraining Louis, his voice low and hoarse.

"Yes, I'm quite well…" He looked at Louis. "Have you calmed down a little?" he asked, before letting him go.

Louis stopped his tantrum and turned. Standing before him was a stern-looking blond-haired boy in the same uniform as he was. Blood dripped from his nose. His face was familiar.

*It's that golden gorilla…!*

Louis had never expected that the golden gorilla he'd sold a bowl of soup to half a year ago would turn out to be the first prince. He was stunned.

Across from him, Adolph was still shaking. He quickly dropped to his knees and lowered his head.

"Please… Please forgive my rudeness, Your Royal Highness!" he wailed. "Hey, Louis—you bow, too!"

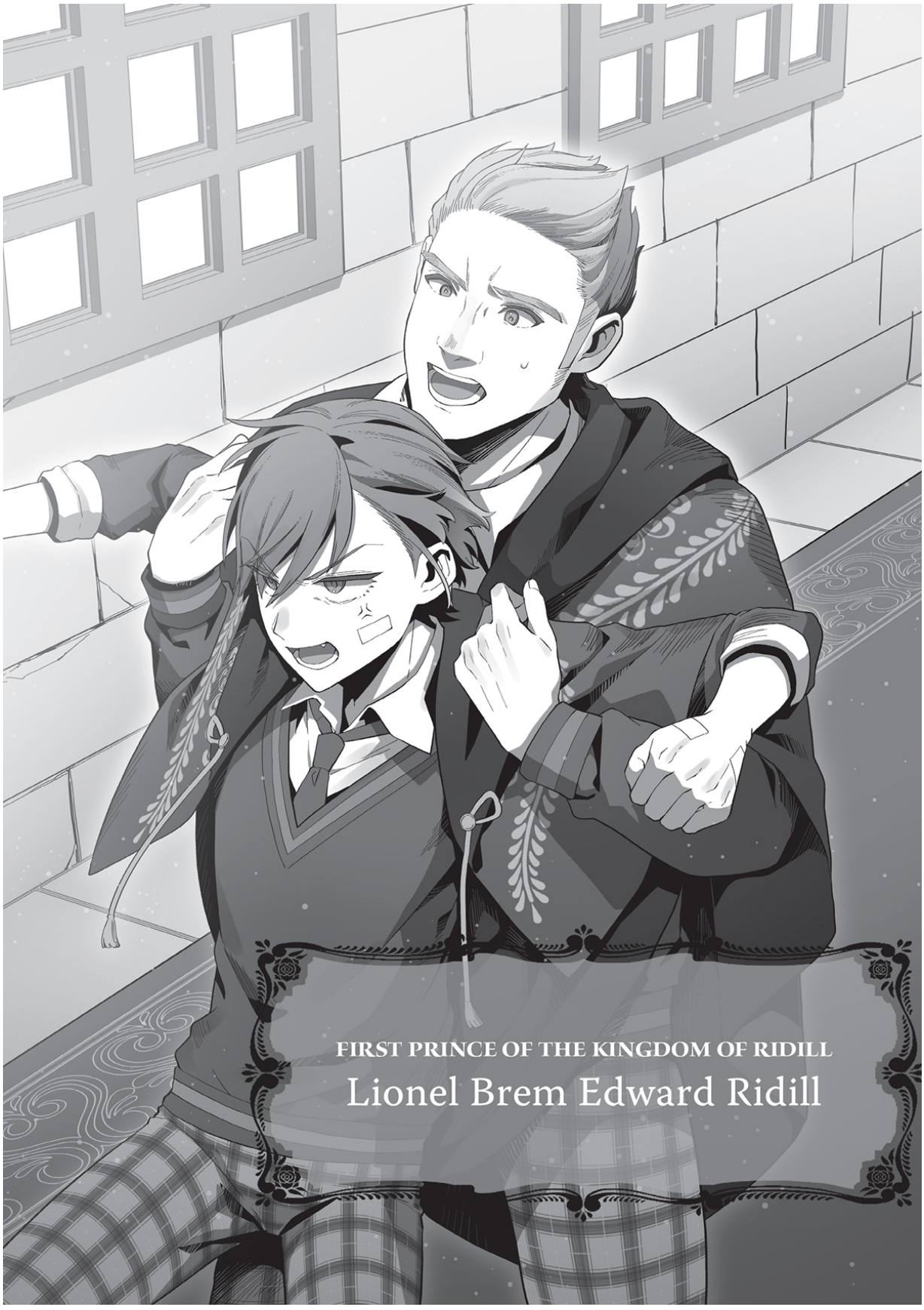
Lionel, nose still bleeding, shook his head. "No need to apologize. I was just passing by and stuck my neck into your business."

*You did more than stick your neck in*, thought Louis. Princes weren't supposed to go around mediating fights between delinquents.

Rutherford had told him to stay away from this boy. But he'd involved himself in Louis's fight all on his own. How could Louis have predicted that?

A stir quickly rose up around them. The teachers rushed over, calling Lionel's name. One of them yelled, "Not you again, Louis Miller!"

*Better scram before this gets ugly*, thought Louis—just before someone firmly grasped his arm. It was the black-haired servant who had followed Lionel here. Like the prince, he wore a Minerva's uniform, but he kept a sword at his waist, too.


FIRST PRINCE OF THE KINGDOM OF RIDILL
Lionel Brem Edward Ridill



Holding Louis's arm with his left hand, the boy placed his right on the hilt of his weapon so that he could draw it at any moment.

"…I see you're wearing your uniform today," the boy remarked.

"I'll rip your eyeballs out," threatened Louis, baring his teeth.

The teachers surrounded them, looking horrified.

A few minutes later, Louis had been knocked to the ground by Rutherford and ordered—along with Adolph—to go pull weeds behind the school building.

* * *

The day after the commotion, the golden gorilla—First Prince Lionel—arrived, together with his servant, at the same first-year classroom as Louis.

"I'm Lionel Brem Edward Ridill. I'm looking forward to learning with you all!" The tension in the room was thick as Lionel continued, his attitude sincere. "I know this may be a difficult request, but I'd love it if you could interact with me as a regular classmate, and as a friend."

"…I'm Nate Wall, his attendant," said the other boy in a near whisper. "Despite what the prince said, I would advise you all to exercise caution. Thank you."

Lionel's thick eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Nate! I told you there is no need for anyone to be cautious around me—!"

"Sir, for many, exercising caution brings peace of mind. I humbly ask your understanding."

"Hrm. Is that how it is…? I'm sorry." Lionel withdrew without complaint. Their relationship seemed a bit unusual for a master and servant.

The Kingdom of Ridill had three princes in all, but they were far apart in age; Second Prince Felix would be seven this year, and Third Prince Albert was turning three.

For that reason, many saw Lionel as the only real candidate to

succeed, and several students—the children of prominent nobles—officially greeted him during the break. As Louis observed them, he was a bit surprised.

*…Less than I thought*, he noted to himself.

Louis had expected everyone to be falling over each other, swarming the prince, trying to get into his good graces, but almost nobody did. Even Adolph Faron, who loved to stand out, gave Lionel only a simple greeting, then apologized for the day before and went back to his seat.

"Guess they're scared of his gorilla face," Louis mumbled.

"That was very rude."

He felt a hand pull on his ear. Rosalie was staring at him with a frightening look.

"I mean, he's a prince," Louis complained. "Isn't everyone supposed to be going nuts right now?"

"No. They know it isn't their place to do so."

"Are you sure that's all it is?" asked Louis, lowering his voice.

He honestly wasn't interested in the affairs of noble society, but he also didn't want to get involved in any unnecessary trouble at school. Of course, if someone picked a fight with him, he'd always rise to the occasion.

"The fanciest school in the kingdom is Serendia Academy, isn't it?" he continued. "Why didn't he go there? He must be really interested in magecraft to specifically choose Minerva's."

"The Duke of Clockford is the director of Serendia Academy," explained Rosalie. "He's the second prince's grandfather. And Minerva's is fairly neutral, politically speaking…"

"Hmm." Louis pursed his lips, forgetting that they were split. He scowled in pain. Rutherford had punched him so much yesterday that it hurt literally everywhere.

*In other words*, he thought, licking his cut lip, *Duke Clockford and the first prince don't like each other. This duke guy must really want to get his cute little grandson into the big chair.*

Louis had heard that Second Prince Felix was sickly, though. Apparently, the boy lived at his grandfather's mansion under constant care. No prince that frail could ever take the throne. *Or*

*maybe the duke just wants to use him as a puppet.*

Either way, it had nothing to do with Louis. He did have something else to ask Rosalie, though. "Hey, does Adolph's family suck up to this Duke Clockford guy?"

"…I've heard they're on good terms, yes."

*I see.* That had Louis convinced: Those like Adolph, whose parents were close to Duke Clockford, couldn't simply be friends with Lionel. Nor could they act rudely to a prince, of course. That was why Adolph had kept his greeting minimal and was trying to maintain his distance.

Louis looked around the classroom and saw a surprising number of other kids acting the same way. *The second and third princes must have a lot of power behind them*, he mused idly.

* * *

"Today, you will all compete in one-on-one magic battles. Please pair up with someone nearby."

Solow, the magic battle teacher, was a woman in her midforties with a hard expression and a militaristic attitude. But she could be surprisingly whimsical, and she tended to switch up how she arranged the students from day to day. Some days she would decide teams herself, others, she'd have everyone draw lots. Today, she let everyone pair up on their own.

As soon as the word "nearby" left Solow's lips, the other students all moved away from Louis. The message was painfully obvious—they *really* didn't want to fight him.

*Well, that's fine, too, I guess.* Whoever was left over would fight the teacher, which was what Louis wanted anyway.

Solow generally had another teacher assisting her for magic battle class. Today, instead of Rutherford, it was a younger mage. Louis expected he'd end up fighting one of the two.

…Until Lionel addressed him, that is. "Excuse me," he said.

"Would you be willing to fight me in a magic battle?"

"…Huh?" Louis frowned. There were grave consequences for incurring a royal's displeasure. He understood why nobody else wanted to pair up with Lionel.

But the prince's attendant Nate took this class with him. The black-haired boy had extricated himself from the ring of students and now stood over in one corner of the training grounds.

Louis gestured toward him with his jaw. "Can't you fight him?"

"Nate is exempt from magic battle class," explained Lionel. "It's so he can protect me."

*Right*, thought Louis. There was a greater risk of assassination while they were outside battling than when they were inside, studying at their desks.

Everyone around them watched their exchange with bated breath. Eventually, as Louis was tossing the idea around, Lionel straightened up, put his hand on his breast, and said, "I am Lionel Brem Edward Ridill."

"Yeah, I know," replied Louis.

"Would you do me the favor of telling me your name?"

*So earnest*, he thought, *making sure to give his own name before asking for someone else's*. "It's Louis Miller," he mumbled, looking exhausted.

"I see. A valiant name indeed!"

Louis honestly wasn't sure what to make of the guy. He'd never met anyone like him before. Were all royals like this?

Lionel watched Louis with wide, round eyes, then something occurred to him. "Ah, yes. I knew I'd met you somewhere before."

"…Eh?"

"You were manning the soup stall at the festival half a year ago, weren't you? Why were you dressed like that?"

Louis grimaced. Veins rising to the surface of his temple, he quickly walked straight up to Lionel. "You'd better drop that right now. Fine. Magic battle. Let's do it."

Louis Miller, the preeminent Problem Child of Minerva's, was about to fight the prince. Many shuddered at the unexpected development, with a few who thought poorly of Louis snickering as

they imagined what sort of punishment he'd receive.

Meanwhile, Solow adopted her usual bold attitude. "Very well!" she announced. "We'll do the first five pairs now! Come with me to the starting position!"

Limited class time meant that several one-on-one magic battles had to take place at the same time. And while the intermediate course had used a specific clearing in the woods, the advanced course would be using much more of the forest—obstacles and all—in order to train for actual combat.

That also meant that, as long as you hid behind the trees, the teachers wouldn't see you, and you could do whatever you wanted.

Louis opened and closed his scraped-up fists. *I'll dodge and parry for a bit, and when it's time to land the finishing blow, I'll just do it behind the trees so nobody sees.*

Students could apply to bring in personal weapons or magical items for advanced course magic battles. Louis, though, had chosen to forgo even his short staff. While having it made his mana control more stable, it got in the way of his more physical methods. He couldn't bear to think what might happen if he accidentally broke the thing.

Lionel, on the other hand, had gotten permission from the teacher to bring in a sword. The magic battle barrier nullified physical attacks, and that went for swords, too. *Which can mean only one thing.*

"Begin!" announced Solow.

Instantly, Lionel drew his sword and began to chant. As he finished, red flames exploded around his blade. This was blademagic, a type of imbuement magecraft that infused objects with mana.

Blademagic was popular in the neighboring Kingdom of Landor, but you didn't see it very often at Minerva's. It boasted shorter chants than regular magecraft and could be maintained for long periods of time at minimal mana expense. However, it demanded a high degree of skill in both magecraft and swordsmanship.

"Here I come!"

With a loud cry, Lionel dashed toward Louis. By then, Louis had

already finished a chant of his own.

He lifted his fist and blocked Lionel's downswing. It wasn't just his hand, of course. He'd created a shield-shaped defensive barrier on the surface of his fist, a little larger than his palm.

Punching people was faster than flinging attack spells all over. That was why Louis had developed his own fighting style that incorporated the kind of physical strikes allowed by the nullifying barrier.

Almost no mages punched enemies with barriers. It confused most opponents when they first saw it, making them vulnerable.

Lionel, however, remained calm. When Louis blocked his opening strike, the prince went for another, this time aimed at the left side of Louis's body.

Louis jumped backward, chanting all the while, then erected a shield barrier on the top of his right foot and kicked.

"Yaaah!"

Lionel kept his arm close to his side as he blocked the kick. "Urgh…," he grunted. "Good one."

In a magic battle, your mana depleted according to the damage you took. The damage from Louis's barrier kick counted, so it must have taken a chunk out of the prince's mana. The blademagic flames flickered and swayed, growing slightly dimmer.

*What the…? Is he—?*

Ignoring the damage he'd just taken, Lionel stepped in deep and loosed a slash at Louis's left shoulder. At the moment, Louis was keeping up the barriers on his right hand and foot—and the prince had noticed the weak defenses on his left side.

Louis immediately launched himself into a slide, dodging the slash by moving straight past Lionel, then regaining his footing. Immediately, the prince struck again. Louis blocked this one—a downward strike from overhead—with his right hand.

As Lionel's blademagic clashed with Louis's defensive barriers, the latter didn't budge, while the former was clearly losing force.

Now Louis was certain. *I knew it… He's got a good sword arm, but his magecraft is pretty shabby!*

Lionel was using blademagic because they were inside a barrier

that nullified all physical strikes. Outside of it, he'd be more than strong enough with just a sword.

But each time he swung and Louis blocked it with a barrier, his mana trickled down. And that *really* frustrated Louis.

