

III

Shusui
Hazuki

Illustration: necomi

My **Magical Career** at
Court

Living the Dream After My Nightmare
Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild!



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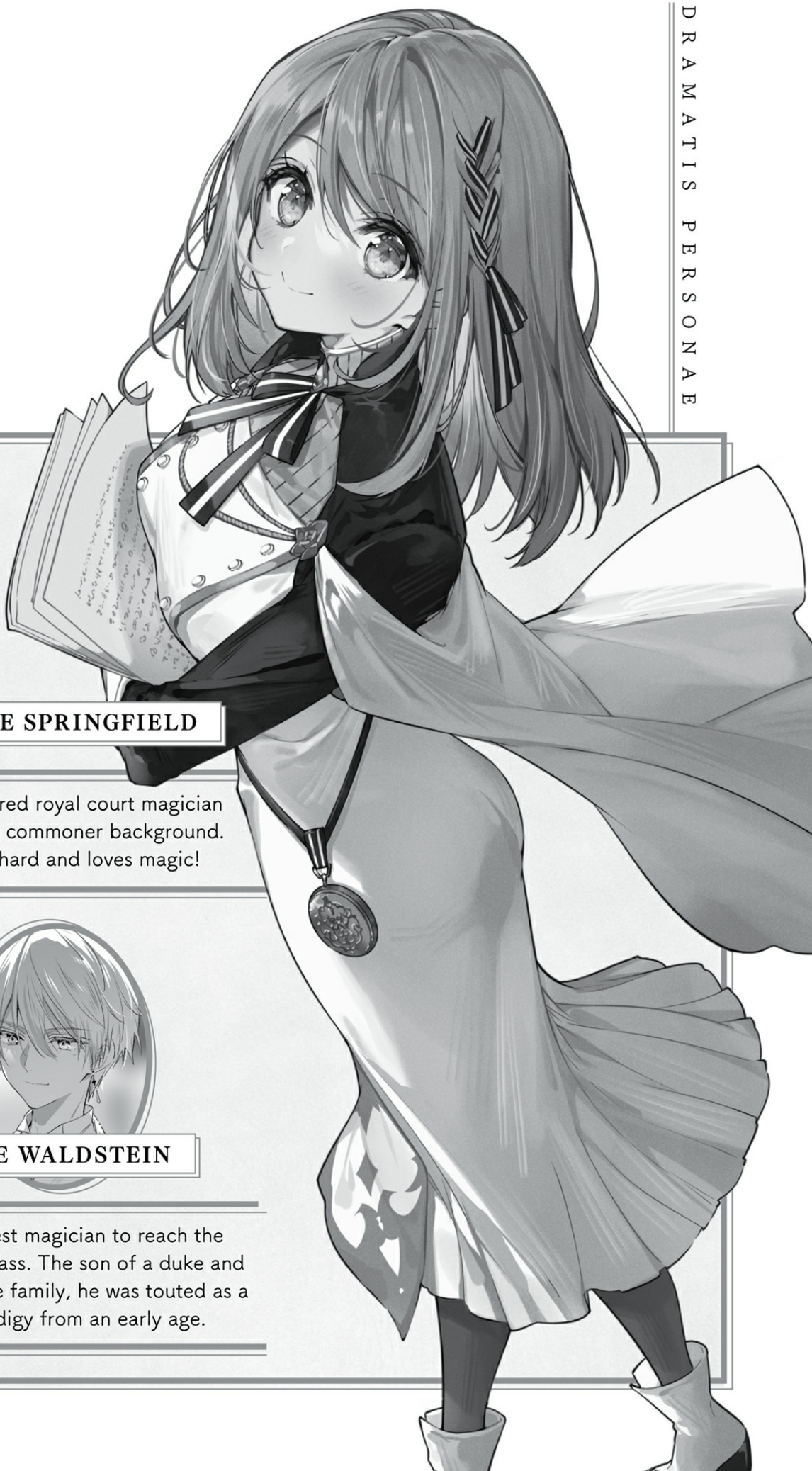
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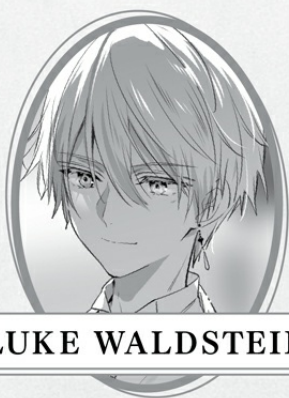
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NOELLE SPRINGFIELD

A small-statured royal court magician rookie from a commoner background. She works hard and loves magic!



LUKE WALDSTEIN

The youngest magician to reach the adamantite class. The son of a duke and heir to a noble family, he was touted as a child prodigy from an early age.



EVANGELINE RUNEFOREST

Queen of the elves, and one of the Three Mystic Rulers. As one of the strongest magicians on the western continent, she has won the last three World Magic Championships.



RYAN ARCHBRET

Lieutenant of the First Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. He is a weaponsmithing magic user with an impressive record in one-on-one magic duels.



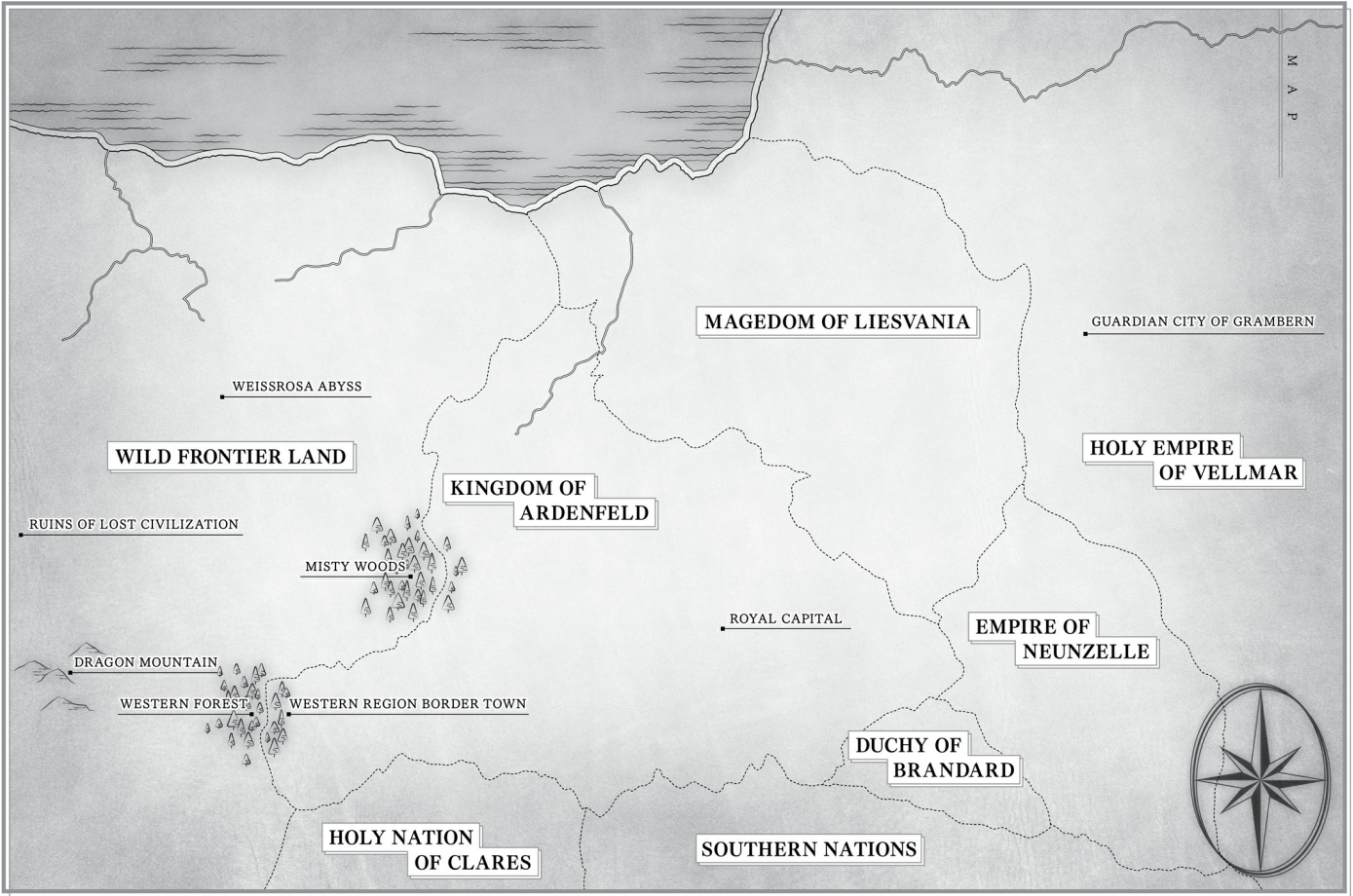
GAWAIN STARK

Captain of the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division, and Noelle's boss. Despite his easygoing nature, he is one of the magi, the kingdom's highest-ranking magicians.



LETITIA LISETTE-STONE

Lieutenant of the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division who helps Gawain. Noelle admires her mature personality.



Volume 2 Synopsis

“Noelle Springfield, we don’t need a good-for-nothing like you at our workshop. You’re fired.”

Noelle was working at a mages’ guild in her hometown so that she could take care of her mother after graduating from a prestigious academy of magic. Fortunately, her mother recovered, but Noelle still needed to put up with the mean, prejudiced guild chief, who finally fired her. She was devastated after being cut off from a career in magic, but then an old school friend appeared.

Luke, Noelle’s erstwhile rival, had risen through the ranks as a royal court magician and reached the adamantite class faster than anybody else in history. He told Noelle that he wanted to nominate her as his mentee in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division.

Noelle soon began working as a royal court magician, but although she had Luke as a mentor, nobody at the court was willing to believe in a commoner like her. However, even with the odds against her, she smashed through the wall designed to test new recruits’ magical abilities, passed the so-called Sixty Seconds of Blood, saved a visiting queen, fought a wyvern, stamped out a sinister crime syndicate’s illegal weapons operation, and even held her own against a master swordsman at the Royal Invitational Tournament. She took on every new challenge using her talent and hard work, her bonds with her coworkers, and her devotion to magic!

These two young magicians—Noelle, the magic-loving commoner, and Luke, the heir to a noble household—have begun to usher in a new era in the kingdom!

But what’s in store for Noelle when her next task is to represent the kingdom at the World Magic Championships?

At that moment, everyone realized...the girl was not human.

Prologue: The Story So Far

When she'd enrolled in a magic academy in the royal capital nine years earlier, she hadn't stood out whatsoever. The academy was a prestigious institution that attracted the finest talents from all over the kingdom. Compared to them, she was a nobody, and certainly not someone worth talking about.

The other new students were under the impression that she was an ignorant country bumpkin. "You're from the outskirts of the western region? It can't have been easy to come all the way here," they said.

"I studied by myself," she told them. "I'm lucky I passed the entrance exam!"

Her classmates were reassured that she was beneath them, so they talked to her without worrying about her opinions of them.

One day, a classmate said, "Hmm? You don't know about the World Magic Championships?"

"The world magic what?"

Seeing her befuddled look, the classmate sighed. "It's only the biggest tournament of magic in the western continent. Each country sends highly trained national representatives to compete. Recently, the Fairy Queen Evangeline Runeforest has been taking part too. She's one of the Three Mystic Rulers, you know. Ever since she got involved, the tournament's been getting more and more prestig—"

"Oooh! I don't really get it, but that sounds super cool!"

As she loved magic more than the average student, she immediately began to pore through the records of past tournaments with wild abandon.

"Hey, Liz, check this out!" she raved one morning. "Did you know this person was the first to successfully use teleportation magic?" Day after day, she was

absorbed in heavy volumes found in the academy's library annex. "These people are all so incredible! One day, I wanna be the kind of magician who can compete at the WMC too!"

She wasn't shy about vocalizing her fantasy.

As if you ever could, the others around her thought. To become a national representative, one had to clear the famously brutal hurdle of passing the examination to join the Royal Court Magicians' Division, and then continuously produce outstanding results. The road to the WMC was unbelievably steep and unforgiving. It wasn't something that some country girl could do. Nevertheless, she forged ahead, oblivious to everyone's doubtful stares. Her heart was full of hope for the future.

To think that back in those days, I felt like I was capable of anything...

Her work clothes were bedraggled. She had deep, dark circles under her eyes from hour upon hour of intense labor. Only a binder clip held her shaggy, unkempt hair in place.

So much had happened since she first went to that academy of magic. She was now an adult, working at a backwoods mages' guild. Her quotas were assigned without any consideration for the actual situation in the workplace, and her monthly overtime exceeded four hundred hours. The higher-ups paid her no attention, treating her as a burden. Out of everyone in her graduating class, she had ended up in the worst work environment.

"Didn't I tell you to get this finished by morning?!" her boss screamed, irrational as ever. "It's no wonder you can't do it if you always decide it's impossible before you start. It's your job to come up with a way to do it! Don't forget, a waste of space like you is totally disposable!"

Just the thought that they might get rid of her made her breath catch in her throat. There were very few jobs available in her rural town where she would be able to use magic. Even at a local mages' guild, she was made to feel useless. Old-fashioned ideas still held sway there, so just being a woman would put her at a disadvantage when it came to job hunting. All things considered, if she were to lose this job, finding alternative employment would be a tall order to

say the least.

“Please!” she begged, frantically bowing. “Leave it to me! I’ll make sure to meet the next quota!”

With that, she managed to hold on to her job. People called her a clueless ditz, but even she could recognize that things were going badly.

I can’t handle this job. I’m not cut out to be a magician, she thought.

She’d succeeded up to a point at the academy, but she’d only been a student then. Real life wasn’t so forgiving. Some things would always be a fantasy no matter how hard she wished. She was clever enough to know that.

But still, I don’t want to give up on myself.

She didn’t care if people laughed at her for being naive. They could mock her all they wanted. She had chosen to devote her life to her one true love—magic. She just wanted to get at least a little bit better at it every day.

Okay, let’s do this!

She pulled up the sleeves of her tattered work shirt and got back to business.



I woke up from a funny old dream. I’d remembered what it was like to be a child, innocently believing I could fly, and then to grow up and learn my limits.

Some things had changed, but others had stayed the same. There were still dreams I hadn’t achieved. Not everything in life could go the way I wanted. There were things that I couldn’t achieve, however hard I tried.

And I was so careful to drink milk every day!

It was amazing how little I’d grown since I started at the academy of magic nine years ago. I’d tried plenty of stretches and other methods to try and become taller, but it was pretty much a total failure. Then again, I’d had a bad habit of staying up too late after getting engrossed in grimoires, so I had to accept some responsibility too.

Apart from that, there was another dream I hadn’t achieved. It always made me a little sad to think about it. *I never became the kind of magician I wanted to*

be back then.

I'd flopped at a mages' guild in the middle of nowhere, and found myself clinging to the job for dear life just to be able to keep working with magic. It seemed laughable that I'd ever dreamed of participating in the World Magic Championships...

Wait a minute.

A lot had happened in the meantime. Luke had invited me to join the Royal Court Magicians' Division, and thanks to my hard work, I'd earned lots of praise. It had all led to me being selected as a national representative for the World Magic Championships...or something.

Nah, that can't have happened. Not in my wildest dreams.

I was a realistic adult without pretensions, so I knew it was all a fleeting dream that had come to me after being stretched to my limits in my brutal work environment. Now I would open my eyes to see the mountain of work I hadn't finished...

Oh no! I need to get up early to meet my deadline!

"I'd better get to work!"

I leaped up and looked around. What I saw was nothing like what I'd expected. I felt a gentle draft and smelled a subtle, flowery scent. I was in a clean, cool office.

"Sorry for interrupting you during your lunch break, Noelle," I heard someone say. "A person from the Central Administration Office wants to talk to you this afternoon."

"The Central Administration Office?" I repeated blearily. After getting up, my thoughts were still sluggish.

"Yep. I think it's something to do with the WMC. You've been penciled in as a representative, remember?" My superior watched me as I froze, then clutched my head and screamed internally. "Your reactions are always so *funny!*"

The Central Administration Office was a department that dealt primarily with

human resources and financial affairs in the Royal Court Magicians' Division.

"It's a top-class department in the organization," I'd been told once at after-work drinks. "People say that getting in there is a surefire way to climb the corporate ladder."

Of the top members of the court magicians' division—those in the adamantite class and above—around half had worked in the Central Administration Office. I learned that Letitia, lieutenant of the Third Unit, had worked there before she took on her current role.

"She was really something. She was so icy and stern, they called her the Iron Lady," my coworker had explained. "She was constantly exposing corruption among nobles and clergymen with government positions. I heard it caused her some problems, though."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. The truth is, it's not always as simple as doing the right thing, doing it well, and getting the respect you deserve for it. She made some enemies and took a lot of heat. They'd come up with all these wild claims, like saying it was a setup designed to promote social progress for women. In the end, when it came time for her to be promoted, she got transferred to the Third Unit."

"For her protection, right?"

"Nah, it was because the newly installed Captain Gawain had gone too far in treating his employees and ended up in a crazy amount of debt. People in the division were concerned that he was in so much trouble that he'd need money from them, so they wanted to put a stop to it."

"Oh..."

Even if people I knew had had a hard time there, I understood that the Central Administration Office was home to some of the real elites of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. I had to brace myself to make my way there. I had a stern expression on my face as I walked nervously down the long corridor. And I wasn't the only one—just ahead of me was my dear friend Luke, looking equally serious.

As the youngest person ever promoted to the adamantite class, he had

history with the Central Administration Office. I'd heard that when he was a new recruit, he'd ruffled some feathers by filling his preferred position questionnaire with comments like "I definitely don't want to be in the Central Administration Office" and "I can progress faster in the field; I'll simply prove my worth." When he'd then gone on to be as good as his word and rise through the ranks faster than anyone before him, it wasn't so surprising that people who thought they'd made the right choice for their own career progress had been unamused. When I'd joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division, it turned out that hiring me had also been something Luke decided alone, without alerting anybody.

Marius, the chief of HR, had really scared me back then. Thinking about him reminded me of all the difficulties I'd endured on my first day. Even now, any time he looked at me, I'd get frazzled and worry I was being tested. I suppose I still couldn't shake the nervousness I'd felt turning up to my interview with him—and my less than stellar impression on him—with all my other bombed interviews still stuck on my mind. My current anxiety must have been at least partly due to those feelings.

I came to a stop a little behind Luke. As he knocked on the door before us, the sound echoed around the quiet corridor.

"Enter," a voice called out.

"Excuse us." Luke opened the door and walked into the room with a graceful bow.

I followed him in, also bowing. Once I was in the room, though, my mind went blank as I spotted the people filling the seats on the opposite side of the room.

First, there was the Sixth Unit captain and director of the Technological Development Bureau, Theodore Gide—also known as the Creator Magician. Then there was Maurice Heidenstam, the so-called Logic Magician, who led the Fifth Unit and the Magical Potions Research Section. The kingdom's most talented user of healing magic was there too—Vicente Cera, captain of the Fourth Unit, nicknamed the Savior Magician. I also recognized two of the other magi: Gawain Stark, the Third Unit's captain and known as the Hellfire Magician for his great command of fire-type magic, and Chris Sherlock, the Silver

Magician, who was an ice-type magic expert and captain of the Second Unit.

The captains and lieutenants of each unit are all here!

There were only seven magi in the kingdom, and six of them were in the room. The only one absent was the secretary-general, who was in the middle of time travel research that could shape the course of history if it succeeded. The mere fact that these people were present was sufficient evidence that something was different about the World Magic Championships this time around.

The atmosphere was intense. I felt so on edge that I could hardly breathe.

“I would like to speak to the two of you before moving on to other matters,” an old man said.

The look on his deeply creased face was enough to send a chill down my spine. After the absent secretary-general, this man was the highest-ranking member of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division. Captain of the First Unit and leader of the Central Administration Office, he was the so-called Glimmering Magician, Ernest Maeterlinck.

“Luke Waldstein, Noelle Springfield,” the magus continued. “You performed bravely in the Weissrosa Abyss. I understand that it is largely thanks to your efforts that our nation, having been slow to react initially, was able to forge a relationship with adventurers in the area ahead of delegates from other countries. In recognition of your distinguished service, Noelle Springfield, you are to be promoted to the gold class.”

I gasped as he held out a pocket watch toward me. In my student days, I’d been useless at any subject outside of magic. I knew nothing about high society, and my manners in pompous situations like this were the worst of the worst. So far, I’d usually managed to get by as long as I could copy whatever Luke was doing, but I was the only one getting a promotion here. That meant that I had no example to follow as I navigated how to appropriately accept the pocket watch.

Just relax. Stay cool. Simply reach out and take the watch.

Under the watchful eyes of the biggest names in the organization, I carefully

stepped toward Captain Ernest. I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't keep track of anything else going on, and I failed to notice the tiny bump where the edge of one rug met another.

"Wuh-oh!" I blurted out as I tripped and landed flat on my face. At the same time, one of my shoes flew off.

Yikes! Okay, I just need to get up nice and casually, like nothing happened, and put my shoe back on.

I suppressed my inner turmoil and looked around with all the grace I could muster. Fortunately, I spotted my shoe right away. Less fortunately, it was atop the head of Captain Ernest, the most powerful man in the room.

I see. So this is where it all ends.

Having felt the cold touch of death, I bowed solemnly as Captain Ernest handed me the pocket watch and my shoe, before I walked back and stood next to Luke. The room was silent, as if nobody wanted to address what had just happened.

Soon enough, the meeting proceeded like everything was normal, but I was left with no memory of what they talked about.



I was too distracted by my own problems to realize it at the time, but that meeting had revealed an added significance to this edition of the World Magic Championships.

For the first time in the history of the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, there was to be an eighth magus, and there were currently three candidates for the title. One was the Third Unit lieutenant and the most decorated female magician in the kingdom, Letitia Lisette-Stone. The next was the Second Unit lieutenant and head of the Improper Magic Usage Bureau, Seamus Glass. Finally, there was the First Unit lieutenant, the Royal Court Magicians' Division's most successful duelist, known as a master of weaponsmithing magic—Ryan Archbret.

"Out of those three, Ryan is the one people say is the closest to becoming a magus," I was told. "It's hard to ignore the importance of him being chosen as the captain of the national team at the WMC. He'll be treating this tournament

as his own chance to prove himself in battle. There's hardly anyone in the whole wide world who could beat him in a one-on-one duel. It's likely that this tournament will decide who becomes the new magus."

However, the person who wanted to become the eighth magus most of all was Luke. My old friend was working to become the greatest magician in all the land so that he could lay his hands on something that he was determined to obtain. He would do whatever it took to make his greatest wish come true and become the youngest magus of all time.

This tournament was to be contested by representatives from all over the world—but privately, these magicians had their eyes on another prize.

Chapter 1: A Special Warm-Up Match

A few days had passed since the incident where I'd made a complete fool of myself and hit Captain Ernest on the head with my shoe. As soon as I'd realized what I'd done, I'd given up on everything. I had thought it was time to meet my maker, but somehow I made it out alive without even facing much in the way of punishment. That didn't stop me from having recurring nightmares, though.

"Announcement! Noelle Springfield, you're fired!"

"Noooo!"

Now that I was getting a meager eight hours of decent sleep each night, I'd begun trying to soothe my nerves by carrying around the transport whistle the dragon gave me. All it would take was one blow of that little silver whistle to solve everything.

"Announcement! Noelle Springfield, you're fired!"

"Dragon, come to me!"

"Oh no! This is a disaster!"