Devising a new plan, Louis continued to dodge Lionel's slashes, all the while guiding him deeper into the woods, little by little. The magic battle barrier covered a large area of the forest, but Louis knew exactly how far it reached.

*Any moment now…*

As they came within mere feet of the barrier, Lionel's blademagic lost its shine. The prince's stern features twisted into a scowl, and he hung his head, frustrated.

"…I don't have the mana to maintain my blademagic," he said. "I have lost!"

"Come on. It's a waste to settle this with a simple magic battle, don't you think?" asked Louis, grinning. He pointed beyond the barrier with his thumb. "Let's continue this outside the barrier."

Lionel's eyes widened in confusion. Despite his stern countenance, such expressions looked oddly charming on him.

Ignoring the prince's surprise, Louis exited the barrier and beckoned to him. "Hurry it up!"

"You would have us engage in a pure contest of strength?" asked Lionel.

"Yeah, 'cause you're so bad at magecraft. This magic battle is boring. Let's have a regular one."

Lionel grunted at Louis's scathing criticism, but he met the boy's gaze nevertheless. The prince's eyes were a beautiful sea-blue color.

"I see. You're giving yourself a handicap, since I'm inexperienced with magecraft."

Lionel breathed out sharply through his nose and placed his sword on the ground. Louis figured he could have simply tossed it aside, but the prince did everything carefully. *As expected of a royal*, he thought.

The prince, his footsteps heavy, left the magic battle barrier, then turned to face Louis.

"I accept your challenge! Let us begin, Louis Miller!"

Louis grinned with satisfaction and pounded his right fist into his left palm, producing a clear *smack*. "Just what I was…hoping for!"

He dove at Lionel, attempting to drive the heel of his palm into the prince's jaw. But Lionel caught it in his own large hand. Louis decided to throw his other fist, too. The prince stopped that one as well. The fight had become a pure contest of strength.

Lionel was clearly blessed with a better constitution and build. His muscles weren't just there for show. He was well trained and had a body to match.

The prince groaned as his thick arms drove Louis back. "Hrrrrghhhhh!"

Louis, not wanting to lose, put all his strength into his fists, as if trying to crush the prince's hands. "Raaaahhhhhhhh!"

He dug in his heels, braced himself, and then leaned his head back—to break the stalemate with a headbutt.

Realizing this, Lionel gritted his teeth and pushed his own forehead forward.

*Wham!* The sound was like two boulders ramming together.

For a few seconds, neither of them moved.

But Louis was the first to fall over. His eyes had rolled up into the back of his head.

* * *

When Louis regained consciousness, he saw two sets of eyes peering down at him: Lionel's were worried, while Rosalie's were exasperated. The difference was stark.

"Ah, you're awake! Dr. Woodman, Louis has awoken!" Lionel cried out in that uncomfortably loud voice of his. Rosalie fixed Louis with a frigid stare.

When he sat up, a cloth filled with ice fell to the floor with a wet thump. Rosalie quickly picked it up and pressed it to his forehead.

She was angry. Quietly angry, but angry all the same.

"What were you thinking, headbutting Prince Lionel?" she asked.

*It was the only way to win. Even though I lost.* Louis swallowed his excuse, though. He knew that if he argued, he'd only make Rosalie angrier.

For now, he stayed quiet and held the ice pack to the bump on his forehead. Then he looked between Rosalie and Lionel. The prince's gaze was uncomfortably warm, while Rosalie's was icy cold —complete opposites.

Next to them, Woodman closed his book. "Prince Lionel carried you all the way here on his back, Miller. You gave this old man quite a fright."

"Seriously?" Louis grimaced. "Someone should have stopped him."

According to Woodman, though, the sight of a desperate Lionel running through school with Louis on his back wasn't the kind of thing anyone felt comfortable interrupting.

Apparently, Lionel had been talking to him while he was still unconscious—well, more like *yelling*, really. "Raaaahhhh! Snap out of it! Get a grip!" Louis had never been so embarrassed in his life. He was speechless.

Woodman crossed his legs and shrugged. "Hard to believe you were carried all the way here by a handsome storybook prince. If I were a girl, my heart would have skipped a beat. Though you do have an awfully big lump on your head now."

"Yeah, from headbutting that stupid prince. And losing," replied Louis sardonically.

Lionel, who was sitting down, suddenly looked up. Then he put his hands on his knees and hastily bowed. "My apologies!" he exclaimed. "It would seem my head is as hard as a stone!"

"Sir, you don't need to apologize," said Rosalie coldly. "In fact, you needn't concern yourself at all."

Lionel frowned, his thick brows knotting. "But Rosalie! I'm the one who knocked him unconscious!"

"Louis only got what he deserved."

"Hey, wait a minute," interrupted Louis, looking between the two of them.

To tell the truth, he'd been curious about something ever since waking up. Rosalie was a very earnest, serious girl. And yet, despite being right next to royalty, she wasn't acting very formal. She was *polite*, of course, but she seemed somehow familiar with him.

The same went for Lionel. And he was on a first-name basis with her, too. Louis couldn't let that slide. "…You two are friends?"

Rosalie and Lionel nodded at almost the same time.

"I've met him several times through my father's job," explained Rosalie.

"Indeed," said Lionel. "She also showed me around the school festival."

"…Huh. Really? I see." Louis frowned. Keeping the ice to his forehead, he flopped back down onto the bed. Then he rolled over, meaning to turn his back to the two of them—only to come face-to-face with Lionel's attendant, Nate.

"Gyah?! Where'd you come from?!" cried Louis in surprise.

Nate, who had been hiding his presence this entire time, answered like a whispering wind. "…Queen Vilma ordered me to watch over the prince, since he's a bit mischievous. I can let a few things slide, but if you could restrain yourself, it would really help… I don't want anything too dangerous to happen…"

As he whispered, his face remained as impassive as always. Louis thought he'd be angry at the delinquent who'd picked a fight with his beloved prince, but the boy was so expressionless that it was hard to read any emotion in his face.

Louis stayed silent, and Nate continued, his voice weak. "I've told everyone that you tripped during the magic battle, and that is how you were wounded. You fell, hit your head, and the prince carried you away. Rumors are spreading like wildfire…but you have only yourself to blame."

Louis sat up cross-legged on the bed and glared at Nate. "I can fight *you* next time if you want, you know."

"I'd rather not. It would be troublesome if I accidentally killed you…"

For a boy with such a small voice, this attendant had a lot of nerve. Why was that?

"…Please just think of me as a wall that happens to speak from time to time."

On the other side of Louis's bed, Lionel spoke up. "No need to be like that, Nate. We should both openly enjoy our lives here at school!"

"You may have forgotten, sir, but I'm a bit too old to attend the advanced course…"

"Eh?" grunted Louis, narrowing his eyes at Nate.

The boy had a plain face and short black hair. He was of average height and build; nothing about him particularly stood out. He appeared to be in his midteens. To be honest, Lionel, with his stern features, looked even older than he did.

"I'll be twenty-seven this year," said Nate. "I've only been allowed to enroll at Minerva's as a special exception—to guard the prince."

Louis unconsciously pressed his hand to his throbbing forehead and moaned. "From today forth, you'd better start calling yourself 'old man.'"

"Twenty-seven?" cackled Woodman. "If you ask *this* old man, he's still far too young for that."

* * *

"Wow, Louis! That's a big lump! It's all puffy and swollen!"

The day after losing his headbutt battle with Lionel was a holiday, so Louis had come to Goah's Place a little early in the afternoon to help out.

Sally kept poking the bump on his forehead. "Did that hurt? Hey, did it?"

Louis shoved the carrot he'd just finished peeling at Sally and yelled, "Of course it hurts, you nitwit! Quit touching it! And I'm done peeling these carrots!"

"Oh, no! Louis, you're so *scary*. Anyway, it's about to get crowded in here, so go take everyone's orders!"

Louis clucked his tongue and looked into the store proper. Noon was approaching, and the seats were steadily filling up. In another thirty minutes, the place would be mobbed.

The door chime jingled. More customers. Carrying plates of finished food, Louis looked toward the entrance and called out, "Welcome to Goah's… Huh?"

Three people had just walked inside: Lionel, wearing plain clothes, as if no one would recognize him, along with Nate and Rosalie.

As Louis stood there, baffled, Lionel called back. "We're here for some food!"

"……"

Louis silently stared at Nate and Rosalie.

Nate spoke, his voice small. "Please think of me as a wall that happens to eat food."

"I guess walls can do *anything* these days, huh? Hey, Rosalie, what are you all doing here, anyway?"

Rosalie, who was out of her uniform and wearing a blouse and skirt, spoke unusually quickly. "The pri—er, *he* wanted to take a look around town, so I'm acting as his guide…"

"Indeed!" added Lionel. "Also, that soup at the school festival was sublime. I had Nate figure out which shop it came from!"

The lump on Louis's forehead began to sting. He pressed a hand to it, not knowing how to respond.

The owner, Goah, called out in surprise from behind the counter. "Friends o' yours, Li'l Lou? Hey, Lowe, here's a first! Friends! The boy has friends!"

"Oh, your friends are here? That's nice," said Lowe genially.

*No it's not*, thought Louis.

It seemed even Sally wanted to get in on the action. "Wait, they're your friends, Louis? Hey, there's even a girl! Is she your girlfriend? I need to know!"

To top it all off, even the *patrons* started whistling and grinning. "Hey, Li'l Lou!" one called out. "Which one are you really after? Sally or that girl?"

As Sally and the guests carried on, Rosalie muttered the words

"Li'l Lou" to herself. Nate distanced himself from the situation, again claiming he was merely a wall. And Lionel—standing perfectly straight—asked Louis for some bean soup, his voice stupidly loud.

At last, Louis grasped his head with both hands and began to wail.

"Everybody sit the heck down! Shut up! And eat your food!"



CHAPTER 10

# The Problem Child's Alcohol War

It was Louis's fifth autumn at Minerva's, and the year's first snow had fallen a little earlier than usual. People were expecting the coming winter to be especially cold.

Some snow still remained in the shade, and a chill wind blew through town as Louis, now a second-year student in the advanced course, walked along with his roommate Owen, bantering.

"Crap," said Louis. "It's definitely gonna pile up again this year."

"And the job of shoveling it always seems to land on us, huh?"

"It's because you have bad luck."

"Me? I think you mean *you*."

Owen was now as tall as Louis, and he'd begun to grow out of his scrawniness, too. He must have been working out in secret, trying to reach his goal of joining the Magic Corps. Owen had moved into the advanced course this year and intended to join the Corps when he graduated, so he was busier than ever with schoolwork.

The two of them had come to town to restock on writing implements and so on before the first semester exams. Pens, ink, and replacement pen tips were available for purchase at school, too, but Owen said he wanted to buy a Shelgria card to send to his parents, come winter. Louis also wanted to buy some consumables and alcohol on the cheap before the cold really set in.

Though Louis was now accustomed to life at Minerva's, he still found drinking spirits the best way to warm up when the weather got cold. Owen had been appalled at first, but now he held his tongue. He probably saw Louis's penchant for jam and spirits as similar to his own love of coffee—luxuries neither of them could go without.

Eventually, the pair entered a familiar general store and began rooting around for what they needed. The writing utensils here were

always cheap; their prices didn't fluctuate much. But from time to time, the store would stock rarer wares, making it fun just to look around.

Today, there was an unusual bottle of ink sitting in the most prominent spot on the shelves. From the label, it appeared to be a high-quality item. A sign beside it read BIG SELLER!

Louis cocked his head. "Why would a bunch of people be buying the same ink?"

"Oh, I thought everyone at Minerva's knew about it, sir!" said the middle-aged owner. "The blue ink is for love charms!" The man had a large gut and a friendly tone as he spoke to them over the counter. "Write a love letter to the girl you like in blue ink, and your feelings are sure to be requited! I know of ten people who have already been successful!"

*A charm? That's stupid*, Louis thought, casually checking the price. His eyes went wide. It was ten times as much as regular black ink.

Louis very carefully returned the bottle to the shelf.

"Everyone loves charms like that," said Owen, who was busy picking out a card. He didn't sound very interested. "Like the one where you drip morning dew over a flower accessory. Or put a piece of paper with all your wishes on it under your pillow to make them come true."

Owen didn't sound very excited about the topic, but his words reminded Louis of something.

"Wait, I once saw a piece of paper sticking out from under your pillow with the words 'get into the Magic Corps' written on it. You mean that was—?"

"Why were you looking at that?"

"Hey, if you didn't make your roommate clean up your messes, maybe I wouldn't have. Blame yourself," said Louis casually. After double-checking how much he'd have left to buy alcohol, he proceeded to purchase the cheapest black ink they had, along with a new pen nib.

* * *

One day at the end of autumn, as the second snow fell at Minerva's, Rosalie Verde hurried toward the infirmary. She'd heard Rutherford had punched Louis and sent him there yet again.

Woodman generally left Louis to fend for himself, and Rosalie would come treat him instead.

*I'm becoming pretty good at this…*, she thought. *And getting nowhere with my magecraft abilities.* She grimaced as she opened the door to the infirmary.

Woodman was gone, which was unusual. Instead, she found Louis—covered in scrapes—doing something with a bunch of bottles. Lionel was trying to stop him, while the prince's attendant Nate was standing to one side, blending in with the wall.

As Rosalie stood in the doorway, unsure of who to address first, Lionel spoke up. "Rosalie, perfect timing! Please stop Louis!"

"…What's he done this time?" she asked.

"Eh?" said Louis unhappily. He looked at her, his lower lip jutting out.

He looked vicious and threatening, but that was nothing unusual. Rosalie met his gaze impassively.

Louis grunted in irritation and scratched his short hair. "I haven't done anything yet."

"Which means you're *about* to do something." Rosalie looked to Lionel for an explanation.

Lionel was a tall boy with stern features, but he was kind to everyone he met. His natural sincerity must have been driving him to stop Louis from getting out of hand.

"Louis, just calm down. Don't rush this," he said.

"I *am* calm," Louis insisted. "I'm so angry, I came back around to being calm. I try to be a good, meek student to that stupid old man once in my life, and he starts getting cocky!"

"When have you ever been meek?"

"Shut up!"

That was hardly the proper way to address royalty, but Lionel didn't seem offended. He was earnestly trying to placate his friend. Listening to the two of them gave Rosalie a pretty good idea of what had happened.

"…Something between you and Rutherford, then?" she asked.

Nate, over by the wall, rasped out, "Remember the surprise inspection this morning?"

"Yes," she said.

"They found several bottles of alcohol among his things."

While it wasn't codified into law, Ridillian society generally stipulated that a person must be sixteen before consuming drinks with low alcohol content, such as wine and beer, and twenty—a full adult—before imbibing spirits. Louis had probably been carrying around the latter, like an idiot.

But that didn't mean it would have been fine if he'd had something weaker. Minerva's Mage Training Institution was a prestigious school—its halls were basically sacred ground. Of course the faculty was going to confiscate any alcohol they found.

Louis, however, didn't seem to understand. He sat there, sulking.

"Back home, alcohol is safer to drink than water," he said.

Flood control projects were more advanced in Ridill than in other countries, and water and sewer services had developed quite a lot in the last few decades. Improvements lagged behind in the countryside, however, and many believed that alcohol was safer to drink than water—including Louis, apparently.

He was from the north, and Rosalie could easily imagine him thinking it was cheaper and faster to drink than to light a fire in the hearth. With how cold it had been these last few days, he'd probably wanted the alcohol to stave off the chill.

Rosalie put a hand to her brow and sighed. "You should have known they'd confiscate that stuff… And what is the delinquent trying to do now that Rutherford has taken away all his alcohol?"

Louis lifted one of the glass jars and swished around the liquid inside as his lips twitched up. So long as he stayed quiet, he had a pretty, girlish face. But now he wore an evil, scheming grin.

"Tonight, I'm gonna sneak into the old man's lab and swap *this*

for the stuff he took away."

"…And what's in there?" she asked.

"Water mixed with a laxative. I bet that old jerk is gonna have a big feast to go with all the alcohol he took from me. So I'll loosen up his bowels and make him really squirm!"

Louis Miller's creed was that, when crossed, he would pay the culprit back double. Some students had tried to make fun of him for his humble origins, but every single one had been sent packing, without exception. The jam-hunting incident in the cafeteria, the chucking of Terrence Abanethy into the cesspit, the attempted smoking of Adolph Faron—all were hot topics around school.

"I don't trust the taps anyway," said Louis. "Who knows what kind of crap someone could put in there? Alcohol is way safer."

"…I see," said Rosalie, voice lower than usual. She glanced at Lionel, expressionless. "Conversation will get us nowhere. Let's leave him to his devices, sir."

"Hrm? But Rosalie…" Lionel trailed off as he noticed the chill emanating from her.

"Let's get going," she said to the prince and his attendant, before walking to the exit.

Before she left, Louis called after her. "Hey, Rosalie, wait a second."

She stopped and turned around. Louis nimbly popped out of his seat, then got right up in her face and stared at her. That face—it'd be handsome, if only he'd shut up—was right in front of hers now, a mischievous glint in his grayish-purple eyes.

Flustered, Rosalie stood there as dry, cracked fingers brushed her cheek, then plucked out the pin holding her hair to the side. "I'm borrowing this. It'll help me pick the lock."

As the awful brat grinned, Rosalie fixed him with the coldest stare she'd ever given.

"I hope you get the thrashing of your life, Problem Child of Minerva's."

* * *

The stars of the winter sky glittered like silver sand as the full moon softly shone through the clouds, in sight one minute and out the next. It was a beautiful scene—the kind to make a person stop what they were doing and look up, entranced.

Louis, however, dressed in all black, didn't even spare a glance for it as he headed straight for the research building.

It was a still night, which posed a slight problem for Louis, since he was trying to sneak inside unnoticed. He would have liked some wind to help hide his footsteps.

He stopped in front of the school gate. Naturally, it was locked. It wasn't so high that he couldn't climb his way over it, but the top part was spiked like spears, to prevent intruders. The spikes even had *hooks* on the end to prevent easy removal, once impaled.

Louis removed the hairpin from his short hair and used a quick-chant to produce a small flame. Relying on its illumination, he stuck the pin into the lock's keyhole.

The flame wasn't strong enough to light up the keyhole all the way to the back, but you could get surprisingly far with such things by feel alone.

After grappling with it for a few minutes, Louis heard the lock click open and grinned.

*That was easy.* He opened the gate a tiny bit and slipped inside. *All right, here's where the real challenge begins.*

He already knew a teacher would be patrolling the first floor. Climbing up the wall and going in through a window would be safer. Fortunately, his destination—Gideon Rutherford's lab on the third floor—had its window open. Rutherford enjoyed smoking, and he often left the window open for ventilation, even in the winter.

Louis climbed up a nearby tree, then jumped from a branch to an ornament on a second-floor balcony, clinging to it. The motion caused the bottles hanging from his waist to clack together.

*…Ugh. Should've wrapped them in cloth.*

These bottles were the same as the confiscated ones, except they had water laced with laxative inside them. His objective was to swap them out with the other set. He couldn't have them breaking on his way there.

Louis was currently hanging onto the side of the balcony with both hands. He would have liked to give himself a nice swing and use the bounce backward to get up onto the balcony, but the bottles would likely break from all the jostling. Instead, he had to carefully pull himself up using arm strength alone.

*You know what would be perfect here? Flight magecraft.*

Using magecraft to propel oneself freely through the air would be extremely convenient, but the technique required very delicate mana control and a superb sense of balance. It consumed a great deal of mana, too, meaning you ran the risk of falling out of the sky mid-flight. It was a very difficult spell to use.

Louis had been splitting most of his time between practicing attack magecraft and strengthening his barrier techniques, but once he had those under control, he swore to himself that he'd learn flight magecraft too. If he could fly, he could *literally* look down on those who metaphorically looked down on him. It had to feel amazing.

Getting to Goah's Place would become much easier as well, and flight was great for skipping out on boring ceremonies. Maybe he could take Rosalie and Lionel along, and they could all skip class together way up in the sky. That sounded nice.

*…Nah, forget about Lionel. He's way too bulky to be worth the trouble.*

He was thinking about this and pulling himself up, when he suddenly heard voices from above. Louis was right below the window to his destination, and the sound was coming from inside.

*Are you kidding me? The old man's supposed to be in a different room right now…*, thought Louis, confused. He'd done his homework on this and everything. Then he remembered Rosalie's words.

*"I hope you get the thrashing of your life, Problem Child of Minerva's."*

*Damn it, Rosalie… She must've known Rutherford would be in his lab tonight!* He doubted she'd told the man about his scheme. But

she hadn't told Louis that he'd be in his lab, either. Though she wasn't scared of Louis, she didn't take his side in such things. She simply maintained a casual distance. That was how Rosalie Verde operated. *Seriously… That woman is something else!*

As Louis wondered what to do next, he sidled over to the wall and pressed his ear up against it. It sounded like Rutherford and Macragan were in the room, talking.

"…Oh? Where's that alcohol from? I thought you didn't drink." Macragan spoke in his usual tone—playing the fool, as always.

Rutherford gave him a brusque reply. "Took it from the brat."

"Ah. And you didn't get rid of it because…?"

"Because I'd be amenable to returning it—if he'd just write me a letter of apology, like an honest child."

*Who'd ever write you an apology letter, you stupid old rat?!* Louis mentally cursed. *Anyway, this is a problem… Two old men in the same room means they're gonna be talking forever.*

Was it best to leave and come back? No. He could already hear Rosalie teasing him about his failed mission. Louis wanted to show off the bottles and brag that it had been a piece of cake to get them back.

*Just get out of here, stupid old men…*

He listened more closely and heard Rutherford exhale. He must have been smoking his pipe, as usual. The smell of its sweet smoke drifted outside the window.

"I'm starting to hate this job, and all because of that brat," he grumbled. "He's such a handful."

"I see. You're quite soft on Miller," remarked Macragan.

"What? Have you gone senile?"

Louis found himself agreeing with the old rat. Rutherford had done nothing but frustrate and torture him ever since he'd come to Minerva's. The old man thought nothing of punching Louis in the head with his full strength. What about that was *soft*?

As Louis scrunched his nose up and frowned, the two men continued.

"But you do look after him," said Macragan.

"…The boy is a genius. He'll be a famous mage, with his name in

the history books one day."

Louis nearly slid off the wall. *Are you for real, old man? Did you just go insane? Are you going to die tomorrow?* he wondered, flabbergasted. Tobacco smoke drifted overhead, melting into the night's darkness.

Eventually, Rutherford continued, his voice earnest. "However, he is oblivious to the kindness other people show him."

Louis's fingers twitched as they held the wall.

Back when he'd first enrolled, he could've easily declared that he'd received no kindness at all from the people at Minerva's. But that wasn't true anymore—now several people came to mind. Rosalie. Lionel. His roommate Owen. The people at Goah's Place.

"He's extremely sensitive to hostility, but he doesn't recognize kindness. He probably doesn't even know how Prince Lionel and Rosalie Verde come to me and explain what happened every time he causes a problem."

*…What was that?* Louis clenched his teeth. He didn't know those two had been covering for him behind his back. He'd had no idea.

But how could he have known? Neither of them had ever said anything to him. All he ever got from them were things like *Calm down* and *Stop being so reckless*.

"Those who ignore the kindness of others hit a wall eventually. One day, he'll be all alone. Isolated."

Louis was confident in his own talents and abilities. Because of that, he'd always looked down on the weak banding together and trying to curry favor with the strong.

Louis was different from them. He didn't need to join hands with others or resort to flattery. He could manage on his own.

So why did Rutherford's words stab him like a knife to the heart?

As he dug deep, trying to find the reason, his nose suddenly started to tickle.

"Ah-*choo!* ……Oh."

With a sniffle, Louis slowly looked up.

And there, with one elbow on the window frame and a pipe in his mouth, was a wicked, bushy-browed old man whose eyes glinted far too sharply for someone his age. It was Gideon Rutherford, the

Mage of Violet Smoke.

Rutherford's lips curled around his pipe, forming a grin. "Hey, brat. Nice night, eh?"

Only then did Louis realize something was wrong with his body. For whatever reason, his nose was *incredibly* itchy. He assumed the man had imbued his pipe smoke with a sneeze-inducing effect.

Rutherford's tobacco smoke could pass through barriers. And Louis hadn't yet devised one capable of blocking it.

Louis sneezed again and again as he clung to the wall. He glared up at Rutherford, tears in his eyes. "Damn you, old…rat… *Ah-choo!* …You knew I was here the whole time! …*Ah-choo!*"

Rutherford looked at him, exasperated. "You sneeze like a girl."

"I'm gonna beat that decrepit rat body of yours into a coffin right now and send you straight to the church… *Ah-choo!* …Geh?!"

Louis's last sneeze had thrown him off-balance. His right hand shot out to grab a protrusion in the wall. But one hand couldn't hold him there for very long.

Rutherford grinned and took a pleasant pull from his pipe. "Say 'I'm sorry, Mr. Rutherford,' and I'll let you off with a thirty-page apology letter."

"Screw you! …*Ah-choo!*"

Louis searched for a way out of this situation. He was so angry, he felt like his blood vessels would burst. He couldn't fly, but he had some proficiency with wind magecraft. He could jump down, then cushion his fall with a gust at the moment of impact.

Unfortunately, another sneeze easily cut off his incantation. He started the chant again but found it was no use. He was sneezing too much.

"Old man… Bastard… *Ah-choo!*"

"Curse me all you want," said Rutherford, "but your adorable sneezes are rather ruining the effect. Not very intimidating, problem child."





He twirled his pipe in his hand, swirling smoke around. Louis, in an astonishing display of grip strength, stubbornness, and spite, continued to hang from the wall by one hand.

His efforts were in vain, however. After an hour, his strength ran out and he fell to the ground where he lay, beaten and spasming.

Rutherford dragged him away, bound him to a chair, and forced him to spend the entire night writing a one-hundred-page letter of apology.

* * *

Rumors about Louis Miller's infiltration of the research building spread like wildfire, but nobody was particularly surprised. Most of the students at Minerva's, Rosalie among them, just saw it as another in a long line of Louis-related incidents.

*He really can't help but cause trouble*, she thought.

The next day, Louis was absent from class, which was unusual. Rosalie figured that was an indication of how thorough a beating he'd gotten from Rutherford.

The day after that, Rosalie got up a little earlier than usual. She left her dormitory, then took a window seat in the lounge. She removed a teapot from her basket, as well as homemade scones, which she arranged on the table.

She wasn't very good at things like baking, but the results this time were decent. The scones had risen nicely and had cooked to a pleasing golden brown.

*I think this will do*, she thought as she looked at the spread before her. Then she heard someone throw open the lounge door.

Louis stomped over to her. Fresh scrapes and bruises were nothing new, but the amount of gauze and bandages he wore today pained her.

His dry chestnut hair was more bedraggled than usual, frizzing out in various places, and his grayish-purple eyes gave off a

dangerous glint. To put it diplomatically, he looked unapproachable, like he'd lash out and punch anyone who walked by, no matter who they were.

The other students chatting in the lounge quickly shuffled out of the room as the delinquent arrived. Louis hurried over and sat down next to her.

"Rosalie," he said.

She didn't reply as she poured tea into her own cup.

"Rosalie," he said again.

She remained silent as she took a sip of the tea.

"Can you just look at me?"

Deciding it would be childish to continue, Rosalie put her cup back on her saucer and turned to face him. "Did you get it back? That precious alcohol of yours?"

"…Do you even have to ask? Look at me."

"Yes, you're hurt all over."

Wounds dotted Louis's entire body, but the worst was his right hand. It was all wrapped up in a bandage. Rutherford must have really gotten the better of him. The wrapping was loose and unpracticed. Rosalie decided she'd fix it for him later.

Louis thrust his left hand, relatively unharmed, in her face. "Here."

"…?"

In his palm was a single hairpin. But not the one Louis had plucked from her hair two days before. Hers had been plain and simple, but this one had been delicately worked to resemble a flower. Rosalie knew that Louis worked part-time despite also attending school.

"What brought this on?" she asked.

Louis looked away awkwardly. After a long, hesitant pause, he muttered, "I heard from the old man. Your dad… Uh, the Aquamancy Mage. He contributed a lot to waterworks projects."

Rosalie's father, Bartrand Verde, was famed for his accomplishments. He'd calmed overflowing rivers and stabilized flood control projects, yes, but he was also deeply involved in the development of water and sewage systems. It would be no

exaggeration to say that the presence of such things in the Kingdom of Ridill was mostly thanks to him.

And yet Louis had told Rosalie that he couldn't trust those systems.

"…Sorry," he said.

To think—the Problem Child of Minerva's himself, frowning uncomfortably and apologizing! *A rare sight indeed*, she thought, feeling a keen admiration well up in her as she took the hairpin.

She didn't think it suited her—the pretty flower ornament was too fancy for a plain girl like her. But she wanted to make sure he knew that she'd accepted his apology. So she put it in her hair anyway.

"It's wonderful. Thank you," she said with a faint smile.

She pushed the plate of scones over to him. He probably hadn't eaten anything since the day before. His stomach had been growling since he arrived.

As if to hide his embarrassment, Louis picked up a scone and took a big bite out of it. "This is a weird kind of bread," he remarked.

"It's called a 'scone.' And it's closer to a biscuit than to bread. You split it down the middle and spread jam on it."

"Dries out my mouth. Seems filling, though."

Rosalie poured some tea into an empty cup and placed it in front of him. Louis frowned, staring at it.

"Still averse to tap water?" she asked. "I boiled it."

"…It's not that." Louis wore a hard expression. After a moment, he seemed to resolve himself and took a sip. The creases in his brow deepened. "I just don't like stuff like tea. Or coffee. You know, bitter stuff."

Louis picked up the jar of strawberry jam meant for spreading. Using a spoon, he took out a big scoop and plopped it into his teacup. When he sipped the jam-infused tea, he let out a satisfied sigh and relaxed. He looked younger than he usually did.