"Dragon-Please-Throw-the-Fight Magic Puuuunch!"

"Noelle, you drove away the dragon!"

"You saved the kingdom!"

That was my incredibly smart and sophisticated strategy for avoiding dismissal—but, of course, it was a last resort. After the dragon had been so kind as to give me this precious whistle, I wanted to avoid summoning it merely for my own protection. For one thing, I would feel bad about getting the dragon to act as a villain when it had done nothing wrong.

With that in mind, in my great wisdom I had begun work on an alternative method to avoid getting fired. That plan was Operation Kick Butt at the World Magic Championships to Prove I'm Useful to the Royal Court Magicians' Division!

Some of the most advanced nations in the world of magic would be participating in the tournament. Of course, there was the Holy Empire of Vellmar, but then there were also the likes of the Magedom of Liesvania and the Duchy of Brandard. They would be tough competition, but that made me even more confident that progressing through the tournament would send my reputation through the roof.

I didn't have experience in formal one-on-one magic duels, but I'd dueled with Captain Gawain, and I'd faced the master swordsman Eric Rashford at the Royal Invitational Tournament. Since I'd been chosen as a national representative, the people making the decisions must have thought I was strong enough for this challenge. For that matter, maybe I would even do better than Luke or Lieutenant Ryan, and people would see me as the kingdom's greatest talent!

"Wow, Noelle. You're even more of a genius than Luke!"

"Heh heh."

I smiled as I envisioned a future where everyone piled praise on me. I'd had my share of serious incidents since joining the Royal Court Magicians' Division, but I felt like I'd done a pretty decent job. Could it be that I was actually good at this?

I was basking in my dreamy mood when I turned up to the first day of training. The three national representatives were going to face each other one at a time in practice duels.

I chuckled to myself as I approached Luke. *Prepare to experience my incredible power, now that I've built up my strength!* Brimming with expectation, I established my magic sequence and got ready to beat Luke to a pulp.

I lost... I lost hard.

After training on the first day, I was staring sadly into space, having just been clearly and resoundingly beaten several times in a row. Our practice duels had revealed how horrifically strong the other two were compared to me.

"It's out of your control," a coworker said afterward. "Ryan is one of the

world's best at one-on-one duels. And Luke has all kinds of natural talent."

No, I thought. You've got Luke all wrong.

I'd known Luke for long enough to know better. He might have come across like he'd had it in the bag from the start, but behind that lay a vast amount of preparation.

He's had so much practice in one-on-one duels to get ready for the tournament!

Duels required not only pure magic ability, but also specialized skills for one-on-one contests: the ability to work out what your opponent was thinking, tactical shrewdness, and the strategic know-how and judgment to respond to that opponent's spells with the most suitable tactics and maneuvers.

When I'd fought Captain Gawain, his fighting style hadn't taken advantage of my tactical weaknesses at all. Then, when it came to the Royal Invitational Tournament, Luke had come up with a game plan that papered over my flaws.

I wasn't good enough. As things stood, it was obvious that I didn't have what it took to fight as a national representative. And if nothing changed, Luke would leave me in the dust again. I would be thrashed over and over again.

I can't stand being left in his dust.

There was still time. There was still a chance. I was determined to improve my weak areas enough to be able to compete in the World Magic Championships. I selected the quickest route I could think of to become strong enough to match Luke at the tournament.

"Lieutenant Ryan, please teach me how to duel."

Ryan Archbret was the lieutenant of the First Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. He used his own system of weaponsmithing magic to manifest huge spears of fire.

I'd heard that his path into this career was unlike that of most other royal court magicians. Having attended a regional magic academy, he'd been a total unknown in his younger years. He hadn't gone to university, instead working as

an adventurer while studying for the Royal Court Magicians' Division entrance exam. He had passed on his fourth attempt.

After spending his days as an adventurer learning to work efficiently from taking on F-rank requests to unload building materials, he'd proved himself to be an unusually down-to-earth court magician. As such, he had gone on to be extremely reliable and hardworking, and his outstanding ability to push his own limits had brought him within reach of promotion to the top rank of magus.

He was the polar opposite of Luke, who had been treated as a prodigy since he was little, turning him into an obnoxious brat.

Anybody would surely take one look at Ryan's story and feel that he deserved to become the next magus, and I had to agree. I wondered what he would be like in person. I was sure that where Luke was overconfident and pretentious, Ryan would be modest and amiable.

I eagerly awaited his answer, letting the clock tick by several seconds.

"So you want to confront your problems head-on, huh?" he responded energetically. His hair was wine red and his skin was tanned. He gave me a cheerful nod and continued. "No problem. I'll teach you. You ready for this, Springfield? Our potential is limitless! See this plant? It's called bamboo, and it grows in the Far East. It stands strong through wind and snow, always raising its face toward the sky. So beautiful and strong. Just like this plant, let's battle with all our might. I'm sure you can do it. From now on, you and I are bamboo!"



“Uh...”

He wasn't what I'd thought he would be like. He seemed really passionate. Just from talking to him, I felt like the room had started heating up.

Can we really see eye to eye when I'm a coolheaded, intellectual lady and he's like this? Is this going to work out okay...?

Feeling a little nervous, I began my private training with Lieutenant Ryan.



It was still only the first day of training for the WMC team, and nobody had imagined *he* would appear.

“Y-Your Royal Highness...”

The Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld had come, flanked by the captain of the Second Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division—Chris Sherlock, the Silver Magician—and the leader of the Order of Royal Knights—Eric Rashford, the Undefeated Master of the Blade. The prince was somebody with such towering intellect that people said he could see into the future.

Prince Michael put a finger to his immaculate lips to avoid causing a fuss.

“Thank you very much for coming, Your Royal Highness,” an attendant said. “Please let me prepare a seat for you.”

“No need. Don't do anything special on my account. I don't wish to be in anybody's way.”

“Very well.”

The prince's golden eyes flashed as he watched the two magicians training in earnest before him.

“Here we go! Ready to run, Springfield?”

“Yes, Lieutenant Ryan! Let's keep running until the sun goes down!”

Those two are a remarkably good match, the crown prince thought. Ryan Archbret and Noelle Springfield have a good deal in common. I can imagine that Gawain Stark was expecting a chemical reaction such as this when he recommended the girl.

Though there was no hint of it in his outer appearance, Gawain was surprisingly resourceful, and his ability to watch people and concoct plans was excellent. Prince Michael admired that about him.

I also know that she's the type to learn from direct experience. It's when she has her back against the wall, with nowhere left to run, that she exhibits her full power. What kind of performance will we see when she reaches the tournament itself? It's a truly fascinating prospect.

A slight smile formed on his lips, and he turned to look at somebody else a little farther away. *And then there's him. He made his demands with such theatrical verve, and I understand that he has been hard at work behind the scenes. But can he make his wish come true, I wonder?*

All of this was only the tip of the iceberg, though. There was a deeper story in the background.

I hear there's been suspicious activity going on within the empire's borders too. I can think of one person it might be appropriate to contact... The prince seemed amused by the thought. *I know the secretary-general of the Royal Court Magicians' Division—the Split-Second Magician—is interested in the Guardian City of Grambern, where the tournament is held. Maybe the magus will make an appearance if our Ardenfeld WMC competitors fall into any danger.*

Only the crown prince and the king himself had the means to communicate with the Split-Second Magician.

Prince Michael smiled. *Yes, this is getting interesting.*



The special training program for the World Magic Championships national representatives had begun. The focus of Luke's attention was the man said to be the closest in the Royal Court Magicians' Division to becoming a magus at the time: the First Unit lieutenant, Ryan Archbret.

He was from a once-great family known for mastery of water-type magic, but Ryan had not inherited those abilities. At the age of twelve, he had failed the entrance test to attend an illustrious magic academy. He'd then honed his skills at an obscure regional academy. Once he graduated, he took on manual labor

while continuing his studies. After four attempts, he had secured a job as a royal court magician. With his tenacity and refusal to give in under pressure, he had gone on to produce astounding results in the area of magical weapons and climbed his way up to become lieutenant of the First Unit.

His track record is flawless, Luke thought. His interpersonal skills are great too. There's no sign of him being involved in any impropriety or suspicious activities. He's regarded as an all-around decent person. Luke turned his blue eyes toward Ryan. *Keeping up with him will be a huge challenge.*

When Luke found any dirt on an opponent, he'd use it to gain the upper hand. However, it was hard to compete with somebody with a reputation as good as the lieutenant's. Perhaps some of this difficulty was due to Ryan reminding Luke of somebody he'd been watching over all this time. Maybe it was because from Luke's calculating perspective, there was something admirable about being purehearted.

Nonetheless, I mustn't work myself up too much.

He was trying to stay calm, but he couldn't deny that the situation had already begun to change in concerning ways.

"Here we go! Ready to run, Springfield?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Ryan! Let's keep running until the sun goes down!"

As an energetic person, she'd always tended to get along with athletic types. As a student, she had spent time with upperclassmen from the sports clubs, battling it out to become the academy's biggest eater. Her interactions with Ryan were not a surprising development.

Even so, Luke wasn't pleased to see the two of them getting along like two peas in a pod.

Ugh, this is ridiculous. I need to grow up.

He knew his feelings were foolish. As the heir to a noble household, he was in no position to ever marry her anyway. If they were to get too close, he would surely hurt her, and it was possible she wasn't even interested.

All he could allow himself to do was to be her friend and look out for her. If

she found love elsewhere, then as long as it was right for her, he would have to congratulate her. He truly wanted to be able to say that if she was happy, he would be happy too. And yet...

Why must I be like this? he thought, irritated with himself, as the first day of training came to an end. He returned to the Waldstein family villa, where an old, monocled butler greeted him.

“Welcome home, Master Luke.”

“Thank you.”

As he walked through the spacious hallway, Luke listened to the butler’s reports on the amount of rainfall in the family’s domain and expected crop yield, investments made to prepare for monster outbreaks, efforts to encourage cultivation of local products with a high market value, and plans for windbreak planting.

They arrived at a room right at the back of the villa’s second floor. The room was totally dark, save for a few rays of light peeking in through gaps in the curtains.

“How are things going?” Luke asked. In the dark, the words seemed to carry a different weight.

“So far, everything is moving forward according to plan, Master Luke,” the butler said with a nod. “On the subject of winning a promotion to the rank of magus, so far we have one-third of the influential nobles in the court on your side. It still depends on achieving something that would convince the neutrals, but there’s a very real possibility that we can turn the situation around such that you may be promoted.”

“Thank you. That’s good. Too good, even.” Luke closed his eyes. Though he spoke quietly, in that room, silent as the depths of the ocean, his next words echoed. “At last... At last, we’ve reached this point.”

His tone sounded pensive, heavy with years of aspiration. All this time, he had been seeking this chance: the opportunity to tear up the records and become the youngest magus of all time. Whatever his lineage and social position might say about him, whatever outsiders might think, such a staggering achievement

would silence any doubters.

He would be within reach of becoming the greatest magician in the kingdom, and nobody would be able to question his choices anymore—even if he wanted to marry a commoner.

“However, Master Luke, I would advise against raising your expectations too high... If you are to set such a remarkable new record, winning over the neutrals is no easy task.”

“I know. It won’t be enough to finish second. I’ll have to win.”

“The World Magic Championships will be a formidable challenge. Each country’s national representatives will be fighting as hard as they can to prove themselves. I am sure many are also training to improve their specialized skills in one-on-one contests. Moreover, the power of the elven magicians is beyond what humans—”

“Do you mean to say I can’t win?” Luke retorted, icy.

With great strain, the old butler continued. “Naturally, I would not say that under normal circumstances. I truly believe that there is no greater magician than yourself, Master Luke. However...” He hesitated, unable to find the words for a moment. “Did the doctor not forbid you from competing?”

What the butler said was true. Luke had fought an intense battle with a Gatekeeper in the unexplored areas of the Weissrosa Abyss. He had paid the price for failing to look after himself at that time. The wounds on his back were so severe that even the Waldstein family’s celebrated private physician couldn’t help him recover fully.

“In the previous tournament, nobody from Ardenfeld even made it to the finals,” Luke said. “The WMC is attracting more attention than ever before. Everyone wants to win. If I can do it, nothing will be beyond my reach. There is no greater opportunity than this. I have to give it my all, or it’ll end in failure. I’m sure of it.” He paused. “I *will* compete, and I *will* win. Mark my words.”

A few days had passed since the announcement of who would be sent as Ardenfeld’s national representatives. In his office, Captain Gawain Stark and

Lieutenant Letitia Lisette-Stone of the Third Unit were talking.

“You want me to accompany the team to the WMC?” Letitia repeated.

She knew there was more to this story—something she couldn’t ignore. She knew this for a fact thanks to the hourglass sitting between them. It was a level-4 relic used to prevent outsiders from listening in. The finely ground magicite inside it fell in a narrow stream.

“Right. It’s been decided that we should send an escort we can trust,” Gawain replied, nodding. “There’s reason to doubt some people’s motives.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve found evidence of a plot to prevent Noelle from being a national representative.”

Letitia’s eyes opened a little wider as her voice became no louder than a whisper. “Do people within our division want to use force to reverse the decision to select her?”

“No, probably elsewhere in the court. Nobles in the Royalist faction are strongly opposed to selecting a commoner.”

“Do they believe that success for a commoner poses a threat to their vested interests and aristocratic privileges?”

Hearing about a revolt by the Royalists reminded Letitia of something that had happened three years earlier. There had been all kinds of underhanded tricks going on when Gawain—a magician with a commoner background himself—was promoted to magus. He had faced a lot of serious harassment, and more than a few plots involving poison and daggers.

Gawain had been under unimaginable stress and anxiety, but he had never shown weakness to Letitia. He must have felt that revealing any signs of vulnerability would only serve to please his detractors. He had continued to impress and earn more recognition. It hadn’t been long before he tracked down the ringleader pulling the strings behind the scenes and took advantage of his enemies’ weaknesses instead.

“After everything that’s happened, I can handle them myself,” he said. “Can I

count on your help?”

Considering what he had been through, he must have had personal concern for a subordinate who had found herself in a similar situation. Then again, with Gawain’s generous nature, it wouldn’t have been surprising for him to offer to help even if he hadn’t had that experience.

“You certainly can,” Letitia replied. “What do we know about our adversaries’ actions so far?”

“We’ve noticed a suspicious flow of money. There are also some letters written using materials made in the empire.”

“Does that mean that the empire is involved?”

“It seems likely. Anyway, they’ve already made their first big move.” He paused, and added in a low voice, “There’s going to be a public warm-up match.”



“Letitia, you’re coming with us?”

I was delighted to hear this news. Ever since my first day in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, Letitia had been so kind toward me. She was the kind of person I wanted to be. She’d helped me come up with a special training regime, and she always watched over me as I grew as a magician. I couldn’t imagine a more reassuring ally to have when I was participating in a tournament like this. If we were attending together, maybe we’d become closer friends too. Most of all, this gave me a legitimate excuse to try and gain some of what made her so cool and impressive!

“By the way, Noelle,” Letitia added, looking at my goofy smile as I pictured myself fawning over her. “You have a public training session coming up.”

“I do?”

“Yes, it’s supposed to be a special plan, designed for you in particular.”

“Just for me?!” The prospect struck me deep in my heart.

No Luke, no Ryan? Just me? They must have high hopes for me!

“Your wish is my command!” I exclaimed. “I’m ready to meet everyone’s expectations!”

Knowing that Letitia would be close at hand, watching my progress, I felt I had to try my best to impress. I was so excited about it all that I didn’t think any more deeply about why this was happening.

“Also,” Letitia went on sternly, “I should explain what this public training session involves.”

“Oh, right. What do I have to do?”

“You’ll be facing ten gold-and mithril-class court magicians, and you’re supposed to try and go for at least ten minutes without losing.”

“Got it. Ten gold and mithril-class court magicians.” I nodded sagely, then stopped. “Wait, what?!”

I was frozen in shock, unable to accept that this could be true. *I only just got promoted to the gold class the other day...* Ordinarily, there was no way I would stand a chance against ten opponents with higher ranks and much more experience. I was still silent as my superiors in the Third Unit began complaining.

“Come on, what are they thinking? How can Noelle do that right before such an important mission?”

“There’s no way ten against one is a fair fight! She’ll be blown away! There’ll be nothing left of her!”

I’ll be blown away...? There’ll be nothing left of me...?

“I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do,” Letitia replied. “By the time we found out, it was already set in stone.”

“Seriously...?”

The other court magicians were stunned by the revelation, but soon enough, they were crowding around me again and shaking me by the shoulders.

“Please, Noelle! Don’t die! Leave at least *part* of you with us!”

“I was having so much fun bragging to the guys in the other units thanks to

you!”

“I’m begging you! Survive just a little longer, so we can keep bringing up your successes to lord it over everyone else!”

Well, okay. Guess this is where it all ends, I thought.

I remained totally silent, eyes wide in astonishment at the sudden announcement of my doom.

“B-B-But wh-why?” I eventually managed to sputter.

“It looks like the people behind it are Royalist nobles who disapprove of your progress,” Letitia explained. “They want to protect their aristocratic privileges, so they object to seeing commoners succeed. According to their excuse, ‘If we’re being represented by a girl with a lower-class background and no patron, we need evidence that she’s really good enough.’”

What?! How dare they?! My life as a royal court magician is already hanging by a thread after I tripped and hit Captain Ernest on the head with my shoe in that important meeting. I need to make it to the WMC so I can do well and save myself!

“Don’t let it get to you,” Letitia reassured me. “People just see what they want to see. I know you’re the real deal.”

Ah, Letitia is so nice and considerate...

“Thank you. It’ll probably be tough, but I’ll give it everything I’ve got,” I said, looking up at her. “By the way, when is this match happening?”

“It’s...today.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know until it was too late.”

And that’s how I ended up in the special training ground of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, without so much as a moment to get my thoughts in order. It was time for me, a rookie magician who had risen from a lower-class background to be chosen as a national representative, to face ten other magicians in battle.

As this was such an unusual public session, it had attracted plenty of attention in the royal court. The seats for spectators were quickly jam-packed with aristocrats and other interested parties.

Why are there so many people...? Are they that eager to see me smooshed into a paste?

Out of nowhere, I'd been set up for a public execution. I was exhausted before we had even started the battle. My last hope lay with whoever had been chosen as my opponents.

If they know the difference in strength is too much and decide to go a little easy on me, there's still a chance I'll make it out alive! I thought, looking up at the ten other magicians for some ray of hope.

"Sorry," one of them said. "I think the national representative should be Seamus, not you. He deserves to become the next magus."

"I feel for you," another chimed in, "but I won't hold back."

"You're not ready for that stage yet. You'll experience only pain if you're given positions and responsibilities beyond what you deserve. It may seem harsh, but we'll have to put a stop to that now."

It's no use. They're way too pumped for this.

My final recourse had come to nothing. I stared into the distance, ready to abandon all hope, but at the same time, a will to keep on living sprung up within me. I'd come from humble beginnings and spent my youth snacking on whatever I could find. After all the times I'd enjoyed some spicy wild mushrooms only to find out they were poisonous, I was sure that I had greater vitality and resilience than anybody in the royal court.

My continued life as a royal court magician is in the balance! No matter what it takes, I'm gonna live through this!

I faced my opponents with a newfound determination. It was time for the battle to begin.

I was up against a team made up of members of the First Unit, Second Unit,

and the King's Guard. Three were mithril-class magicians, and the other seven were gold-class.

As soon as the match began, there was a great surge of magical power that took my breath away.

Their power is so intense...

They established one magic sequence after another. It was painfully clear that every one of them was much stronger than a newly promoted gold-class magician like me. Even a one-on-one duel with a mithril-class opponent might have been beyond me. Not only that, but there were ten of them. In what world was this ever a fair fight?

Facing them head-on could only lead to instant death. That meant that my best shot at holding out for the required ten minutes was to keep running away.

I cast Spell Boost to accelerate my relative perception of time, reducing the speed at which lightning and ice rained down over me. Avoiding the attacks, I managed to break free of the bombardment to gasps from my opponents.

Aha! Now that I can see them, I can respond!

I could feel my methods were working, but the others dealt with my response perfectly. They cast support magic on each other, prepared themselves, and coordinated their attacks. They must have expected me to use my agility to concentrate on dodging their spells. By using ranged attacks that were hard to avoid, they limited my escape routes.

My options were running out, and by the time I realized it, it was already too late. I'd been driven into a corner.

Damn it. I fell for their trap.

Fire-type magic ripped through the air and exploded. I felt burning pain, and my eardrums throbbed. I found myself blown backward and hurled to the ground. My mouth was dry with dirt.

I couldn't even do the bare minimum of preparation. I don't stand a chance.

They were fighting a weaker opponent under clearly favorable conditions, but they weren't letting up in the slightest. They were working together and putting

in their best effort to win. They were true professionals who had reached this point by making it through all manner of harsh challenges. I was more impressed than ever.

Anybody could have looked at the difference in the two sides so far and predicted the outcome. As planned, it would be an utter rout. They were on such a different playing field that there was barely any point in continuing to fight.

Nevertheless, for some reason, I was strangely unafraid. If anything, I was excited.

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

Of course, it was in my nature to get more passionate the stronger my opponent was—and right now, nobody believed I could conquer the challenge before me.

Uh-oh. Looks like I’m ready for some fun.



“It’s totally one-sided,” a ruby-class magician from the Sixth Unit muttered in the stands.

“But don’t you think she’s doing a good job?” a bronze-class colleague from the Fourth Unit responded. “There aren’t many who could hold out this well against ten opponents of their caliber.”

“You may be right, but it’s just a matter of time before they knock her out.”

The public warm-up match had come out of nowhere, and now the spectators felt they could already see how it would end. One side was clearly stronger than the other. The ten experienced magicians weren’t easing off at all despite having a clear advantage.

Noise boomed around the training ground as the recoil from their coordinated attacks made the ground tremble.

“They’re just too powerful for her...”

The audience was taken aback. The unbridgeable gap between the two sides was plain to see. Surely the organizers had known this wouldn’t be a fair fight.

A trembling whisper slipped out from one of the magicians in the audience. “They’re much too strong to fight alone.”



Geoffrey Mayfield was a gold-class magician assigned to the Second Unit. He couldn’t help feeling impressed by the little magician girl’s ability to evade his attacks.

She’s using magic to accelerate time, he thought. I’ve seen this from afar before, but I’ve never personally fought somebody operating so quickly.

She was facing the combined firepower of ten elite magicians with years of experience. Just the fact that she was managing to withstand the onslaught without suffering serious injury proved her skill.

It all makes sense—this is how she’s been improving at such a remarkable rate.

Geoffrey Mayfield now understood why Captain Gawain and His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Michael had such high hopes for this girl. Simply in terms of speed, she was surely already among the best in the kingdom. Moreover, even when faced with much stronger opponents, she had the mental fortitude to play to her outs without losing her grip.

She was obviously gifted. One could only imagine what a great magician she would become. If she was this exceptional in only her first year in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, then it was only natural to expect great things.

However, that was to be her undoing this time. Her impressive exploits during the wyvern incident, her battle with Eric Rashford at the Royal Invitational Tournament, and the exploration of the Weissrosa Abyss had boosted her reputation. Perhaps she was now burdened with expectations that went beyond what she could realistically achieve.

This matchup was no contest. The difference between the two sides was so

absurd that there was no chance of a surprise result. The battle was progressing exactly how everyone had known it would, with Geoffrey and the others teaming up and forcing the girl on the back foot. They weren't giving her a moment to breathe, like a lion giving all its energy to catch a mouse.