To hide the smile threatening to show on her face, Rosalie put her own cup to her lips.

As Louis reached for a second scone, he glanced at her. Then he grinned. "Looks good on you. I figured it would."

The fingers holding her cup shook.

"You should wear it for a while."

She wished he'd stop doing that. It wasn't good for her heart. Rosalie returned her cup to her saucer and looked down.

Louis, seeming to take that as a sign that she was upset, got a little flustered. "Rosalie?" he said.

"……"

"Rosalie?"

"……"

"Come on, Rosalie. Are you still mad?"

"No. It's nothing," she replied, voice hard, faking calm as she took a scone.

*…Please*, she thought as she spread some jam on it, *don't let my face be red right now.*



CHAPTER 11

# The Inter-Laboratory Magic Battle Competition

Allison, the law teacher at Minerva's, was still in his twenties and a relatively young member of the faculty. He had blond hair and an average build. Today, he stood in front of Louis, wearing his mage's robe and carrying his high mage's staff.

"Look at you, so hot-blooded! I do appreciate your enthusiasm, Miller, but I'm not sure you can get past us by yourself."

In front of Allison were two male students, standing between him and Louis. Both of them belonged to his laboratory.

Louis flung several lightning arrows at them. Allison, however, blocked them with a defensive barrier. Meanwhile, the two other students chanted. Once they finished, they aligned the tips of their staffs.

"Formula connected!"

"Casting compound magecraft! Incinerate him, Blastbird!"

A huge flame appeared at the ends of their overlapping staffs, expanding into a bird of fire the size of a pterodragon. The bird, a combination of two elements—fire and wind—created roiling-hot gusts with every flap of its wings.

Inside the magic battle barrier, the spell wouldn't actually burn Louis. The heat would definitely hurt, though.

Protecting himself with a half-sphere barrier, Louis began chanting a different spell. *The hot winds don't have much direction*, he thought, *so they disperse over a wide area…posing a threat to the others in Mr. Allison's group. That's why he still has his barrier up.*

In response, Louis fired off several arrows made of water. Before, his own half-sphere barrier would always get in the way, preventing

him from using magecraft on anything outside it.

Now, though, he knew remote magecraft—which allowed him to deploy his spells *outside* the barrier.

The water arrows stabbed into the bird of flame. It sizzled, releasing a cloud of vapor, but that was all; its fire was just as powerful as before. Louis kept wordlessly firing his water arrows regardless.

"Those weak attacks won't break my students' compound spell, Miller!" said Allison, before growing confused. "…Actually. Wait… Oh. This is bad."

Just then, one of Allison's research students fell to his knees, spasming all over.

Mixed into the water vapor drifting about was tobacco smoke imbued with a paralytic effect—the signature magecraft of Gideon Rutherford, the Mage of Violet Smoke.

"Hiding my smoke with water vapor… For a stupid brat like you, that's an awfully thoughtful way to support me."

Rutherford's feet crunched over the grass as he appeared behind Louis, pipe in hand.

The firebird spell had taken two students to maintain. Now that one had fallen, it vanished into thin air.

Chanting, Allison pulled his fallen student up on his shoulder, then touched his fingertips to the ground. A wall of ice burst up, blocking the members of his research group from sight.

Rutherford's smoke could slip through barriers but not chunks of ice.

Beyond the ice wall, Allison shouted to the student who had held out. "Time to retreat! Quickly! Professor Rutherford can control that smoke with an insane level of precision! It'll come around the wall before long!"

Allison moved to flee deeper into the forest composing their arena. But before he could get away, a hail of lightning arrows poured down on his position.

The aerial sharpshooting had come from Louis's fellow apprentice: Carla.

Carla wasn't wearing a typical mage's robe. Instead, she had on

thick clothing that allowed for easier movement. She wasn't holding a staff, either; instead, she was pointing at Allison with her fingertips.

The teacher threw up a quick-chanted barrier to block the bolts, and the other student from his group countered with a volley of fire arrows.

Carla was currently using both flight magecraft and shooting lightning arrows. It was said a mage could only maintain two spells at once, but Carla kept chanting, creating a shield-shaped barrier to block the fire arrows. She was an incredibly rare genius who could maintain up to *seven* spells at once.

And by the time Allison and the others had shifted their attention to her, Louis and Rutherford had already begun to act.

*Time to end this!*

Louis cast an attack spell and aimed it at Allison. But then a volley of wind arrows came streaming in from the side.

Rutherford instantly had a barrier up to block them.

"Surprise attacks sure are difficult to pull off," came a voice, calm despite the situation.

A red-haired man in his thirties appeared: Redmond, the magical creature studies teacher. He had a research student of his own to either side of him; two boys, just like Allison.

He also wasn't carrying a staff or any weapons. Nor did he have on a mage's robe—instead, he wore the white coat he used during classes.

"Team Redmond will be entering the fray now," he continued. "Also, because I cannot use magecraft, and I have brought no magical items, please think of me as a simple inanimate object."

Louis wasn't sure what to make of this, and his focus wavered.

"…What are you even *here* for, then, Mr. Redmond?"

"Why, to cheer on my students, of course," he replied as the two boys beside him began to chant.

And so began a three-way melee between Team Rutherford, Team Allison, and Team Redmond.

* * *

Once every three years, at the dawn of the new year, Minerva's hosted a magic battle tournament that pitted the different research laboratories against one another. Teams were composed of the teacher plus two students, making a group of three. Teachers were also forbidden from using simultaneous maintenance. In other words, the teachers could only ever use one spell at a time.

For a while, Rutherford's lab had only one student: Carla. They'd been short one person and thus unable to participate.

But when the next competition was held, in the winter of Louis's second year in the advanced course, they had exactly enough people to take part.

Excellent results in the competition would count toward their grades as extra credit—and came with enough prestige to give a student a leg up when searching for employment.

But even being chosen to participate at all meant you were one of the sharpest mages in a research lab, which was an honor in and of itself.

Louis didn't have much use for such things, but he didn't know when else he'd get the chance to fight the other teachers in a magic battle, so he'd happily agreed to join. He'd expanded his repertoire lately, and his style of punching people with barriers was looking sharper than ever.

Though the teachers had initially viewed Louis's barrier-punching tactic as a problem, they'd stopped complaining as much lately. They seemed to have come to see it as similar to blademagic.

Louis had been excited to put his fighting style to the test, but right before the match, Rutherford had told him something unexpected.

"This competition is being projected in the school's lecture hall. It's public for all students and teachers to watch."

The man took a pull from his pipe, then sharply narrowed his eyes at Louis.

"Therefore, if you do anything like kicking sand in people's eyes, tying enemies up, or gagging them, you'll be immediately disqualified. And no secrets, either—they can see everything."

Until now, Louis had always pushed the bounds of the rules, knowing that as long as he wasn't caught, everything would be fine. He frowned. Projecting an image of the battle to a distant location meant sharing a more objective view of it—an amazing innovation. But it was a huge bother for Louis.

"Ugh," he'd groaned. "What a pain! Who came up with that?"

"Actually," said Carla in her relaxed tone, "you might have contributed." She'd been listening nearby.

"Eh? How do you figure *that*?"

"Well, remember the presentation you gave two years ago at the school festival? Your research involved incorporating additional formulae into the magic battle barrier, right? Well, someone from the Royal Magic Research Institute used your ideas to make this possible."

Louis smacked his forehead and looked up at the ceiling. "What have I done? If only I wasn't so talented…"

"Why is this so hard for you? Just don't do anything underhanded. Fight like a normal person," Rutherford demanded, thrusting his pipe at Louis's nose. "Carla can't use her Starspear in this competition, either. It's too strong."

"Yeah," she agreed. "It'd break the whole barrier."

"And I'm not allowed to have two spells going at once. We have a lot of restrictions. Plus, *you* seem to have earned the loathing of everyone at school. I expect we'll have them all after us."

Even if Louis was disregarded, Carla's presence was sure to attract everyone's attention. They'd all come after them right away, hoping to crush them first.

"It'll be a tough battle. But I do have one last instruction for you…" Rutherford twirled his pipe and put on a wicked smile. "Do as you wish."

That was Team Rutherford's motto.

* * *

Team Rutherford managed to incapacitate one student in Team Allison and one in Team Redmond before the others fled. Their group had spent a good deal of mana, but all three of them were still active.

Without planning it, they chased the fleeing teams deeper into the woods, keeping a steady distance between the three of them.

When mages formed teams like this, their members tended to bunch up and act as a group, as Team Allison and Team Redmond were doing now. That made it easier to protect your teammates, give instructions, and communicate.

The culture of Team Rutherford, however, was one of independence. This was mostly due to their personalities, but all three of them were highly mobile and knew flight magecraft to boot.

Even now, Carla was pursuing their enemies from the sky, while Louis and Rutherford gave chase on foot, running through the woods. It would be risky to use flight magecraft with so many obstacles around, as you were liable to collide with something.

Carla stopped in midair, then angled her staff toward Louis. A half-sphere barrier covered the area around him.

Not a moment later, invisible wind blades whipped out from the trees, soaring at Louis. Carla's barrier had protected him.

*We're under attack!* Those were some sharp wind blades, too. Louis had an idea of who the caster was.

He chanted a longish spell, then loosed a large fireball. The wind blades might have been invisible, but when the fireball made contact with them, he could tell where they were coming from based on how they sheared through it.

And when he turned toward their origin, he spotted a figure in the distance. They were too far away to discern, but Louis recognized the magecraft—it belonged to Adolph Faron.

*I'll close the gap with flight magecraft and beat his face in!*

But just as Louis chanted another spell, Carla shouted from

above. “Louis! Behind you!”

That same moment, a flaming spear whizzed at him from behind. The high-powered attack was packed full of mana, and it pierced Carla’s half-sphere barrier, then stabbed into Louis’s right arm as he twisted away.

Pain shot through him. It felt like his right arm was burning. His mana plummeted in accordance with the physical damage he would have taken.

*Who did that?!*

Standing behind him, short staff at the ready, was a boy with blond hair tinged with gray…

“Sorry about this, Louis. But we want to win.”

It was his roommate, Owen Wright.

And standing next to him was William Macragan, the practical magecraft teacher, holding a high mage’s staff as he strolled toward Louis.

Macragan gave a raspy chuckle and stroked his long beard. “I’m not young like the rest of you are, you know. May I sit down on a chair?”

Owen responded to the silly question with utmost earnestness. “Mr. Macragan, if you create a chair with water or earth, that will count as your spell. I think that would be a poor move, considering you can only use one spell at a time.”

“You’re not one for jokes, are you?”

As the two conversed, Rutherford came up to Louis, pipe in his mouth. Rutherford preferred to let his apprentices handle most of the action in these competitions, but up against Macragan, he wouldn’t have that luxury. Rutherford had told Louis before that in the right situation, Macragan could beat him.

In his youth, Macragan had been the ace on any water dragon hunting expedition he joined. The master water mage had slain so many of the creatures that his record still hadn’t been beaten.

William Macragan, known as the Waterbite Mage, was accompanied by two of his students—Adolph Faron, who loathed Louis, and Owen Wright, Louis’s roommate. They were the second most favored team to win this competition, after Team Rutherford.

Louis grabbed his throbbing right arm and grinned. “Hey there, Owen. This is the first time we’ve ever had a magic battle, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Go easy on me, all right?”

“Hah. ‘Go easy,’ you say, after blasting me with that huge attack right off the bat? Well, it’s payback time. Don’t come crying to me later.”


THE WATERBITE MAGE
William Macragan



As Louis and Owen stared each other down, Rutherford puffed on his pipe, and Macragan fiddled with his beard.

"How many have you taken down so far, Macragan?"

"Hmm. Three so far. Allison and his student. We also got a student from Team Redmond."

Rutherford and Macragan's conversation made Louis scowl.

*…They snatched away our prey.*

But something in his words struck Louis as odd. "What about Mr. Redmond?" he asked.

"Oh, I lost sight of him," replied Macragan. "He won't fight, but he's *very* good at hide-and-seek. He is in the profession of observing magical creatures, after all."

"Seriously, why *is* that guy here?" Louis muttered.

Rutherford put out his pipe. He intended to fight Macragan without using his smoke. "My smoke won't work on you, Macragan. That means I can't hold back."

"I'd rather you did… I'm not as young as you are."

"You're only three years older, you sly old man."

Rutherford and Macragan both brandished their long staffs.

Louis and his teacher stood together, maintaining their distance from Owen and Macragan. Adolph was hiding somewhere farther away, while Carla was still waiting in the sky.

Taking in the situation, Louis thought. *The first one I need to deal with is…*

Everyone began chanting at the same time. Louis's flight magecraft activated first. He lifted into a low-altitude position, then used a quick-chant to put up a shield-shaped barrier.

He zoomed through the air toward a hidden group of students from another team, then used the barrier to *run them down.*

"Gyah?!"

"Urgh!"

Louis hit them at breakneck speed, smashing through their barriers. The students screamed as they toppled to the ground. One of them tried to fire an attack spell at him, but Louis just kept charging, crushing his opponents with his barrier. He was quite confident in its strength.

Just as he finished taking care of the others lying in wait, a flame spear zoomed at him from the side. Louis only had his shield-shaped barrier in front of him; any attack that hit him from another direction would obviously do major damage.

"You're not getting me with that again, Owen!" Louis adjusted his flight magecraft, ascending rapidly to avoid the spear.

Owen's spell had both an explosion effect and a simple tracking effect built in. Without the mobility offered by Louis's flight magecraft, he might not have been able to dodge it.

"Then how about this?"

Owen, maintaining the flame spear, finished chanting his next spell. Long, thin flames spread out like a net, surrounding Louis. Owen meant to restrict his aerial maneuverability.

*But while I'm preoccupied with Owen…*

Through the holes in Owen's flame net came a wind arrow, headed right for him. It was Adolph's specialty, though the other boy was nowhere in sight.

Adolph was very good at combining long-distance sniping with remote magecraft. His attacks had two strengths: the range they could fly and their precision when triggered at a distance. Adolph was far better than anyone else in those two respects.

His strategy was the polar opposite of Louis's "close the distance and punch them" style of fighting.

*His attacks are always so infuriating.*

Owen could dole out high-powered hits from mid-range while Adolph delivered precision attacks from a distance. As teammates, they were a force to be reckoned with.

But they weren't the only ones with teammates.

Louis dispelled his flight magecraft and landed just as Carla touched down next to him. She threw up a half-sphere barrier against Adolph's multi-directional wind attacks, then added a shield-shaped barrier to deal with Owen's higher-powered flame spears, deftly fending them off.

Despite being forced to take a defensive position, Carla didn't seem very concerned. "I'm surprised you're letting your master take the better fight," she said, looking at Macragan.

Louis shrugged. “Mr. Macragan would never go all out against a student anyway.”

“Probably not.” Carla cackled.

“In the name of Gideon Rutherford, the Grotto Mage, I command this gate to open.”

“In the name of William Macragan, the Waterbite Mage, I command this gate to open.”

Orange particles of light appeared before Rutherford, matched by blue particles on Macragan’s side, each of them forming into a gate.

Rutherford laughed, while Macragan showed no change in demeanor.

“Come forth from the pit of severance—Archraedo, King of the Earth Spirits.”

“Come forth with the voices of fleeting bubbles—Luluchera, King of the Water Spirits.”

The ground swelled, and pillars of earth imbued with a spirit king’s mana attempted to lock Macragan inside. Macragan, meanwhile, produced a large amount of water imbued with his own spirit king’s mana and used it to form a huge, watery serpent. The earth pillars were nothing before the serpent; it dispersed into water, poured through the gaps, then re-formed.

As the watery serpent rushed toward him, Rutherford constructed a wall of earth to block it.

The two mages were evenly matched.

As they began their fight, Rutherford used his free right hand to twirl his pipe around.

“Time to go crazy, brat.”

When Rutherford summoned Archraedo and earthen pillars began to shoot out from the ground, everyone who had been hiding in the area leaped out from behind the trees in order to dodge them. What’s more, as the ground continued to undulate, forming irregular swells and troughs, no one was able to stay standing on it.

Thus, flight magecraft users now had an incredible advantage—and Louis wasn't about to let the opportunity escape.

"You're not going anywhere," exclaimed Owen, firing a lightning spear.

Louis had seen that coming, however. He grinned and held his right hand out in front of him, creating a shield-shaped barrier—and not just *any* barrier.

The moment Owen's lightning spear touched it, the attack reversed course.

At last, Owen's calm face twisted in surprise. "A reflective barrier?!"

"Yeah. I was hoping to use it on Mr. Macragan. I'd been saving it."

Reflective barriers could bounce back an enemy's offensive magecraft, but they were brittle and tended to break easily, making them extremely difficult to use.

Louis's barrier shattered as it reflected the strike…but he was unharmed. Owen caught the reflected lightning spear in the shoulder and fell to the ground.

Accurately reflecting Adolph's long-distance attacks back to him would be difficult. The easiest prospects were close- to mid-range strikes with a good bit of power behind them, and Owen's fit the bill perfectly.

"I can't believe you can…even use reflective barriers…," said Owen, groaning and lying on the ground.

Louis leaned back, smug. "Yeah. They're gonna call me 'the Barrier Mage' one day."

To accomplish that, he'd waded through every paper and essay of Maeger's he could find after she retired.

Louis glanced at the clash of earth and water and licked his lips. *Right. Next, I'd really like to see how much of Macragan's spirit king summoning I can reflect, but…*

First, they had to hunt down all the students Rutherford's earth pillars had smoked out. "Can you take over here, Carla?" he asked.

"Sure thing. Get going."

Carla used barriers to reflect every attack that came her way, all the while maintaining several attack spells and using them to fell one

off-balance student after another. She didn't forget to protect Louis with a barrier as he chanted, either. Her ability to control seven spells at once made her an extremely dependable ally when facing multiple enemies.

"Thanks," Louis replied. "See you."

Once he'd finished chanting, Louis launched upward, bobbing and weaving between the pillars of earth. As the other students scattered, he took them down one by one with wind spears, all the while searching for his real target.

*…There he is.*

One of Adolph's strengths was his ability to attack from multiple directions at the same time using remote magecraft. But since the technique required a caster to activate their spell from a distance, it demanded an accurate grasp of the terrain—otherwise, they couldn't even activate their spells, much less hit their target.

With Rutherford's earth pillars altering the landscape, Adolph's advantage had been completely nullified.

Louis launched into a rapid descent, maintaining his top speed as he dove at Adolph—all while putting up a shield-shaped barrier in front of him, of course.

Frantic, Adolph launched a wind blade straight at Louis. "Argh! Idiot! Stay away!"

"Your vocabulary always shrinks when you're panicked, huh?"

It was no trouble at all for Louis to block a simple attack from the front. His barrier took care of it instantly. Then he made use of his astonishing sense of balance and well-developed athletic abilities to keep up his flight spell and close in on Adolph.

"Stab, stab, stab, stab, all while you stay far away… You're really pissing me off here, Forehead!"

Louis purposely avoided simply crashing into the other boy with his barrier. Instead, he chose to re-form it over his right fist.

When faced with someone you didn't like, punching them was always the most satisfying option.

"*Oraaahhh!*"

With a bestial roar, Louis crushed Adolph Faron with his barrier-cloaked fist utterly and completely.

* * *

Excitement and cheering filled the lecture hall.

A large white curtain had been hung above the stage, and the situation inside the magic battle barrier was being projected onto it.

The technology itself was impressive, of course, but so was the scene being transmitted.

Gideon Rutherford and William Macragan had pulled out all the stops and were showing off rare spirit king summonings. Carla Maxwell was easily handling offense, defense, support, and obstruction—and all while flying through the air.

And Louis Miller, having mastered the difficult technique of flight magecraft, was flitting about like a bird and brilliantly punching out his enemies with barriers.

"What an impressive fellow. He's doing just as well as his teacher and the Starspear Witch." Lionel nodded to himself.

Nate, his attendant, sat beside him. "I've never seen a mage use barriers as blunt weapons," he murmured.

Rosalie, listening in on their conversation, wasn't surprised by this. A wry smile rose to her lips. *It's unusual, all right, but very like him…*

It wasn't easy to use a fighting style like Louis's. It demanded the ability to use flight magecraft and to produce sturdy barriers, as well as a high level of physical fitness. Not just anyone could manage it.

The image on the curtain showed Louis taking yet another student out of the fight. For the finishing blow, he'd used offensive magecraft—a wind spear. He liked to claim punching was faster, but he was skilled at attack spells, too. And he was quick-witted enough to choose the best option on the fly.

*He's going to be an incredible mage one day.*

The Mage of Violet Smoke Gideon Rutherford, the Waterbite Mage William Macragan, and the Starspear Witch Carla Maxwell were all skilled magecraft users whom many expected might one day join the Seven Sages. And Louis had the ability and the talent to

take them on.

*I…* Rosalie unconsciously clenched her fists in her lap. Frustration welled up within her, directed at herself and stronger than any feelings of inferiority or envy.

*I can't be a good enough mage to stand at his side.*

She was now a second-year in the advanced course, but her mana capacity still hadn't risen much at all. She understood better than anyone else that it wasn't likely to rise any further.

*I need…to make a choice.*

The people around her suddenly began to cheer. Something had happened with Macragan's water serpent—the one he was controlling through a spirit king summoning. Louis had just used a reflective barrier to parry it.

The barrier shattered as it reflected the water, and Louis got soaked, but it was still an incredible feat.

The reflected water magecraft then engulfed Rutherford, Macragan, and even the students nearby, blowing them all away.

The white curtain produced no sound, but Rosalie could almost hear Rutherford yelling "You dumb brat!"

"That was a reflective barrier Miller just used, right? Grade three?"

"No, it reflected a spirit king summoning! Not perfectly, but it's gotta be grade two."

"Wait, but that grade of barrier is just as rare as spirit king summonings…"

As she listened to the voices around her, Rosalie stared at the white curtain, unblinking.

Louis was dripping wet, but he'd successfully reflected the spell and had gotten Rutherford caught up in the chaos. He pumped his fist toward the sky and grinned.

*Did you see that, Rosalie?!*

She thought she could hear his voice then, straight from the smug face of a terrible brat.

To Rosalie, that grin of his was positively *radiant*.



CHAPTER 12

# Burdens and Resolutions

The school festival was held a month after the inter-laboratory magic battle competition, before the excitement had quite faded, and it was even livelier than usual.

The projection technique used to broadcast the previous month's competition drew particular interest. Many people gave research presentations on the subject, and it was said the technology would eventually spread well beyond Minerva's.

Louis, however, despite his involvement in the fundamental idea behind the technology, wasn't giving a presentation this year. Instead, he spent most of his time working at Goah's food stall. And, of course, he brought his *own* change of clothes this time to avoid a repeat of the tragedy of several years prior.

When the lunch rush picked up, he helped sell light fare. But he still slipped away now and then to watch presentations he was interested in.

The one he was watching now didn't have anything to do with the projection technique, however. This one was Owen's.

Currently a first-year in the advanced course, Owen had joined Macragan's laboratory, had been chosen for the magic battle competition, and had been allowed to present at the school festival. He was the most prominent student among the first-years.

"Heya, Owen."

After the presentation, as Owen headed backstage, Louis called out to him. Owen's face was hard, as though he still couldn't relax.

"Louis, I don't think I can go on…"

"Eh? Why not? That was a pretty good presentation. You answered the questions well, too."

"Yeah, but I tripped over my words four whole times… I'm so embarrassed…"

Owen looked like it was the end of the world. Louis snorted. "Yeah, well, Adolph is in the same research group as you and totally got his formulae mixed up. He's gonna be a laughingstock for a while."

"You know, he comes to me every time you rile him up. Always asks if I know your weakness."

"Really? Sorry about that."

Owen stared at him dubiously until Louis shoved a bag of baked goods toward him. He'd bought it on the way to the lecture hall. "Here. Got you something."

"…Thanks," said Owen, leaning against the wall and opening the paper wrapping. Inside were round pieces of dough made from eggs and wheat, with jam added in.

As he opened the wrapping, Louis reached over, plucked one of them away, and tossed it into his mouth.

"I thought this was a present. Don't start eating before me."

"Who phares? I boughf it… Mgh. Oh, there's a *lot* of jam in this one. I lucked out!"

Looking exasperated, Owen tore off a piece of dough and nibbled it. This was in stark contrast to Louis, who would just stuff huge pieces in his face.

For a little while, they stood against the wall, eating the treats. Once Owen had finished his second piece, he murmured, "Why didn't you do a research presentation this year? You didn't do one last year, either."

"Eh? Why should I bother? It's a huge pain."

He'd only agreed last time because his advancement was on the line. Louis *hated* doing research presentations. He liked listening to the ones he was interested in, but he didn't want to do one himself. They took forever.

Delivering a good presentation was advantageous when seeking employment, but Louis wasn't trying to get into the Magic Corps like Owen was.

"I'm gonna become a freelance mage when I graduate," Louis explained. "So I don't need to."

Most of the students at Minerva's took the mage exams during

their third year of the advanced course, got their low mage license, and had the Guild help them find a job. Louis didn't want to be part of the Mages Guild, though.

"Really?" said Owen. "But you could easily be the personal mage of a high-ranking noble if you wanted to… Oh, sorry. Forget I said anything. Your personality isn't really suited for that."

"See? You do understand." Louis chuckled.

Working hard to ingratiate himself to some noble and being perfectly courteous, day in and day out? That was the *last* thing Louis wanted out of life.

You needed money to live, but with his current abilities, Louis knew he'd be able to provide for himself no matter where he went.

The truth was that mages were precious, whether or not they belonged to the Guild; they'd never want for good work. In fact, Louis could simply go to the eastern provinces, where dragons were more common, and volunteer for dragon hunts. Mages were prized in such occupations, and it would pay well, too. They said that if you accomplished enough as a mage, then even if you weren't part of the Guild, you could receive a title—in other words, Louis could stay away from the Guild and still be called "the Barrier Mage" one day.

When he noticed that there was only one treat left, Louis stretched out his hand. But Owen swiftly lifted the bag up and away. "You had three, and I had two. This one's mine. It's only fair."

"But *I'm* the one who bought them."

"Yeah, and you're *also* the one who gave them to me as a present, remember?"

As their childish argument continued, Rosalie and Lionel appeared down the hall. Louis gave up on the treat. "I'll be right back," he said to Owen, before turning around.

He didn't have any particular business with the two of them, but he was hoping to join them and go around the festival together.

Nate was following behind the pair, quietly walking along the wall. As Louis was about to call out to them from behind, he heard them talking.

"Yes, leaving school. The teachers already know about it—it'll happen next month. The first order of business is to go back home

for a little while…"

"Hrm. I see… That will make things lonely here."

Louis's feet stopped moving. *Leaving school? Going back home? Who are they talking about?*

Before he knew it, he was calling out "Rosalie!"

Rosalie turned around. She looked surprised but quickly assumed her usual calm expression.

"…You heard that?" she asked.

"Yeah, something about leaving school next month… What's going on?" asked Louis, his voice hard.

Rosalie brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. When she spoke again, it was casual. "I decided to become a doctor."

Rosalie had a low mana capacity, and Louis knew it had bothered her for a long time. He'd never wanted her to give up, though, and had insisted that they enter the advanced course together, told her that there were still things she could do even with a low capacity.

*…But that wasn't really encouragement*, he thought. *I was just trying to force her.*

Maybe she'd wanted to start studying as a doctor for some time. Had he twisted her path in life by saying he wanted her to stay at Minerva's with him?

Words caught in Louis's throat, and he remained silent.

Rosalie looked him in the eyes. "I want to be like Dr. Woodman," she said. "Someone who can treat mana-related symptoms as well as physical ones. My studies here at Minerva's weren't a waste. And I don't regret moving up to the advanced course, either."

Her voice was gentle, but within it, he sensed true strength of spirit. He felt his chest tighten.

"You told me there are things I can do even with a low mana capacity… And you were right. I'm very grateful to you." Her gaze, usually sharp, softened as a smile bloomed on her lips. "Thank you, Louis."

His pulse sped up, and the back of his head felt numb. His face grew hot, even though it was winter.

That smile had lifted him up, and yet a deep sense of loneliness pulled him back down. He was sad—sad that he wouldn't be able to

share her burden.

*I swear, she's just… Just so…*

Swallowing down emotions he couldn't figure out, Louis forced himself to grin—the smile of a smug problem child. "Hey, if I approve of you, that means you're one hell of a girl. You can be anything you want to be."

Rosalie would probably make a great doctor. She wasn't like Louis, who just wanted to be sure he could provide for himself. She was striving hard to meet the expectations of those around her and had set a proper goal to achieve that.

"Thanks. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go to the faculty room," said Rosalie, her skirt hem fluttering as she walked away, leaving Louis behind.

"Louis," said Lionel. He had been silent up until now, and his voice was hesitant. "I must apologize."

"What for?"

"I thought for sure that you… Well, that you'd throw a fit, not wanting her to leave school."

Louis snorted, then put on the face of someone sensible and understanding. "Come on. I'm not that barbaric. I wouldn't stop her from realizing her dream."

"…Her dream, huh?" repeated Lionel, seeming to chew on that for a moment as he glanced after Rosalie's retreating figure. "It must have been terribly difficult for her to give up on the path of a mage. She's always wanted to make her father proud."

Any child of a Sage would doubtless face certain expectations. To become an excellent mage like her father, and to eventually become a Sage herself…

Louis hated such preconceptions.

"Doesn't matter who her parents are," he said. "She should learn what she wants to learn. Get a job she really likes."

"Still, it was Rosalie's decision to bear the expectations of her father and those around her."

And she'd been bearing them ever since she was little. What must it have felt like to give up on being a mage? Her decision was heavier than Louis knew. His face was full of frustration as he looked

up at Lionel.

"…You too?" he asked.

"I'm part of the royal family, after all."