You aren't strong enough to win—for now.

They deployed an array of summoning circles. A deluge of the ten magicians' magic attacks bore down on Noelle Springfield...but then a strange chill ran down their spines.

What...?

Geoffrey felt an overwhelmingly intense magic power. He couldn't understand what had just happened. A massive noise pounded his eardrums as he saw something peeking out from among the clouds of dust. He was lost for words.

It was ten against one. In terms of experience and track record, the girl didn't stand a chance against these elite magicians. Nevertheless, despite juggling ten foes at once, she was fighting back head-on and matching them with her return fire.

It can't be... Geoffrey thought, gulping nervously as he tried to work out what on earth was going on. *Could she have used some outrageous wind magic to force our attacks to collide and cancel them out...?*

Nobody could do such a thing. It would have required a superhuman degree of spatial and situational awareness.

Geoffrey felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. *There's just no way... This doesn't make sense!*



Aha! Now we're talking! one of the other magicians thought.

The rookie had revealed unexpected power, and the magicians from the First Unit were thrilled to see it. The First Unit was home to the most outstanding members of the Royal Court Magicians' Division, but their jobs mainly revolved around the administration and supervision of goings-on in the world of magic.

They were often wrapped up in practical duties like putting systems together and running inspections, so the unit's strongest fighters had few opportunities to put those skills to use.

Itching for a challenge against a tough opponent, they'd jumped at the chance to participate in the public warm-up match. Just this once, they wanted to put bureaucratic tasks to one side and test their might as magicians against an opponent who could survive the full extent of their power.

Their greatest weapon was their brains: they had astounding mental and analytical abilities compared to magicians in the other units. They'd just begun to recognize the motives hidden within each of Noelle Springfield's moves. Her quick judgments were impressive, and she cleverly disguised her plans. She was making it seem like she was fighting with all of her strength, but in reality, it was quite the opposite.

To make up for what she lacked in sheer output, she kept taking up positions where her opponents couldn't effectively unleash their power, then concentrating her attacks on specific areas to level the playing field one step at a time. She was targeting their main weakness: as a ramshackle bunch of magicians from different units and the King's Guard, they lacked experience in working together as a team. Because of their high degree of battlefield intelligence as individuals, it might have seemed at first like their coordination was flawless, but the subtle gaps that emerged gave her the opportunity to undo their numerical advantage.

I expect only us magicians in the First Unit have realized what she's doing. Her situational awareness is scary. The magician couldn't fathom what kind of hell she had had to go through to reach this level at such a young age.

I feel bad, though. Once you know how the trick is done, you can find a solution. It might be difficult for the others, but it's nothing we can't handle.

They turned her understanding of the flaws in their attacks against her, anticipated her next moves, and launched their attacks at the moments where they were hardest to dodge. The result was brutally predictable: taken by surprise, she failed to evade a spell and took a direct hit.

In a flash, she was back up against the wall. It seemed almost inevitable. She

had targeted their weakness and focused her attacks to achieve balance, but there was still a glaring difference in strength. All they had to do was make up for that one weakness to take the battle past the point of no return.

Noelle could do nothing but retreat in the face of their incessant attacks. Like a tiny pebble fighting against an inexorable current, it took all her energy just to avoid a fatal blow.

I have to commend you. You fought well against much stronger opponents.

There was no longer any way for her to revive her hopes. The magicians from the First Unit moved forward to land a finishing blow.

This is it.

Their summoning circles seemed to fill all visible space. Their innumerable attacks rushed toward her...but in the next moment, they felt a chill they'd never experienced before.

Wh-What...? They could barely breathe as a great shock wave slammed into their bodies. Her casting speed has...increased!

Cannonballs of wind pummeled them at a rapid-fire pace. Even though she'd lost the momentum that had let her punish their lack of coordination, she had managed to raise her speed enough that she could create a localized advantage and strike back.

How can she improve so quickly in the middle of battle?!

It was not only unlikely that she would have been holding back all this time—it was inconceivable. If anything, her actions here were probably beyond her own conscious control. Out of pure instinct, she was becoming more efficient and optimized in reaction to her opponents' attacks. Her ability to rebuild and evolve in the heat of battle was monstrous, and her speed refused to relent.

What the hell is this...?

There was an enormous pressure that seemed ready to crush them as they felt an ever-expanding magic power engulf the training ground.

"This is bad..."

Suddenly, two magi interrupted the battle: Gawain Stark, the magus known as

the Hellfire Magician for his mastery of fire-type magic, and Chris Sherlock, the magus whose ice-type magic ability had earned him the nickname of the Silver Magician.

They launched a sudden surprise attack and struck the girl in the back of the neck faster than the eye could see. The little magician lost consciousness.

“Ten minutes have passed,” the magi announced in a low, slightly troubled tone, once they had immobilized her. “Noelle is the winner.”

Between the two of them, the magi had put a stop to Noelle without paying attention to anybody else.

If they hadn't stopped her, then what...?

All ten magicians clenched their fists, tense. They were sweating like never before.

That rookie had risen through the ranks at the second-fastest rate in history, but her true worth remained hidden within her for now.

Chapter 2: The Final Qualifying Round

Luke Waldstein was in a quiet hallway near the training ground for the Royal Court Magicians' Division. He had just finished bringing Noelle to the doctor's office.

Somebody else was there too. The man's magical power burned so intensely that Luke knew who it was before he heard anything.

"Don't be angry," Hellfire Magician Gawain Stark said. "We did what we had to do."

"I understand. If you two hadn't stepped in, I would've stopped it myself."

"Strangely enough, I noticed that there were lightning attacks targeting us."

"That must have been an instinctive response."

"You really prioritize her above all else, don't you?"

Luke avoided Gawain's eyes. "What's wrong with that?"

"You're a strange one, Luke."

"What do you mean?"

"Anybody who knew you only when you first joined the division must still be reeling from shock. Some people are still traumatized by how cold you were in your first year here."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was too preoccupied at that time."

He'd realized what mattered to him only once he'd lost it. After he and Noelle had embarked on different paths in life, he'd understood that what he wanted was to be together again. With that in mind, he'd concentrated his efforts on career success at the expense of all else in order to be allowed a mentee.

"I admire your determination," Gawain said. "Nobody has put in as much intense effort as you. You've reached this point incredibly quickly. I doubt anybody would dream that it was all for the sake of a commoner you had a

crush on at school.”

“I keep telling you not to put it like that.”

“Even in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, there’s hardly anyone stronger than you. I think you’ve reached a level where you could put up a good fight against a magus, for that matter.” Gawain paused. “Of course, that’s *if* you’re at your peak.”

Luke heaved a sigh. “So you know the truth.”

“I only need to look at you to notice.”

“I’m asking you not to stop me. I must go to the WMC.”

“I understand. It’s your life. As long as you’re prepared to take responsibility for your decisions, you’re free to do whatever you want,” Gawain went on calmly. “But at the World Magic Championships, you’ll have to fight one duel after another. The longer you keep fighting, the more your condition will suffer. It’s after all that when you’ll have to fight the most powerful magician in the western continent.”

Gawain didn’t even need to mention that person by name. Luke knew of Evangeline Runeforest, the Fairy Queen. She was one of the Three Mystic Rulers: the leaders of each of the nonhuman magical beings that stood at the apex of magic in the western continent. Along with the Dragon Emperor and the Lord of the Night—the leaders of the dragons and vampires, respectively—her power was far beyond that of humans. However, unlike those two, who rarely showed their faces in the human world, the Fairy Queen was relatively familiar to humans.

One of the opportunities for people to see her was at the World Magic Championships. Ever since the Holy Empire of Vellmar had begun inviting her to compete, her overwhelming power had completely upset the balance of the magic world, making her emblematic of the empire’s power internationally. To mainstream human society, she was a much greater presence than the other Mystic Rulers.

“Could you defeat her, Captain?”

“If it were just a question of strength, it seems unlikely. Looking at it

objectively, my chances of victory might be about thirty percent. But personally, I'd give myself a hundred-percent chance."

"What's the good in telling me what you think personally?"

"If you expect to lose before you enter the ring, how can you stand a chance?"

"That's very like you, Captain." Luke laughed softly. "Even if I'm at a disadvantage, I'm also one-hundred-percent sure of victory."

"As long as you're prepared for whatever happens, that's fine." Gawain nodded. "I'm giving you an order as your superior officer. Come back safe. Don't do anything you might regret."

Luke imagined that the last point was the main thing Gawain had wanted to tell him. *He's so soft on his comrades*, he thought, smirking at the way Gawain lived up to his reputation. He felt grateful that the man cared about him, but he knew that there was no way he could've been talked out of his plan at this point in time.

Luke wasn't going to let any opponent stand in his way. The undisputed champion of the world couldn't stop him, and if it came down to it, nor could somebody who stretched themselves to the limit every day for victory. Filled with determination, Luke prepared for this great challenge.



I smelled the faint medicinal aroma of the doctor's office by the training ground. When I opened my eyes, I was deeply confused to find myself on a soft bed.

How did I end up here?! I searched my memories in an effort to recall what had happened, but I couldn't remember a thing. I must've lost hard if it gave me amnesia...

I pictured the stony, emotionless face of Captain Ernest with my shoe on his head. If I was no longer a national representative, that meant I'd lost my means of undoing that catastrophic incident.

This is bad... My life as a court magician is no more!

I was gazing into space, ready to be fired, when my coworkers entered the room. I tried to find the words to explain that I would have to bid them farewell, but suddenly one of them grabbed me by the shoulders.

“That was amazing... Newbie, you survived!”

I hadn’t expected this.

“Huh?” I said timidly. “Are you sure they didn’t thrash me so hard that I lost all my memories and my job?”

“No way!” the others responded, shaking their heads furiously.

“No, you killed it!” one exclaimed. “All the nobles who came to watch were amazed!”

“You should’ve seen the looks on their faces,” another added, giddy. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“Just keep on impressing everybody so we can keep bragging! We’re counting on you!”

They all looked so excited. *I made it!* I thought triumphantly. *My life as a royal court magician isn’t over yet!*

After the results of that warm-up match, the people at court who’d wanted to prevent me from appearing at the WMC scaled down their efforts—for the time being at least. I was relieved we’d averted that crisis, but now I had to shift gears to the tournament itself. I needed to live up to the expectations of the people who had chosen me, but most of all, I needed to right the wrongs of the meeting with Captain Ernest and secure my position in my nonexploitative workplace!

I worked my way through the intense training program, while also getting individual coaching on magic duels from Lieutenant Ryan. Despite the constant work, I never considered giving up. I wasn’t going to give up, nor was I going to let anybody force me to.

In the past, nobody had believed in me. I remembered back when everyone told me I couldn’t do anything, but my love for magic and the chance to use it every day kept me going.

On the other hand, as I had to do more and more training, I became more useless at home. I used post-training recovery as an excuse to lie on my bed and reward myself for my hard work. I did nothing but eat crepes, waffles, custard tarts—you name it.

“Ah, this is the best!” I laughed to myself, lying around self-indulgently.

“Who would want a girl who acts like that...?” My mother sighed. “Is this really what that boy wants...?”

Even so, I could tell she understood that I was working hard. Before I left for the final qualifying round, she cheered me on from the bottom of her heart.

“Don’t forget to do your very best!” she said. “If you show how hard you’re working in front of lots of people, maybe you can even persuade that boy that you’ve got something to offer. When you’re so childlike, charmless, and unfeminine, you have no choice but to try and turn the tables!”

“U-U-Unfeminine?!”

Her way of showing her emotions was always strange, but this was beyond the pale. There was no way I could accept this. *I’m a cool, sexy grown-up! How dare you say that to me!*

A week before the beginning of the tournament proper, it was time for the national representatives to go to the Magedom of Liesvania to take part in the final qualifying round. On the day of our departure, we boarded a flashy carriage that had been arranged for us. As it passed by the court, the carriage was surrounded by well-wishers seeing us off.

“Oooh, it’s Luke! Gorgeous as always! Wow!”

“Lieutenant Ryan! I’ll always be your fan!”

“Hey, look! Lieutenant Letitia is there too! She’s so amazing!”

I had a vague memory of coming to see the departing national representatives myself when I’d been a student. Considering the fact that the Kingdom of Ardenfeld was putting more effort into this year’s tournament, it was no surprise that there were bigger crowds than usual.

What concerned me, though, was that I could hardly hear a single voice shouting out in support of me personally. Wiping all signs of annoyance from my face, I poked my head out of the window and waited for people to cheer, but there was no response.

Weird. Normally, you'd think that just being a representative is enough to earn some support.

Wondering what was going on, I listened carefully and heard somebody mention my name.

"Miss Noelle isn't here after all. That's a shame. I came just to cheer her on."

Aha! I've found a boy who came to see me!

He seemed like he might be a schoolboy. Judging by his height, I thought he was probably in his early teens. It looked like he had come with some other boys to see off the national representatives.

I pushed my face out farther, nonchalantly drawing attention to myself. *Go on, cheer for me as much as you like! Go for it!*

"Who's that kid?" one of the boys said, seeing me eagerly awaiting praise. "She's so desperate for attention."

"Is she a team member's daughter or something?"

"A national representative wouldn't show off like that."

They'd mistaken me for a child. They were school-age children themselves, and they were treating me like a little kid. Maybe they weren't the only ones who thought it was more likely that I was somebody's child than a national representative.

No... I can't believe this is happening...

Deep down, I felt newly determined to prove myself—and drink some more milk.

With the tournament's roots lying in magical contests held in the lost capital city of the United Dynasties period, the World Magic Championships were known far and wide as the western continent's foremost tournament of magic.

In recent years, the WMC had amped up its scale and profile, and with that came logistical difficulties in keeping the entire event on schedule when held in one location. Starting with the previous tournament four years earlier, the organizers now arranged regional playoffs.

The final qualifying round for the western lands was held in the Magedom of Liesvania, a country northeast of Ardenfeld. Contestants who won two to three matches in this round would advance to the main tournament in the Guardian City of Grambern.

However, there were plenty of serious contenders here. There was the Duchy of Brandard, a nation that excelled in magical duels and had achieved attention-grabbing results at recent international competitions. There was also the Judicate of Figaro, a major military power whose strength lay in the country's esteem for law and virtue. Finally, there was the host nation of the qualifying round, the Magedom of Liesvania, one of the western continent's most advanced magic nations.

Beating the kinds of magicians selected by those countries would probably be an even tougher challenge than the public warm-up match. Four years ago, all three mithril-class magicians Ardenfeld sent had been eliminated in the final qualifying round.

When I looked at the task before me, the main issue I had was that my two teammates seemed totally assured that they would win. The gap between us wasn't as significant as it had been at the start thanks to the training I'd received from Lieutenant Ryan, but it was still true that my dueling ability was nothing like theirs. What if they won their matches while I had to watch from the stands after being eliminated? I couldn't help picturing the face of the boy I'd competed with all these years.

"Oh, did you lose, Noelle? That's too bad, but I guess you are weaker than me. It's to be expected."

It just made me want to hit him! I absolutely had to avoid such a turn of events. If nothing else, I needed to work hard to improve Captain Ernest's opinion of me and consign that disaster to history. My continued life as a royal court magician depended on this tournament.

My mind was buzzing with those thoughts when we arrived in the Magedom of Liesvania. I was pumped up and ready to go, but I got an unpleasant surprise when we entered the inn used by many of the other national representatives.

Wh-What's going on...? I could feel intense magical energy from all directions. They're like m-monsters... I guess this is what national representatives are like. I can see it now... I'm gonna lose and have to be the team cheerleader!

I was bewildered by the magnitude of the magical power around me, but then I stopped in my tracks as I noticed somebody familiar. Between the leaves, I spotted a long shadow in the quiet back garden of the inn.

He's already training.

Taking care not to be seen, I continued to peek at Luke through the leaves. He was wholeheartedly working on tedious fundamentals. It pleased me to see that he was the same as always. He always hid his hard work to make his performances appear effortless, but he repeated his training exercises constantly.

I didn't want to let him get the better of me. I decided to look for another secluded space where I could train, and I soon found a small churchyard nearby. Once I'd spent an hour working on my fundamentals, I felt a little more relaxed.

Okey dokey. That's enough for today!

Feeling satisfied with myself, I turned to go back to the inn, but then I noticed that the church had amulets for sale.

This is the kind of time I could use some help from a higher power...

I hesitated, thinking to myself for a second, before committing. I called out, "Excuse me, can I please have...?"

"An amulet?" Luke asked, incredulous, as I approached him later at the inn and handed him what I'd bought.

"Yeah, it's supposed to help you win. I thought it would be useful at a time like this." I looked down at the little pale blue stone and suddenly remembered a conversation we'd had years earlier. "Oh, you might not want it. You're not

religious, right?”

“What? I never said that.”

“Yeah, you did. You don’t remember? It was before the final exam at the academy.”

“Uh...”

“Wow, you seriously forgot?” I frowned. “A week before the exam, I was really nice and bought an amulet for you. But just when I was getting ready to give you it, you said something about how you don’t believe in those working.”

“I might’ve said that...”

“You made it super awkward for me to give it to you! I didn’t want it to go to waste, so I forced you to take it anyway, but still...”

I could clearly remember that previous incident. Maybe it was more of a hindrance than a help in Luke’s eyes, but ultimately I’d just wanted to give him the amulet.

“Maybe it’s not something you believe in, but take it,” I went on. I felt a little embarrassed, but tried to pass it off as lighthearted. “Let’s pass these qualifiers together and shock all the Liesvanians.”

Luke paused for a moment, then nodded. “Sure thing.”



“Yeah, you did. You don’t remember? It was before the final exam at the academy.”

When he heard her say that, Luke was lost for words. His mind was flooded with bittersweet memories of simpler times.

Three years earlier, he’d sat by the window of a classroom as meandering specks of dust twinkled brightly in the sunlight around him. He’d felt the warmth of the amulet that had just been pressed into his hand.

The truth was that he remembered it like it was yesterday, but doubts raced around his head, making him wonder if it would seem strange to remember it too well. He fumbled his reply this time—what did she think of that? Irritated

with himself for being so worked up over so little, he looked at the amulet she'd just given him. He took the simple stone charm and placed it carefully in his jacket pocket, where his fingers happened to brush against something else.

Once he was sure that Noelle had left, he quietly took out the other item from his pocket. It was an old, somewhat scratched stone amulet.

He'd actually had this older amulet on his person ever since she'd given it to him three years ago.



The draw for the WMC western region final qualifying round took place the day after we arrived in Liesvania. The immense magical power of the participants hung in the air at the venue.

I guess I'll have to fight these people soon...

This was my first time taking part in a tournament of one-on-one duels. When it came to experience, I fell far short of the other competitors. It was no surprise that people didn't expect much of me. I took a look at the predictions Liesvanian journalists had been making in local newspapers.

"A first-year royal court magician. She has no dueling experience."

"I thought she was somebody's child, but she's actually a national representative."

"Questions have been raised over whether this pip-squeak has the necessary ability as a magician."

"Grr... How can they say this?!" I muttered furiously, tightly gripping the newspapers and shaking all over.

How rude! Don't they know I'm a smoking hot icon?! I guess since I'm a commoner without much of a professional track record, they think they can write me off. Well, I'll show them! I'll blow those low expectations out of the water!

Unfortunately, it wouldn't be so easy. With my luck of the draw, my first opponent was one of the competition's foremost magicians. My colleagues around me gasped when they saw the results of the draw.

“Ouch...”

“Of all the people to face...”

“Your first opponent is Alessandro Volterra,” Letitia explained. “He is the Duchy of Brandard’s strongest magician. He’s a master of gravity-type magic and a dueling specialist. The Liesvanians are said to be the best fighters in the final qualification round, and I’ve heard he isn’t quite on their level, but there’s a strong expectation that he’ll progress to the finals.”

The fact that he used gravity-type magic seemed like a particularly bad omen. The juxtaposition of the combatants’ chosen types of magic had a major effect on duels. One of the biggest difficulties of dueling was that it wasn’t unusual for even a skilled fighter to be completely undermined by poor compatibility. And in that respect, my magic was weak against his. A strength of gravity-type magic was its ability to hurl heavy objects, and using wind-type magic to stop that would require a lot of energy and a lot of precision.

“It will be a tough fight,” Letitia said.

“It’s okay. I came ready for this.”

I closed my eyes and thought back to a moment from my past.

“We don’t need a good-for-nothing like you at our workshop. You’re fired.”

Back to my dismissal from the Mages’ Guild.

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

Jobs rejected me no matter where I went. I’d fallen into a slump, wondering if I was a lost cause.

Remembering that time in my life gave me the motivation to indulge in my passion for magic. Just using magic brought me nothing but happiness.

Once the first day of the qualifiers arrived, I stepped into the ring, surrounded by stands full of spectators.



It was day one of the final qualifying round for the World Magic

Championships. As magic was so important to Liesvanian society, this was practically their national sport.

The venue was packed with eager viewers from all the countries in the area. Among the huge crowds, magicians from each participating country acted as scouts. Their job was to collect information about opponents and find their habits and weaknesses in order to aid their own national representatives.

“Looks like Alessandro Volterra is up next,” one of them murmured.

As a rare gravity-type magic specialist, the man known as Brandard’s strongest magician was one of the most carefully observed participants in the competition. Knowledge and experience both played a crucial role in one-on-one duels; it was hard to prepare for a match against somebody who specialized in an unusual type of magic.

“He’s in fantastic form too,” the scout commented. “Just in the past two weeks, he’s put nine opponents in the hospital.”

“They say he’s the strongest magician the Duchy of Brandard has ever produced,” another added.

The two scouts nodded at one another and shifted their focus to the little magician scheduled to fight Volterra.

“His opponent is Noelle Springfield.”

“Word has it that she’s the big up-and-coming magician in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, but still...”

“Never mind the WMC, she’s never appeared in any kind of dueling tournament before. Pure magic ability just isn’t enough. At the WMC, you need specialized training and experience in one-on-one battles.”

Given that she lacked dueling experience and her opponent was one of the most acclaimed magicians in the tournament, her chances of victory were virtually nonexistent.

“This will be totally one-sided.”

“It’ll be interesting to see how long she lasts.”



Quietly standing before me was Alessandro Volterra, the Duchy of Brandard's strongest magician. As he stepped on the stone floor, something about the sound was quite unlike normal footsteps.

He was a tall man with tawny eyes. His ears were minutely decorated with jewels, and the hem of his robe swayed gently. He was full of fighting spirit. His magic power was so unusually intense that my face was going numb just from standing opposite him.

As soon as the match started, he launched an attack that used violent gravitational force to crush all matter within a targeted space.

“Gravité.”

A single direct hit from that spell could cause a fatal injury. He had established his elaborate magical sequence in an instant, and that was all the time he needed to make it painfully clear that he was on a whole other level from an ordinary human.

“Spell Boost!”

I dodged his attacks with my acceleration of time. His destructive power was enormous, but that didn't matter if I avoided being hit.

However, he disrupted that plan within seconds.

“Tempesta.”

This spell used gravitational force to pulverize the ground around him, lift the rubble into the air, and launch it at me from a distance. I found myself under fire from a barrage of debris as the attack swept the entire area around me.

Since speed alone wasn't enough for me to dodge all the attacks, I used wind magic to try and counter, but I couldn't defend perfectly. I felt the shards graze my cheeks.

His approach took advantage of the fact that it was hard to use wind-type magic to fight back against attacks based around objects with physical mass. He had grasped the situation perfectly and made the most of his magic's strength over mine. Little by little, I was forced toward the edge of the ring.