*That's right*, thought Louis. Though he tended to forget, Lionel was the kingdom's first prince. Everything about his life had been decided from the moment of his birth. The expectations on *his* shoulders were heavier than anyone else's.

"Do you want to be king to answer other people's expectations, too?"

"Not quite." Lionel shook his thick neck, then declared, "My goal is not to be king but to improve this kingdom."

His attendant Nate, who was busy being a wall, looked to Louis, as if to complain about what a handful Lionel was.

Lionel was friendly, honest, and had the kind of charisma that made others want to follow him. But that was the problem—he wore his heart on his sleeve. Politics was about clever maneuvering and plots. He wasn't meant for those.

If he became king, both he *and* those around him would have a hard time of it.

Louis and Nate both looked exasperated, and Lionel responded with a bitter smile. He probably knew it, too—that he wasn't cut out for politics. But he wasn't about to abdicate his royal responsibilities.

"I have two younger half brothers," he explained. "Both are still young… And Felix, in particular, is frail."

As he looked up, Louis saw in his profile the face of a brother concerned for his younger siblings' futures. *Having an older brother like him might be a bit suffocating, but I bet it'd be nice, too*, thought Louis honestly.

"I want to make the Kingdom of Ridill a place where my brothers can live without worry. Whether I become king, or the title falls to one of them, that goal will never change."

Lionel wanted to make this land a better place, whether he inherited or not.

He had his own burden, and his own way of facing it.

* * *

After the school festival, Louis pulled a cart loaded with the stall's equipment back to town. The sky had turned red as the sun set, casting evening shadows on the streets. The wind was cold enough to sting his cheeks. He wanted alcohol.

His steps were heavy, and the cart wasn't the only thing weighing him down.

*I wonder…how they bear it.*

Ever since he was born, Louis had possessed nothing. For that reason, he'd always been content with the bare minimum necessary for staying alive. But having nothing meant he was also free of any burdens—and that made life easy.

He'd always vaguely figured his life would go on like that forever. But when he thought of Rosalie and Lionel, he felt awfully small.

Suddenly, he remembered what Shauna had told him, back before she died and he came to Minerva's.

*"Hey, Louis. I have a question."*

*"Eh?"*

*"You shouldn't be here forever. Why don't you leave? Make a family of your own?"*

He hadn't known what a family was back then. And he hadn't wanted one anyway. Family was a heavy burden. Families held people down. He was fine without one.

*…But if I ever wanted one…*

Louis was always sparing with what he wanted. As long as he had what was important to him, he didn't need anything else.

And so he gave this some thought. What did he *really* want right now? What did he not want to let go of?

He had no use for heaps of treasure. He only needed what he could grab with his own hands—and the first thing he thought of was Rosalie's fingers as she took care of him whenever he took a beating.

"Louis! I'm sorry—I'm late to help!"

Louis looked up and saw a figure running toward him, a lantern in one hand. It was Lowe, from Goah's Place.

Lowe went around behind the cart, meaning to help push it along. But the thin, frail man didn't add much strength to the equation.

"You don't have to push, Lowe. Could you light the way forward instead?"

The sun hadn't fully set yet, but Louis still wanted a little more illumination. He'd been raised in a poor village, and having a fire around naturally set him at ease.

Lowe came up next to Louis and scratched his head, looking a little guilty. "I really am sorry. Sally's fiancé came for a visit, and I couldn't get away…"

Sally would be getting married in early summer to an older man—one she'd long been head over heels for.

"Getting married with her personality, huh? You sure she's gonna be okay?"

"She'll be fine. Sally is a well-put-together girl, and her fiancé is a proper, responsible sort."

Louis stuck out his lip. "Proper and responsible… Is that important?"

"It is. I got the feeling he won't just treat Sally well—he'll treat Goah well, too."

This surprised Louis a little. Since he'd been raised in a brothel, *marriage* and *redemption* were basically the same in his mind. He figured it was good if the man treated his wife well, but he'd never thought much beyond that.

"Sally even introduced *me* to her fiancé. She said I was like family to her." A soft smile rose to Lowe's sunken cheeks. His small eyes, which always seemed bleary, grew slightly wet with moisture. "He even properly introduced himself to me. It made me a happy man."

Louis had heard that Goah and Lowe were childhood friends. Goah had initially run his restaurant with his wife, but she'd passed while Sally was still young, and his friend Lowe had started helping out instead. Hence why Lowe was like family to Sally.

"…Must be a really good guy, this fiancé of hers."

"Well, he got Sally to fall for him."

"Yeah. Guess so."

The words seemed to fall straight into Louis's heart and settle there, and he felt his heavy steps lighten somewhat.

* * *

After the festival, time passed in a flash for Rosalie as she prepared to leave school. She had to do all kinds of paperwork, thank and say good-bye to everyone who had helped her in the past, pack up her things, and start studying to get into medical school—there was a lot on her plate.

Rosalie's roommate had dropped out before the start of winter break, so she had the room to herself. That meant she could stay up late packing without bothering anyone.

On the night before she left, she cleaned the room to her satisfaction and went back over all the things she'd packed. *I remember cleaning just like this when I left home.*

Though her father was a count of magic, their house was relatively small and cozy, and they had few servants. The man had originally been a merchant, not a noble. Perhaps that was why he preferred a simple, steady life. And that, in turn, meant Rosalie was more than capable of making do without the help of servants.

As a young girl, she'd *needed* to be a good study, to take care of herself. She was the daughter of one of the Seven Sages, after all. Since her mana capacity was so low, she'd believed she had to do everything else perfectly to make up for it.

*"You can't even do that?"*

She remembered when her father had first taught her magecraft. Simple mana control was beyond her. That was how little mana she possessed.





That was all he said; he didn't lecture her at length. But he never watched Rosalie practice magecraft again.

*I'm sorry, Father.*

She fell into the bottom bunk bed. Her guilt at being unable to become the mage everyone wanted her to be probably wouldn't go away anytime soon.

And yet, despite that, someone was willing to cheer her on.

*"Hey, if I approve of you, that means you're one hell of a girl. You can be anything you want to be."*

She'd have to commit those words, along with the problem child's invincible smile, to memory.

*Because I won't…see him anymore after tomorrow.*

Should she tell him how she felt before she went away? No, she was about to leave Minerva's. A confession like that would satisfy nobody but herself. It would only make him sad.

She closed her eyes, as if to put a lid on her loneliness, when she suddenly heard someone knocking. And they weren't knocking on the door, either, but on the window.

Rosalie jumped out of bed despite herself, shocked. Through a narrow gap in the curtains, she saw Louis, his back to the night sky.

She rose and reached a hand out toward him. The night was dark, and the curtains were mostly closed. She couldn't see his face like that.

When she opened the window, Louis took a seat on the frame.

"What are you…? Why…?"

The night breeze rippled the curtains. The clouds moved with the wind, revealing a white moon. It cast its dim, hazy illumination on Louis's back as he stared at her, his expression serious.

"Rosalie, I love you."

It was such a Louis way to profess his feelings—simple and blunt.

Rosalie stood there, hesitating, as the problem child grinned in satisfaction.

"Yes, I did it. I said it!" Still sitting on the window frame, he reached his arms up and behind him, as if to stretch out a stiff back. "All right, now let me hear it, Rosalie. I won't go any further if you reject me. And I'll see you off as a friend instead."

As he said "any further," he rapped on the frame with his fingers.

Despite his rude entrance through the window, he was being oddly reasonable. It was kind of amusing.

"…Me too," said Rosalie, mustering up all the courage she had and reaching out to touch his fingers as they sat on the window frame. "I love you, Louis."

Their fingers intertwined. Louis's were freezing cold, and Rosalie's warmed them.

The two of them were silent for a few moments, looking at their overlapping hands in the freezing night air, as if basking in each other's warmth. The hand Rosalie grasped was dry, cracked, and covered in lumps, just like it always was. But it was much bigger than when she'd first met him. It was a man's hand, not a boy's.





“If you achieve your dream and become a doctor, then I’ll become an incredibly awesome mage and come see you again.”

“All right.”

In that case, she would make an excellent doctor of herself and wait for him—so that when the problem child next came in through her window, covered in scrapes and bruises, she’d be able to take care of him right away.

“…I’ll be waiting,” she said.

Louis slid off the window frame and hugged her.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to treat a girl,” he said in a whisper. “If you don’t like this, just tell me. I’ll stop right away.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

In the corner of her vision, she could see his dry, chestnut-colored hair. He didn’t take very good care of it; he had countless split ends and damaged strands. But where it was brighter, she could see a little bit of orange, and she liked that.

“I don’t mind.”

She brought her hands up to touch his dry hair, then reached around behind him. Her heart was racing, but she felt so calm, for some reason.

“If you don’t mind, then I won’t bother holding back.”

Instead of answering him, Rosalie squeezed him a little more tightly in her arms.



CHAPTER 13

# The Problem Child Graduates

When Owen saw the workbooks spread out on his roommate's desk, his eyes went wide. His roommate was solving a problem from the previous high mage certification exam.

"…Wait, Louis, you're taking the high mage exam?" asked Owen cautiously.

"Yeah," said his roommate curtly, not looking up from his paper.

He'd told Owen he would be a freelance mage and avoid joining the Mages Guild. What had brought this on?

Owen looked out the window without saying anything. The sky was perfectly clear; winter was about to end. No sign of any sudden calamities.

Louis got to a good stopping point and put his feather pen down. Then he stretched and looked at Owen. "Best to have a high mage certification if I want to get into the Magic Corps, right?"

"Well, yes, but… Wait! You're trying to get certified as a high mage *and* join the Magic Corps?"

Owen couldn't hide his surprise, but Louis was dead serious. "Joining the Mages Guild, getting a high mage certification, and entering the Magic Corps—that would be *proper* and *responsible*, right?"

Owen looked out the window again. Still no sign the world was ending. "I never thought I'd ever hear you say words like those…"

"Hey, if I wanna marry the woman I love, I gotta be proper and responsible, don't I?" said Louis, sounding somehow sulky.

Owen blinked at him. He could only think of one person who fit that bill. It was pretty easy to tell what, or who, Louis liked.

*Oh, right. Didn't she drop out last week?* thought Owen, and it suddenly all made sense. He nodded.

Louis stared at him. Owen responded with an unspoken *what?*

only to hear his roommate struggle to get his next words out.

"…Must be a pretty impure motive, in your eyes."

*I guess even Louis has worries like that, huh?* Owen knew that saying as much would earn him a sharp *shut up*, though, so he replied a different way, and quietly. "I don't think the motive really matters."

Whether one's motivation was a childhood dream, making money, or wanting the person you loved to pay attention to you, Owen's opinion was that having a grand reason for something didn't make that thing any better.

If Louis wanted to join the Magic Corps, the important thing was whether he was good enough. And he certainly was.

"Guess you'll stay my upperclassman even in the Magic Corps, huh…?"

"Just so you know, I'll be aiming to become the leader. So get ready for me to work you real hard."

His tone was joking, but Owen suspected that if he really wanted to, Louis could do just that.

* * *

Rosalie Verde had been the main force keeping the problem child in line, and when she left Minerva's, it struck terror into the hearts of all the teachers. And yet, after she dropped out, Louis became far more docile than before.

His tone was still rude; he was still rough; he certainly hadn't become polite. But he restricted himself to minor brawls.

The resident doctor, Woodman, had joked that it was because he'd lost the only person who would take care of his injuries. And perhaps he was more right than he knew.

After that, just as he'd declared to Owen, Louis passed the high mage exam, then gave a research presentation at the school festival —his first in three years.

The presentation was on a technique called “Mirror Prison,” which used a sealing barrier and reflection magecraft to reflect attacks internally, and it went over very well. Thanks in part to that accomplishment, as spring came and his graduation approached, Louis received informal approval to join the Magic Corps.

Around that time, Rosalie would have been furiously studying to get into medical school. Once that was over, he’d send her a letter and tell her that he’d been accepted.

…But not too long after he’d made this decision, he heard a disquieting rumor.

Apparently, Rosalie’s father—the Aquamancy Mage Bartrand Verde—wanted to marry his daughter to his successor.

In the magecraft world, mages frequently tried to bring those with large mana capacities or excellent magecraft skills into their lineage. While it was just a rumor, it could well be true.

And so, in a panic, on a day off a week before his graduation ceremony, Louis used flight magecraft to speed away from Minerva’s.

* * *

Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage and one of the Seven Sages, would be thirty-six this year. He was a tall, large man with black hair. Dressed in well-worn traveling clothes beneath his Sage robe, he stood atop a hill and used his right hand to shade his eyes as he observed the wreckage before him.

The building atop the small hill had been falling apart, but nobody had wanted to spare the effort to take it down, so it had been left there, abandoned.

Due to the recent spate of rain, it had been on the verge of collapse—and so had the dirt foundation beneath it. If left alone, it would have devastated the town road below the hill.

Thus, it had been decided that the road would be sealed off before that happened and that the building and its foundation would

be removed all at once. It was for that purpose that the Artillery Mage and one other had been dispatched to the area.

"Sorry to drag you out here with me, Aqua."

"I don't mind. Out of everyone, I'm likely the most suited to aiding you."

Next to Bradford stood the Aquamancy Mage, Bartrand Verde. He was a man in his prime, gray hairs creeping into his dark-brown locks, all combed back.

The Artillery Mage specialized in high-powered spells strengthened several times over. And the Aquamancy Mage, as his title implied, was skilled in water manipulation. It had been Bradford's job to blow up the structure and Bartrand's to protect the area from all the dirt and building fragments that went flying afterward.

They'd finished the work already; now registered surveyors were making sure the land showed no signs of further collapse. The two men were currently waiting for their report.

The sky above was perfectly clear. The spring weather made Bradford want to lie down and take a nap.

Keeping his gaze skyward, he spoke again, his voice casual. "There's a huge ball in the capital tonight, isn't there? Sponsored by Duke Clockford."

Duke Clockford was Second Prince Felix's grandfather and one of the most powerful men in the Kingdom of Ridill. Felix was a sickly child, and he had been laid up with illness for a long time. Recently, however, he seemed to have recovered quite a bit; Bradford heard the duke had been throwing a lot of balls in order to show him off.

Maintaining his casual tone, Bradford stroked his beard and grinned. "The duke wants the second prince on the throne. It's gonna get real interesting at court soon."

"It matters not what the duke does. As Sages, our only duty is to offer up our knowledge and magecraft for the sake of His Majesty and the kingdom."

Bartrand was quiet, but his tone was solemn. He wasn't much of a talker, and that added a particular weight to his words.

Bradford saw the Aquamancy Mage as someone who appreciated

steadfastness and sincerity, and who almost never raised his voice in anger. He disliked the gaudy and conspicuous and preferred not to make public appearances—but despite all that, he was widely loved and respected.

Just then, Bartrand seemed to notice something up above. Bradford looked up as well, and there, in the clear spring sky, he spotted the silhouette of something larger than a bird—a person, using flight magecraft.

The figure landed in front of the two men without a sound. The caster demonstrated superb skill. Few could use such stable flight magecraft.

Bradford had assumed he must be a veteran mage, but he soon realized he was a young man in his late teens wearing a Minerva's uniform, albeit somewhat sloppily.

The young man didn't even glance at Bradford. He fixed his stare on Bartrand instead and began to speak.

"You the Aquamancy Mage?"

Bartrand narrowed his eyes sharply as he gazed at this boy who had descended from the sky. "I remember you. From that research presentation at Minerva's… Louis Miller. You belong to Rutherford's laboratory."

"Good, you remember. That'll make this easy." A firm, almost aggressive expression came to Louis's impudent face. "I'm marrying your daughter. So quit asking other jerks to do it."

That was the first time Bradford had ever heard Bartrand sound so utterly confused.

Louis's first impression of the Aquamancy Mage was that he resembled Rosalie. In other words, he was upright and serious—the type that couldn't take a joke.

Thus, Louis mustered as much sincerity as he could and spoke from his heart. "If you want a mage to succeed you, I can do it. So…"

He had intended to continue with "so please let Rosalie become a doctor." But Bartrand cut him off with a roar.

"Enough of this rubbish, boy!"

His voice, low and heavy, shook the air. The dignity in it was genuine, backed with true ability.

Louis glared at him, unwilling to give in. Bartrand pointed his mage's staff right between Louis's eyes.

"Your clothes are slovenly! Your hair is unsightly! How dare you stand before me! Do they not teach the proper way to speak at Minerva's?!"

This irritated Louis. This uniform was the best outfit he owned. Yes, his hair was frazzled and unkempt, but he'd been speaking very politely, by his standards. *This guy's way too big for his britches*, thought Louis, though he swallowed the words. Bartrand continued to rant, his words coming thick and fast.

"You are vulgar, boorish, and utterly unrefined! You will never have my precious daughter like that!"

This silenced not only Louis but the Artillery Mage as well, who had been listening to the whole thing.

The surveyors working nearby stopped what they were doing to glance over and see what the commotion was about.

But Bartrand didn't seem to care who was watching. His face was bright red as he sputtered and shouted. His dignity as a member of the vaunted Seven Sages had disappeared, replaced by the idiocy of an overly doting father.

"I will accept no less than a man with intelligence and class, a house in the capital, and the skill to become a Sage!"

The Artillery Mage, unable to keep watching, spoke up, his voice reserved. "Hey, uh, Aqua… I think you're going a little overboard—"

"All right, old man… You better not forget what you just said." Blue veins stood up on Louis's temple, and his grayish-purple eyes glinted.

Louis Miller hated to lose more than anyone. And, most importantly, he was the type to fight back harder the more he was beaten down. Naturally, he had no choice but to accept Bartrand's challenge.

Louis took a step forward, planted his feet firmly on the ground, then roared back in a voice every bit as loud and angry as

Bartrand's.

"So as long as I have class, a house in the capital, and I'm a Sage, you're fine with it, right? Well, all right, then! I'll become a Sage! And then I'll marry Rosalie whether you like it or not, and you won't be able to complain!"

"Hmph. You've misunderstood me completely! I shall never accept a vulgar, uncouth man like you!"

"Go on, keep talking! Rosalie and I already promised our futures to each other anyway!"

"You lie! Rosalie told me herself that she likes classy, wonderful men—like princes!" Bartrand Verde, the Aquamancy Mage, grasped his staff and shouted at the top of his lungs. "Rosalie *must* and *will* marry a man who is like a prince!"

The Artillery Mage Bradford Firestone would later have this to say on the matter:

Though the Aquamancy Mage was a man who couldn't take a joke, he was decidedly comical when he erupted in rage that day. And that was the first and last time he would ever do such a thing.

* * *

Flight magecraft was an expensive spell, mana-wise. By the time Louis got back from meeting the Aquamancy Mage, he was exhausted, his mana utterly depleted.

Nevertheless, he stomped through the halls with the rage of a wrathful earth dragon until he got to Lionel's room on the top floor. He pounded on the door.

"Lionel!" he shouted. "Lionel!"

It wasn't Lionel who opened the door, however, but Nate. The attendant looked at Louis, obviously bothered. He was almost thirty, though his face still looked as youthful as ever.

"…Now you're raiding us? Give me a break."

"I'm not! Hey, Lionel! Show yourself! I need to ask you a favor!"

As Louis threw a fit at the entrance, Lionel appeared from farther back in the room. "What's going on?"

Perhaps he'd been resting—he was dressed in his own clothes rather than in his uniform. Louis stared at his outfit with bloodshot eyes.

Though Lionel was a large man, his vest and pants silhouetted him in such a way that he didn't look uncouth. His shoes were polished to a shine. He wore a scarf of gorgeous, lustrous silk, which he had pinned with a large gemstone brooch. All of it fit Lionel to a T.

While the boy's size and stern features had made Louis liken him to a golden gorilla, the way he stood emanated a refinement that Louis lacked. He was just what the Aquamancy Mage had described—a classy, wonderful prince.

"You wanted to ask me for something? You're my friend. If there's anything I can do, I'll help." Lionel gestured for Louis to come sit on a couch in the room.

The couch was grand, befitting of royalty. The room itself was twice the size of Louis's, and all the furniture looked very expensive.

Louis lowered his head, not taking a seat. He could see that his uniform was fraying at the hem and that his boots were scuffed and worn.

"I want you to teach me how to talk and act like someone from the upper class."

Lionel's eyes widened—and even Nate, who was normally so expressionless, looked at him in shock.

"I see…," said Lionel, after hearing the story as he reclined on the couch.

Nate placed a cup of tea in front of him. The black-haired attendant then put another in front of Louis, who sat across from Lionel. "I had thought," he said pensively, "that given your personality, you would simply kidnap Miss Verde and elope if her father objected to your marriage."

"……"

Louis fell silent. He gazed at his cup sourly, then told Nate, "Jam!"

Nate cleaned up his tray and went back to the wall. "An upper-class citizen of Ridill wouldn't put jam in their tea."

"Damn it!"

"An upper-class citizen wouldn't swear so readily, either."

Louis growled, rumbling like an unhappy dragon, and brought the tea to his mouth. It was just as bitter as ever.

Lionel looked at him with exasperation. "Louis, if you don't like how bitter it is, you need only add sugar and milk. Nate, would you mind bringing some?"

"…Of course, sir."

Louis assumed that Lionel didn't normally put sugar or milk in his tea, since Nate hadn't set any out for them. Nevertheless, Lionel joined Louis in adding both to his own cup.

The prince's hands were large, and his fingers were thick, but the way he stirred his tea with a spoon was *beautiful*. He didn't make any of the clacking sounds Louis did, either.

"I think I understand." Lionel took a sip of tea, then set his round, blue eyes on Louis's. "I, Lionel Brem Edward Ridill, shall assist you to the very limits of my ability!"

Louis knew he was making a foolish request. But Lionel neither laughed nor made fun of him. The prince was a good person, and he sincerely wanted to support Louis in his mission to become a man worthy of Rosalie.

"Thanks… Er…" Louis frowned, his lips moving awkwardly for a moment. "*Thank you very much*."

"Never before has that phrase been spoken with such an unnatural enunciation," remarked Nate.

"Come on. I did it all *classy*-like."

Louis knew that his accent was mild compared to that of other northerners. The farmers from his village, for example, spoke so differently that people from other parts of the kingdom couldn't understand a word they said.

Lionel smiled reassuringly at the sullen Louis. "So you'd like to start speech and courtesy lessons right away! I understand. Let's

begin right now. If there's anything that doesn't make sense, just ask me!"

"Gotcha. Okay, first tell me this." Louis's whole body filled with enthusiasm, and very seriously, he asked, "How should I say *You'd better be watching this, you old rat. I'll give you a show to remember* in a classy way?"

Lionel and Nate both closed their mouths in perfect sync.

For the following week leading up to his graduation ceremony, Louis began to stay in Lionel's room overnight, learning all he could about the other boy's mannerisms and speech, making an incredible effort to replicate it.

He walked from one end of the room to another with a book on his head, studied how to properly hold his eating utensils, and even learned how to ballroom dance.

Louis's distaste for losing made him a very hard worker. One could even say he was a genius of hard work. That genius came to the forefront whenever he was riled up and wanted to get back at someone. And this was indeed one of those times.

He'd always been a fast learner, with great motor skills. Improving his posture, mannerisms, and dancing ability didn't pose much of a problem for him.

And even the style of enunciation and word choice used by the upper classes came to him in time, though his speech was still somewhat awkward.

"You've learned enunciation, yes. But *only* enunciation," Nate, his trainer, had said.

* * *

The graduation ceremony that year would go down in Minerva's history—at least, that was what Professor Redmond had said, with overblown theatrics.

Not only did Louis, the greatest problem child Minerva's had ever seen, attend the ceremony, he even sat up straight and proper in his seat.

While Louis never missed classes, he boldly skipped ceremonies whenever he could.

To see such a delinquent attending graduation, back straight, hands in his lap, sitting tall and proper, was enough to send shock waves rippling through the faculty. And, in what could only be called a miracle, he didn't swear, insult or punch anyone, glare, or drink.

Some laughed at him. "I don't believe it!" Some sobbed. "He's grown so much…" Some trembled. "What could he be planning this time?"

Louis's master, the Mage of Violet Smoke Gideon Rutherford, had heard about the situation from Lionel. But when he personally saw his pupil sitting properly in his seat, he couldn't stifle his laughter.

"Hey, brat. I heard all about it," said Rutherford after the ceremony, a smirk on his face. "Graduated from being a problem child, and now you're trying to become a gentleman, eh?"

Louis, who had been silent all day long, stuck out his chest, maintaining perfect posture. Then, to the man he'd sworn he'd rather die than curry favor with, he put on an awkward but polite smile and declared, "Just watch, you old rat… I mean, Master. I shall show you just what I can do."

Rutherford's fingers stopped mid-pipe twirl, and his eyes, always glinting, narrowed to pinpricks. "…That sounds gross coming from you."

"Shut up, you old rat!"

After only a few seconds, Louis's polite smile was smashed to pieces.

And that was how Louis, the first Problem Child of Minerva's, sealed away his northern accent, decided to join the Seven Sages, and graduated from Minerva's—all to marry Rosalie, and truly for no other reason.



EPILOGUE

# His First Dragon Hunt

The Magic Corps took on missions spanning defense, the protection of nobles, administering various magical items and barriers, and securing criminal mages. But its most prominent task was that of hunting dragons.

Louis, who had joined their number, applied for the Third Response Team, which was frequently deployed for such assignments. If he wanted to get promoted as quickly as possible, slaying dragons was the fastest way to do so.

And with the bounties rewarded for such missions, he could earn money in addition to his regular pay. It was the perfect place for someone trying to save up to buy a house in the capital.

"One fire dragon spotted, dead ahead! No others nearby. It hasn't seen us!"

By the time the scout returned with their report, the fire dragon had already entered visual range.

It was a month after Louis joined, and he'd been sent out on a dragon hunt. This was his first time seeing one of the creatures up close.

Most dragons were weak to the cold, so you didn't see them often up north. You'd occasionally spot a pterodragon in the distant sky during the warmer seasons. For northerners, wolves, boars, and avalanches were a more immediate threat.

The Third Response Team had a high rate of on-the-job fatalities, so Louis, who had applied for the position without the faintest idea of how terrifying dragons were, struck his coworkers as arrogant, taciturn, and reckless. The "taciturn" part was because Louis still wasn't totally used to the upper-class speaking style that Lionel had

taught him.

Some of Louis's seniors in the Magic Corps looked at him with outright malice. They probably assumed the new, overconfident kid would be petrified with fear when presented with an actual dragon.

But even under their hostile stares, Louis's only thought when he saw a fire dragon for the first time was *Damn, that's one big lizard.*

Only one dragon had been confirmed. It had skirmished with another team already, and it had several small injuries on its brow. That was where a dragon was weakest, but without a spell of enough force to punch through, even striking it between the eyes wouldn't be lethal.

*In that case, maybe I'll give* that *a spin.*

The captain turned around to give an order to Louis. "Newbie, you're good at defensive barriers, right? I need you to deploy one first, while we—"

Louis was done chanting before his captain could finish his instructions. He hadn't created a defensive barrier, either. His chant was for a flight spell.

"Allow me to go on ahead, sir," he said very properly, before making a wide loop to arrive above the fire dragon's head. The beast spewed flames from its mouth, but all he had to do was avoid them.

Maintaining his flight spell, Louis chanted again. This time, he created a barrier, as his captain had ordered.

Louis then shoved the staff in his hand into one of the smaller wounds on the dragon's brow and deployed a shield-shaped barrier centered on that point.

The barrier expanded, ripping open the dragon's head wound as it did. The creature roared as its brow was torn apart by Louis's barrier.

It was an incredibly absurd and grotesque sight. The Magic Corps members looked on, shocked, as Louis counted the time it took for the dragon to stop moving.

*…A little under twenty seconds. Not good enough. It takes too long. Plus, it's difficult to put sharp angles on a defensive barrier. They won't work for anti-dragon combat.*

There had only been one dragon this time, but if any others had

been around, that time would have been fatal. Probably better to go with normal offensive magecraft, in that case.

Louis wanted something with high power that covered a large area. Like the spirit king summoning Rutherford had used once.

*If I close in with flight magecraft and use an attack spell, I can ensure it hits. But flight magecraft costs a lot of mana, and I wouldn't be able to put up a barrier.*

If he used one of his two available spells for flight, he'd have to choose between attack or defense.

When he was up against other people, he could punch and ram them with barriers, but that wouldn't work on dragons.

Anti-dragon combat was nothing like fighting humans. You could hurt a person no matter where you hit them, but with a dragon, you needed a powerful, precise attack to a specific weak spot.

…As Louis was thinking about all this above the dragon's corpse, with its head split open, he suddenly realized the other Magic Corps members were watching him.

They looked terrified.

Louis smiled at them amicably and used as polite a tone as he could muster. "Defensive barrier deployed, sir." He patted himself on the back for how classy he'd just sounded.

He'd slain a dragon. He was acting *properly*. It might take a while for him to become a Sage, but he knew he'd just taken a definite step toward his goal.

Rosalie would probably fall in love with him all over again.

*Just you wait, Rosalie. I'm gonna become a proper Sage, then I'll come to see you again!*

* * *

"I'm sorry. I can't go out with you."

A male student had called Rosalie into a deserted hallway and asked her out. Her response was plain and simple. "I'm sorry," she

said again, turning her back to him.

She walked for a few moments, then ran into her classmate Sonia.

"Oh, Rosalie. If you were in *that* hallway…did someone confess to you?"

Sonia had soft black hair, and her eyes glittered with curiosity. Rosalie said the first thing that came to mind. "Why do you think that?"

"Nobody ever goes in that hallway, right? It's often used for love confessions… Okay, I'm lying. The boys were all talking about how someone was going to confess, so I tricked you by asking a leading question. Was I right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Rosalie headed for the library, Sonia beside her. There were so few girls at medical school that when Sonia spotted another one, she'd wasted no time getting to know her.