Ugh... This guy's tough!

The difference between us was plain as day. His onslaught of spells was way more than I could handle.

But I knew what to do in a situation like this. I wouldn't panic. I would keep my cool. Just like in the old days, when I'd diligently made my way through a vast volume of work, I would calmly make progress, starting with what I knew how to do.



For Alessandro Volterra, Brandard's most powerful magician, the little magician he was facing in his first match was no great threat. The members of the scouting team were all in agreement on this.

"First, you'll be fighting Noelle Springfield. I don't think you need to prepare any special strategy."

On the other hand, Volterra thought that if his opponent was so much weaker than him, there was an even greater danger of defeat if he failed to take this seriously. His performance in the first match would also have a significant impact on his later duels.

He arrived at the ring with his plans laid out perfectly. He observed the petite magician standing across from him.

She may be young, but she's been practicing for this, he thought. Her magical power is considerable too. There are plenty of weaknesses, though.

He had given her a lot of credit while he prepared for this match, but once he faced her in real life, she appeared to be an easier opponent than he had predicted. When the duel started, she cast Spell Boost about as quickly as he'd thought she would. It might have been tough for other magicians to deal with, but he knew how to handle this.

I needn't have worried.

However, he still maintained his focus. Showing any sign of weakness would spell defeat. When faced with a weaker opponent, it was more important than ever to be efficient and consistent as he sought victory.

There's still a chance she has something up her sleeve. I could go in for the kill,

but it's best not to take any risks. I'd better keep pressing my advantage to wear her down.

His gravity magic and projectiles were outdoing her wind spells. She was gradually getting tired out. There was no need for him to rush matters.

I'll just go on pushing her back until I secure vic—

Just as he was going to solidify his advantage by raising his magical output, something happened. An unidentifiable wave of cold ran through him. He felt a strange magical power, the likes of which he'd never encountered before.

Did she just increase her casting speed?!

She was establishing new magic sequences at an impossible rate. Even though her magic was weak against his, she was able to cancel out his attacks thanks to her speed.

This was inexplicable. Another chill racked him with apprehension as he stared at her.

This girl isn't normal!

The sight of the little magician coming back from a desperate situation really got the crowd going.

"Hey! That little girl is holding up pretty well!"

"She's working hard! This is serious pressure."

"Nice! Don't go down without a fight!"

People had expected a dull, one-sided affair, and the reality of a close match electrified the air. The audience had started rooting for her brave performance.

"She's really fighting tenaciously against such a powerful opponent," a scout from the Judicate of Figaro remarked. "Enduring a ferocious attack like that is no easy task."

The scout's colleague, a man in his thirties, did not respond. He had many years of experience scouting for Figaro. In silence, he stared intently at the duel with a severe look on his face.

“Truman?” the younger scout asked, but Truman didn’t hear. He only continued to watch the match, not blinking once.



When fighting such a strong magician, a tiny lapse of concentration was all it would take to lose the battle instantly. For a moment, I’d been on the verge of defeat, but as I defended myself, I noticed a few things. He seemed perfect, but he wasn’t. Humans have their habits—and their weaknesses. That meant I still had a win condition.

But most of all, I’d begun feeling something that gave me the strength to keep going.

I can see what he’s doing, and my response is working.

I could feel it physically, and that propelled me onward.

In any case, all I could do was focus on what was in front of me. It didn’t matter who the opponent was. What mattered was that I gave it my all. If I fought with all my power, there was no shame in losing. Knowing that, I pushed forward.

My heart was racing as I confronted this formidable foe. I felt oddly excited.

This is fun!



I have the upper hand when it comes to magical power and precision, Alessandro Volterra thought. *So why can’t I beat her?*

In the heat of battle, he searched for an answer. Countless magic attacks and shock waves overlapped all over the battlefield. While using a gravity wall to crush the knives of wind she’d sent racing toward him, he carefully observed his opponent.

Something’s going on... She has something other magicians don’t.

Most people would be unable to stay calm during a duel like this, but she was relaxed. Duels were sometimes compared to chess; both involved the mind games of anticipating the opponent’s thoughts, making strategic opening moves, and drawing the opponent into an indefensible position before finishing

them off.

As a magician who had built his career on one-on-one dueling, he had great tactical acumen. Based on his outstanding intelligence and experience, he came up with a possibility.

Could she be analyzing my movements and behavior to modify her response time more efficiently...?

As they traded blows, he could see that her actions were changing little by little. The angle and timing of her attacks were clearly becoming harder and harder to combat.

It would be dangerous to let this go on too long. Volterra quickly reached a decision. *I won't let her have any more time. I need to hit her fast with maximum strength to finish off this duel.*

He took a step toward landing a decisive blow. Silently using Multicast, he enabled himself to establish four magic sequences at once. He rapidly raised his power.

“Tempesta!”

The spell tore up the ground around his opponent, lifted debris into the air, and used incredible gravitational force to launch a stream of projectiles at her faster than the eye could see.

But as the horrifyingly intense attack flooded toward her, the look on the little magician's face didn't seem to reflect the situation at all.

Why is she reacting like that...?

She looked almost as if the magic attack excited her. It was the face of a child seeing a rainbow.

She must really love magic.

The sight of her reminded Volterra of himself in his younger days. Back then, he'd approached magic with unbridled passion. When had he stopped being able to honestly say that he loved magic?

“Results are what matters. Do whatever it takes to produce results.”

He'd become driven by pressure and responsibility. If he didn't succeed, he would face total rejection. He now spent his days suppressing his emotions to reach ever loftier goals. It was a painful existence.

The world was so big, and he could never become the best no matter how much effort he put in. His life was full of frustration, pain, and stress. However hard he tried, he couldn't reach the top. Whenever he compared himself to others, he was driven mad with jealousy.

And what was it all for? He sometimes found himself lying alone at night, agonizing over the futility of everything.

After those sleepless nights, he was shocked by the girl before him now. Her magic sequences were spontaneous and free, not bound either by tradition or common sense. She cast her spells breezily, as if announcing with every move that she couldn't help having fun when magic was involved.

He remembered the time when he too could declare his love of magic without a second thought. Before he knew it, he was utterly immersed in this duel. Responsibilities, expectations—none of it mattered anymore.

This is fun.

His heart danced in time to the casting of spells. He felt a sense of joy that he'd lost at some point in his busy life. He felt light and unafraid. Later, he would tell people that he'd never felt stronger than he did that day.

He launched waves of flying rubble, attacking successively as he approached the decisive move. It was his most effective technique. By the time she knew what had happened, it would be all over.

I win.

He could feel it. He was certain.

So why did it suddenly feel as if liquid nitrogen had been poured down his back?

Huh...?

He'd just given his all to land a finishing blow. Victory should have been his.

Did she just start casting and moving even faster...?

The speed at which she launched her spells had climbed to a superhuman level. Volterra couldn't imagine how much time somebody would need to devote to magic to reach that stage. She must have given absolutely everything to magic, living a life where nothing but magic existed, and constantly honing her skills.

It was love and passion in its purest form. He couldn't help feeling moved.

You're really something else.

She quickly gained the upper hand, but he didn't feel any regret; he felt at ease. He couldn't remember when he'd last enjoyed using magic. He'd never expected this duel to make him feel this way.

I'm glad I got to fight you.

As the final cannonball of wind bore down on him, his beaming face looked nothing like somebody who had just lost.

After the end of the duel, the varied spectators chatted animatedly.

"What a match!"

"I never thought that little runt would win."

"That was a massive turnaround! We just saw something special."

"It was really something. Maybe she got lucky, but we're still talking about beating Alessandro Volterra here!"

The scouts from the Judicate of Figaro had been paying attention too.

"That girl is impressive," the younger one commented. "Even against such tough opposition, she never backed down. With a bit of luck, she has a real chance of qualifying for the finals."

Meanwhile, Truman Hawkins wasn't as calm and collected as his colleague. He could barely believe his eyes.

Could she really have done that...? he thought.

What she'd shown was out of this world. It took a great deal of magic knowledge to understand the reality of what she had done. Truman had closely observed her every move, and he knew something that only a handful of audience members would have been aware of. He knew just how difficult and unusual it was for her to be able to change the way she had during the duel.

In response to her opponent's attacks, she instantly adapted to optimally deal with the challenge. Not only that, but her efficiency was practically superhuman. At the very least, it was far beyond what most people could do.

She's like a monster that gets stronger in reaction to its opponent's power. The scariest part is that I don't think we've even seen her full capabilities yet. I feel like this is only the tip of the iceberg.

A chill ran down his spine.

What on earth is she?



"Nice work, Springfield! We all won our opening duels!" Lieutenant Ryan boomed as I returned, exhausted, to the lounge for competitors. "I was happy about my own victory, but after you two put so much effort into training for the qualifying round, witnessing your success is even better! You fought hard, and you fought well. I'm proud of you both."

"Thank you..." I breathed, my eyes glistening in response to his kindness.

"You're rather close to Noelle," Luke butted in, stepping between us. "Do you mind giving her some space?"

Luke's conscientious care for me warmed my heart. He was somewhat overprotective at times, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. He was always looking out for me.

But my thoughts rushed away as soon as I recognized somebody else in the corner of my vision. Suddenly, I could think of nothing else but the person whose praise I sought more than anyone else's in the world. She was the coolest, most sophisticated lady I knew—my number one role model, Letitia.

"Letitia, I did it! I won!!!" I announced, running over to her.

She was normally busy all the time, so as long as I had a good excuse to talk to her, I couldn't let this golden opportunity slip away. I had to try and absorb some of what made her so great.

"Your match was fantastic," she said. "Well done."

So cool... So amazing... I thought. I'm so happy I get to work with somebody sooo cool and amazing! I bet everyone in this place wants to talk to her, but I'll never let them. I wanna get to know her better!

"What's the plan for my next duel?" I asked. "I want to hear what strategy you've come up with."

"You do? I was going to base it on whatever you want to do."

"Perfect! Let's go over there and talk tactics!" I exclaimed, pulling her away by the hand.

Heh heh. Now I'll have her all to myself.

This was the flawless plan I'd concocted with all my intellect and brainpower. I'd pulled it off with such finesse that I could just imagine the nonplussed expressions on Luke and Ryan's faces, them muttering, *She fooled us! I wanted to talk to Letitia too!*

Ahh, she even smells like a grown-up! I thought, continuing to pull Letitia along and being captivated by her elegant scent of citrus.



"Wow, she's already thinking about her next match," Ryan Archbret remarked, impressed. "That's just what I've come to expect from Springfield. Her attitude is remarkably positive."

I don't think she's up to anything that admirable, Luke thought.

She had that triumphant look that she'd briefly shown to him too. She was most likely thinking something along the lines of, *I did it! Now I'll have Letitia all to myself.*

Luke still couldn't understand why Noelle was so enraptured by the lieutenant instead of her own official mentor, but as long as she was having fun, he didn't mind too much. If anything, he felt like he could forever watch her excitedly

following Letitia.

“Hey, Waldstein,” Ryan said. “Shall we discuss our hopes for the future too?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Come on, don’t be shy. Show me the passion that drives you!”

“There isn’t really anything to show.”

“Relax. I know how it is. Captain Gawain already told me everything. You can trust me as a friend. Even if you *did* choose the girl you’ve had a crush on ever since school to be your mentee—”

“When I get back there, Gawain is a dead man.”

Of that, Luke was certain.

“Perfect! Let’s go over there and talk tactics!” Noelle exclaimed.

As Noelle pulled her along by the hand, Letitia looked at her junior with some surprise. The girl had become oddly attached to her in the time since she’d joined the unit. She had constantly approached Letitia to strike up conversations with her and to seek her help. It was something that Letitia had rarely experienced before. People usually avoided her.

“I’m sorry, you must be really busy. I’ll try not to bother you from now on.”