"You're pretty popular, Rosalie. It hasn't even been six months since you enrolled. This is the third time I'm aware of."

"Probably because my father is a Sage."

Otherwise, nobody would have any reason to confess to Rosalie; she'd barely said two words to anyone since coming here. Her appearance didn't particularly draw the eye, nor was she especially friendly.

And anyone who would put on a fake smile and make a pass at her simply because she was a Sage's daughter was no one she wanted anything to do with.

"The one you just turned down—they say he's kind. A real gentleman."

"…Well, not everyone prefers people like that."

"Then what *is* your type?"

As a child, Rosalie had always said she wanted a prince like the ones in story books. It was adorable, coming from a little girl. But as she grew, her tastes changed.

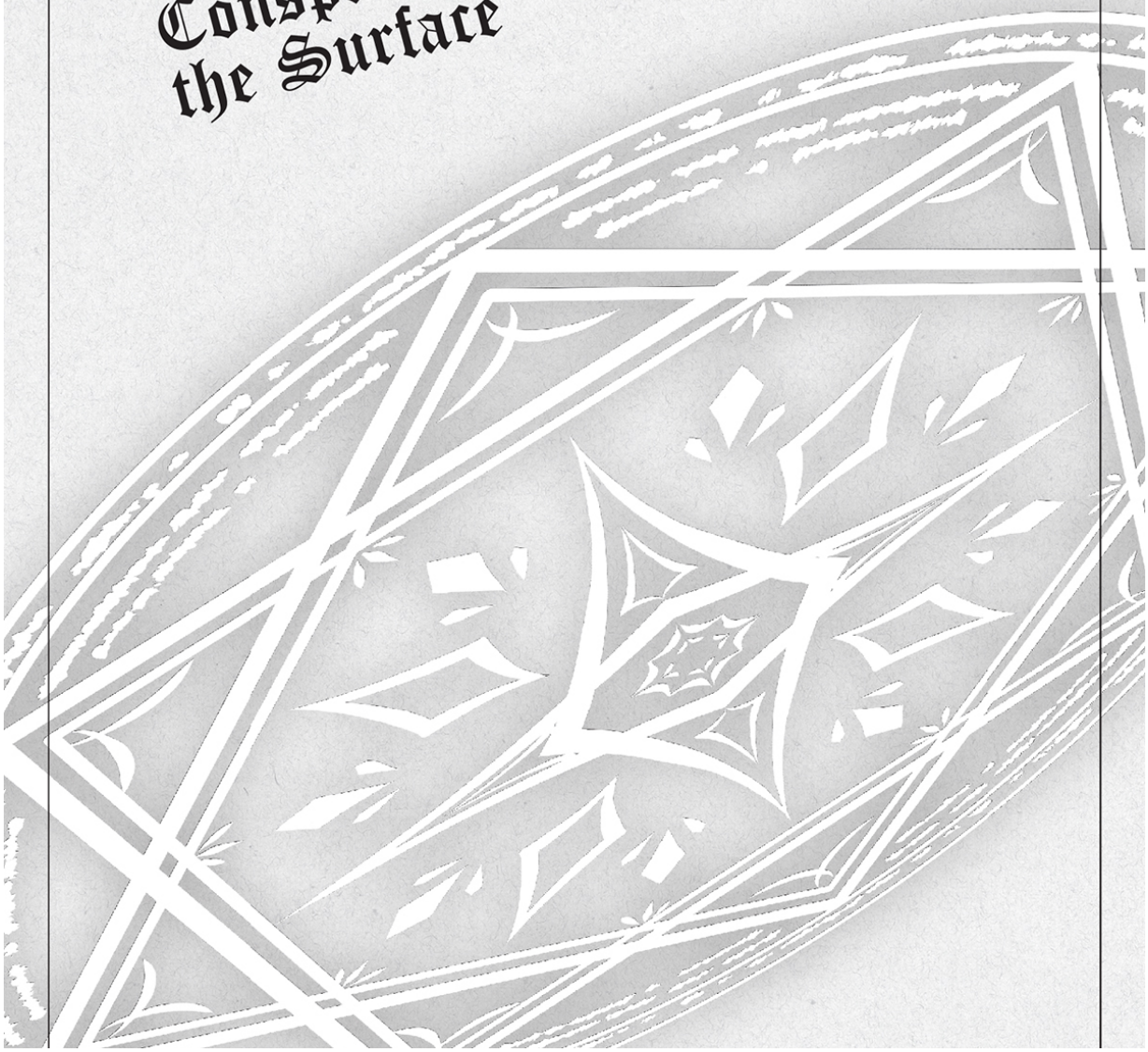
Flitting through her mind was a certain head of dry hair lit by the sun and the toothy grin of an annoying brat.

"…Someone who breaks the mold, I suppose. And who needs a

little attention. Someone who’s a bit of a delinquent.”

SECRET EPISODE

# Conspiracies Beneath the Surface





Adolph Faron, now a research student at Minerva's, hastened across campus.

The topic on everyone's lips at the moment was the appointment of Carla Maxwell, the Starspear Witch, as the newest Sage.

She was one of the greatest geniuses at Minerva's, capable of controlling up to seven spells at once and able to use Starspear, a rare light-element technique.

And whenever Carla came up, people would say how it made sense for one of Rutherford's students, and how perhaps Louis Miller would be next…

*No. That's impossible! They're all morons!*

Every time someone whispered about the possibility of Louis becoming a Sage, Adolph cursed him from the bottom of his heart.

*Just because he uses magecraft in a weird way doesn't mean he's a genius. He's just using boring old barrier techniques.*

Wasn't Adolph far superior to him, with his remote magecraft and ultra-long-distance sniping? And yet the teachers all sang Louis's praises nonstop.

It must have been because he was born poor. They pitied him. Felt sorry for him.

Louis was a nobody, and he didn't even *know* it. What a joke.

Plus, he'd fallen in love with Rosalie, the daughter of a Sage, and now he wanted to get into the Magic Corps. So, starting just before Louis's graduation, Adolph began spreading rumors.

He said that the Aquamancy Mage wanted to marry Rosalie to his own successor. When Louis heard that, he'd realize how unworthy he was and give up.

But Louis had believed the rumors, and then he'd *barged in on the Aquamancy Mage himself* and declared he'd become a Sage. He was a complete idiot. Beyond moronic.

*There's no way he can become a Sage. You need the trust of the Mages Guild and the backing of nobles to do that…*

Adolph had a relative high in the Guild. And more importantly, he had the best backer anyone could ask for.

He left campus and headed for Ragliszilbe, specifically for the best, most expensive inn in town.

In one of its rooms, waiting for him, were two men, each in their fifties. One was tall, his graying blond hair tied back, and the other—white-haired—carried a high mage's staff and had several jewels hanging from his robe.

The former looked at Adolph sharply as he entered. Stopping himself from cringing away from the man's glinting eyes, Adolph bowed deeply.

"I'm terribly sorry for the wait, Your Grace."

"…It matters not. Sit."

Normally, Adolph would have drawn out his greetings, watched the other person's mood, and tried to persuade them of his talents. But he didn't have the courage to do so here—not with the man before him. As ordered, he sat down across from the pair.

The man with the jewels broached the main topic. "So you're Adolph Faron. I saw your presentation at Minerva's. It was very well-put-together."

"…I'm honored you think so, Lord Gem Mage."

This was the Gem Mage Emanuel Darwin. He was famous even among high mages for his incredible talent at making magical items. In Adolph's estimation, he would have been selected as a Sage this time around, had he not been up against the Starspear Witch.

Emanuel was mild-mannered and friendly. The blond-haired man, however—the one Adolph had called *Your Grace*—continued to fix him with a sharp gaze. He was appraising him. Trying to see how much he was worth.

*Don't let him scare you*, Adolph said to himself, then, *Please, take my measure. Know me. And choose me.*

Eventually, the blond-haired man opened his mouth and spoke slowly. "Adolph Faron."

"Yes, sir."

"Both you and this man—the Gem Mage Emanuel Darwin—are to become members of the Seven Sages within ten years."

Adolph shook with surprise, awe, and a powerful joy. *He… He plans to put the Seven Sages under his thumb!*

The Seven Sages were counts of magic, considered directly subordinate to the throne of Ridill. Even the Noble Assembly couldn't easily interfere with them.

Graham Sanders, the Thunderclap Mage.

Sabrina Roseburg, the third Witch of Thorns.

Adeline Albright, the second Abyss Mage.

Mary Harvey, the Starseer Witch.

Bartrand Verde, the Aquamancy Mage.

Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage.

And the newest among them: Carla Maxwell, the Starspear Witch.

All seven of the current Sages were neutral. This man wanted to have pieces of his own among their ranks. And Adolph had just been selected for that purpose.

*If he's chosen me, then he's essentially promised me the position of Sage!*

After all, this man was Darius Nightray, the Duke of Clockford, grandfather to the second prince, and one of the most powerful men in Ridill. One day, Second Prince Felix would ascend the throne, and the duke's political power would only increase.

And Adolph would be one of his favored Sages! He held his singing heart in check and bowed deeply.

"It is an honor, Your Grace."

# Characters So Far

Rise of the Barrier Mage





# Characters

Rise of the Barrier Mage



## Louis Miller

A boy raised in a brothel in an impoverished village. Has poor behavior, but will do whatever it takes to achieve his goals. Confident in his natural talents and has a work ethic to match. Put all his cute points into his sneezes.



## Rosalie Verde

Daughter of the Aquamancy Mage, one of the Seven Sages. Top of her class on the written exams, but a low mana capacity means she has difficulty putting her knowledge to use. Ended up improving only her medical skills in the course of tending to Louis's injuries.



## Owen Wright

Louis's roommate. He is a year younger than Louis, loves coffee, and wants to join the Magic Corps. Though earnest and hard-working, he always leaves a mess. He thinks having all his things scattered about his room is more efficient and has no plans to change his ways.



## Adolph Faron

Louis's classmate. Specializes in remote and long-distance sniping magecraft. His father is close to the Duke of Clockford, and so he supports the second prince. He and Louis are like oil and water.



## Carla Maxwell

Nicknamed the Starspear Witch. She is Rutherford's other apprentice and is older than Louis. A genius who can maintain up to seven spells at once and use a light-elemental spell called "Starspear." A traveler at heart, she often leaves the lab for extended periods.



## Gideon Rutherford

Nicknamed the Mage of Violet Smoke. Teaches advanced formula application at Minerva's. Was known as the Grotto Mage when he was young and belonged to the mage unit of the Royal Knights.



## Lionel Brem Edward Ridill

The first prince of Ridill. His mother was a princess of the Kingdom of Landor. He is tall with stern features, but is kind of heart. Swordplay is his specialty, but his magecraft skills aren't as impressive; Louis and Rosalie frequently help him with his studies.



## William Macragan

Nicknamed the Waterbite Mage. Teaches practical magecraft at Minerva's. Incredibly powerful in any water-laden battlefield. Held the number one record for water dragons slain in his youth. Retired because he gets seasick easily.

# Other Characters


## Terrence Abanethy

The boy who was originally supposed to be Louis's roommate. Victim of the cesspool incident.

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## Allison

Teaches law at Minerva's. Relatively young, with a bright, cheerful personality, but has a bad habit of gambling. Seeks thrills in everyday life.

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## Redmond

Teaches magical creature studies. Abnormally good at concealing himself, and keeps setting new records for surviving inter-laboratory magic battles.

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## Claris Maeger

Taught barrier techniques at Minerva's. The Watermirror Mage's pupil. After retiring, she began instructing the children in her neighborhood.

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## Solow

Teaches magic battle class. Formerly of the Magic Corps. Looks like a stickler at first, but is actually quite sloppy and moody. The type who doesn't mind if she's wearing her socks on the wrong feet.

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## Woodman

The resident doctor at Minerva's infirmary. Amazing at his job when he works up the effort to do it, and has connections to magic research groups and medical science associations. Only has energy once every few years.

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## Goah

The owner of Goah's Place. A big, tall, bearded father. Worked the eatery with his wife, but after she passed and he needed more hands, his childhood friend Lowe came to help.

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## Lowe

An employee at Goah's Place. A skinny, middle-aged man. Originally worked on a noble's estate, but left after being treated unfairly. Reunited with Goah soon after and now helps out around the eatery.

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## Sally

Goah's daughter. A charming girl who brings in customers. Casually became friends with Rosalie, and every time she comes to the eatery, Sally chats with her, making Louis scowl.

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## Nate

Lionel's attendant. A baby-faced man from the Kingdom of Landor, who came to Ridill with Queen Vilma when she married the king. Has sworn loyalty to Queen Vilma.

# Afterword



Thank you for purchasing the first volume of *Secrets of the Silent Witch –another–: Rise of the Barrier Mage.*

This novel is a side story to the *Silent Witch* series, but it's actually based on a short story I submitted before beginning the web version of the main series.

In the original short story, Rosalie Verde was the main character, and the story progressed almost entirely from her perspective.

This book is a massively overhauled version of that story.

When I was first approached about making the short story into a book, I imagined it would fit into a single volume. My reply was enthusiastic: "I'd be glad to put my all into writing it!"

A few days later, when my editor suggested making it a two-part series, I was astonished. When I said I'd put my all into it, my editor decided to secure a two-volume slot in advance.

That was how, thanks to the thoughtfulness of my talented editor, this side story turned into a two-volume series. If I hadn't had two volumes, the part that takes place at school would have been cut almost entirely. It is no exaggeration to say my editor is to thank for its inclusion.

I'd like to use this space to express my incredible gratitude. Getting to write so much has made me very happy.

Ms. Fujimi, thank you for providing wonderful illustrations even for this side story.

I keep looking at the gorgeous cover illustration, thinking how

beautifully the composition came together. It gives a very different impression than the covers featuring Monica for the main series.

The color illustrations have so much story packed into only a few pictures. They really are wonderful.

Thank you for expressing the world of the story, at times vividly, at times warmly, and at still other times with gentleness.

Every time Ms. Fujimi creates an illustration for me, I find myself feeling guilty about something: the way my characters treat their staffs.

The characters in this series all have so little respect for their staffs. In this side story, Louis stops carrying his short staff midway through, the reason being that it gets in the way of his rampaging. And Monica, the main character of the main story, uses her staff as a drying pole and nothing else.

I'm always at my wit's end, thinking what an awful thing I've done to Ms. Fujimi after she designed such wonderful staffs for my characters.

One day, I'd like to introduce a mage who takes very good care of their staff.

Regarding future books, Volume 7 of *Secrets of the Silent Witch* is planned to release in February 2024 in Japan.

For Volume 7, I intend for Louis—having matured into a proper adult—to energetically go wild.

The second and final volume of *Secrets of the Silent Witch –another–: Rise of the Barrier Mage*, wherein Louis, having left his rowdy youth behind him, strives to be a gentleman and a wonderful Sage, is planned to release in spring 2024 in Japan.

I'll be putting my all into writing the second volume as well, so I hope you can give me your continued support.

Matsuri Isora

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