Having always been unusually talented, Letitia had developed a reputation for being unapproachable. She was well-liked, and people held her in extremely high esteem, but with that came an invisible wall between herself and others. There was something isolating about the way that her talent led people to treat her with such reserve and apprehension.

However, as much as she fretted about it, Letitia wasn’t a child. She knew full well that she couldn’t control others’ opinions of her. Worrying would only stress her out. She understood that life didn’t always pan out the way one wanted. Even though everyone went through hard times, they still had to get on with their lives.

She had come to accept that she was simply a difficult person to love, but then the adorable new recruit showed up and strangely took to her.

“Letitia! Hey, Letitia! I saw these really appetizing crepes, so I brought some back with me!”

Letitia pictured the glare Luke had shot her way on that occasion, and she laughed to herself. *He might be a little jealous over it, but I don’t mind this at all.*



I could see that people’s estimation of me was improving little by little after I’d beaten a tough opponent in my opening match. Word spread quickly in Liesvania about my ability to overturn the odds. As a result, I found that people were calling out to me more often around the venue.

“Hey! It’s the hardworking little girl!”

“I’m not little!” I would respond.

“Look, it’s that tiny little fighter from Ardenfeld! Good luck in your next duel!”

“Hey, I’m not little!”

I found myself needing to object to a lot of their comments. Somehow, they’d ended up seeing me as some kind of idealized character in the “little kid who tries her best” mold.

*What an impudent thing to say to somebody as stylish and mature as I am!
This is unacceptable!*

On frustrating days like those, Lieutenant Ryan really helped to lift my mood.

“I see you’ve both been focused on intense training again today!” he proclaimed. “I’m proud to call myself your comrade!”

Luke and I were pretty young compared to most of the other participants, so Ryan probably saw us as juniors in need of his support. As it happened, all three of us had ended up with such tough opposition that it made me start to wonder if we’d done something wrong; under those circumstances, it was a relief to have a reliable veteran on our side.

“I don’t think I did anything out of the ordinary,” Luke replied casually.

Ryan grinned broadly. “That’s the spirit! That’s why you’re my bosom buddy. I

have no doubt that you can do this. Whatever challenges life throws at you, you have what it takes to fight! Now, what do you say we run together until the sun goes down?"

"I'll pass."

Luke's response was as cold as ice, but it only seemed to encourage Ryan more. He would call out to Luke every time he had a chance, and slowly but surely, they grew closer. Ryan's charisma was truly impressive. He didn't seem at all concerned about the fact that he was probably competing with Luke for a promotion.

What a great guy. But he sure is...unique.

One day, a staff member involved in scheduling was looking for Lieutenant Ryan.

"You mean he isn't here?" I asked.

"That's right. I wanted to talk with him about his next duel. Have you seen him around anywhere?"

The staff member seemed in a hurry to speak to Ryan, so I decided to help look for him. Fortunately, it didn't take long before I spotted him at a drinking fountain in a park by the venue.

"Lieutenant Ryan, somebody is looking for you."

No sooner had I called out to him than I froze. Ryan's face was drooping forward, and at his feet was a pool of vomit.

"Oh, um, I..." I spluttered, not sure what to say.

"Don't tell anyone about this," he murmured. "Please."

Several hours passed, during which Lieutenant Ryan had won his duel flawlessly.

"I can't believe you saw me earlier, Springfield. I was careless."

He had been calm throughout, his opponent unable to lay a finger on him. Thank goodness everything had gone as smoothly as ever for him. When I

thought about what had happened earlier, one possible explanation occurred to me.

“This wasn’t the first time you’ve been sick like that, was it?” I ventured.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because you’ve been acting completely normal otherwise. Even right when I called out to you, you seemed so relaxed.”

“So this is your perceptiveness I’ve been hearing about.” Ryan chuckled bitterly. “Yes, I’m like that before every duel. I become so terribly afraid. I just want to run away. I’m scared that I’ll fail again—that I’ll be hated.”

“Again? What do you mean?”

Ryan briefly fell silent. Eventually, he grimaced and continued.

“Fundamentally, I’m a pessimistic, weak-willed man. Ever since I was little, I was used to losing constantly. Out of all my siblings, I was the worst in school. Nearly every day, my parents would tell me, ‘I wish we’d never had you.’” He began to delve into the memories of his youth. “I was an utterly miserable child. I didn’t understand why I couldn’t do what my siblings could. It hurt to compare myself to them. It was unbearable. But around that time, I had an idea. Even if nobody else accepted me, I could at least accept myself. I wanted to make an effort to love myself.”

He went on, his face lit by the streetlamps. “Of course, that was easier said than done. After all, I hated myself. Everything I said was self-deprecating. So I made a conscious effort to advocate for myself. I suppressed my negative instincts and worked as hard as I could to see myself in a better light. I told myself, ‘Don’t give up. You can do this. You *are* good enough.’ And then, I found that things started to turn around for me. I began to gain ground on my siblings. Before I knew it, I’d caught up—even overtaken them. Everything had changed thanks to my own self-affirmation. And do you know what I thought then? I realized it was my duty, as somebody who had overcome self-doubt, to support anyone else who questions their own capabilities.”

“So that’s why you’re always so enthusiastic.”

“Exactly. Before I came to the qualifying round, I was given orders by more

people than I can count. They say I must win—that as the team leader, I have to make sure we all progress. They won't tolerate failure. But there's nothing wrong with losing. I don't need to win to accept myself. If I lose a match, that doesn't mean I lose at life. That's the most important thing to remember." He spoke as if he was talking to himself, but then he addressed me directly. "It's okay for you to lose too, Springfield. I'll still support you, no matter what anybody else says. You have nothing to prove. All the responsibility lies with me, so just go out there and do your best."

He carried the expectations of a nation on his shoulders. He was under strict orders to succeed. But even when he was under such tremendous pressure, he still had it within him to inspire others.

What an incredible person, I thought, contemplating all the advice he had given me.

I looked up at him. "You shouldn't worry about losing either. Don't listen to what anybody else says! I'll be on your side, no matter what!"

Ryan had a momentary look of surprise on his face, then smiled broadly. "Thank you."

Led by our dependable team captain, the Ardenfeld national representatives continued to build momentum. We each cruised to victory in our second matches, leaving us just one win away from guaranteeing us a spot in the finals.

As the third match beckoned, this promised to be my toughest challenge yet. I had to fight one of the three representatives from the Magedom of Liesvania in my final duel. Not only that, but he was the western continent's strongest fighter, somebody who had flawlessly blown away the Ardenfeld representative at the previous tournament.

I could hear what people were saying about me.

"This is as far as that little girl is gonna get."

"What a shame. I was rooting for her."

"Rubens is just too strong for that kid."

I hadn't yet shaken free of comments like "Questions have been raised over whether this pip-squeak has the necessary ability as a magician," so everyone must've been thinking my loss was imminent.

But I wasn't going to lose. And why was I so sure?

"Before I came to the qualifying round, I was given orders by more people than I can count. They say I must win—that as the team leader, I have to make sure we all progress. They won't tolerate failure."

It was Lieutenant Ryan's mission to ensure that the entire team qualified for the finals. I needed to win, not only for myself but also for my trainer who'd treated me so well.

"Your next opponent is Rubens Mengelberg, also known as the Steadfast Magician," Letitia explained. "He's one of Liesvania's biggest names. Even now that he's in his sixties, his power continues to grow. He's said to be the greatest duelist in the western continent, thanks to his expertise in anomaly-inducing magic. By taking advantage of the opponent's weak points, he eliminates their strengths and prevents them from fighting back. He's probably the trickiest duelist in the qualifying round."

My opponent was the best the western continent had to offer. Not only was he strong, but he specialized in the most annoying kind of magic to duel against. With help from Letitia, I devised a strategy.

"We're a team. Got that?" Lieutenant Ryan said as the three Ardenfeld representatives huddled before my duel. "All three of us are gonna make it to the finals."

Even the calm and collected Luke was getting into the spirit of it. What buoyed me most of all, though, was the look he'd given me after his own duel. He had steamrolled his opponent in just fourteen seconds without taking a single hit. Amid all the excitement at the end of the match, his sapphire eyes had locked onto mine, challenging me, as if to say, *Can you keep up?*

No problem, I thought. There's no way I'm getting left behind.

I'd already done everything I could. All that was left to do was to meet this challenge head-on—no holding back.

My opponent appeared, slowly walking toward me. He moved casually, as if he was on his morning stroll. I could hardly sense any magical power. At first glance, he just seemed like an ordinary old man, but I realized that he was actually using incredible manipulation techniques to hide his power.

Deep wrinkles had etched themselves into his face. His white hair stretched well past his shoulders, and he had the long beard of a hermit. His eyelids hung heavily over his shiny black eyes. This was the man said to be Liesvania's leading magician.

The people in the crowd meant nothing to me. My opponent was all I could see.



She has a good eye, Rubens Mengelberg thought, observing the little magician he was set to duel. Since turning sixty, he hadn't lost any of his passion for magic, and he could see that this girl was someone who deserved his admiration.

How much has she trained to become so perceptive, so efficient at such a young age? I certainly couldn't have beaten her when I was that young. He smirked as he remembered his younger self. *That won't be a problem for me now, though.*

As soon as the match started, he established a magic sequence designed to inflict anomalies on the opponent—his specialty. He smiled at her quick reaction.

I see she's come prepared.

He thought she must have had an impressive adviser. She'd worked out the scope of his magic and made sure she remained at a distance where she could fight safely. He imagined he would've done something similar if he'd been in her shoes. However, the old magician had devised a trap for just that kind of approach.

I was hoping to keep this a secret until the finals, but what's the good in hiding

it if I fail to win now? It's a shame, but she'll have to be the first victim.

Rubens deployed the trump card he'd planned for the World Magic Championships.

"Heart of Darkness!"



Suddenly, everything turned pitch-black. In that deep and total darkness, I couldn't see even faint outlines of anything around me. It reminded me of being in a basement with your only light source extinguished.

It must have been the result of some kind of anomaly-inducing magic. I'd read about instances of spells that impaired the target's vision. I hadn't heard of those spells being used in battle, but it wasn't so hard to imagine that a magician who had spent his life specializing in this branch of magic would have mastered this too.

Next, I felt another spell slam into me with great force—most likely a poison spell. My body felt numb and sluggish, and some kind of magic was preventing me from remembering how to use familiar spells. I was getting the full treatment of these anomalies. The old magician was trying to wear me down by blocking my movements and nullifying my strengths.

Wow, I thought, unable to deny that I was impressed. I was up against somebody who would be a big enough threat even without him impairing my senses. Rubens Mengelberg had spent decades passionately working on his craft and honing his skills to arrive where he was now.

That was why I was filled with such excitement—I could feel that he loved magic the way I did. There was no doubt about it; he was the real deal. He was the kind of opponent I longed to take on at my full power.

This is a wonderful opportunity to share a space with a true master, I thought, closing my eyes. I decided that if I couldn't see, I would just have to go in blind. But deep down, there was something I could see—something I could feel.

Now, my beloved magic...



Unfazed, I see, Rubens Mengelberg thought.

He'd used his secret weapon—a spell that totally obstructed the target's vision—but the little magician remained calm. She didn't panic or back down. Her strength of will in the face of adversity was commendable.

Yes, she's something special. If she'd had another four years, she would probably have gotten the better of me.

However, he was confident that he had the upper hand here. She didn't have the ability to overturn his utter superiority.

"Icicle Lance!"

While her view was restricted, he launched his attack, bringing a rain of icy daggers smashing down upon her.

Looks like she didn't even get a chance to cast any defensive magic. No surprises there.

But a second later, he saw something he had never even imagined.

No! How could she possibly...?

The girl was stepping out of the way of the deluge of icicles, almost as if she could see them. It was enough to make Rubens wonder whether she had broken free of his spell, but surely there wasn't a magician in the world who could escape the effects of Heart of Darkness in such a short time.

So how is she doing it...? He watched the little magician until he came up with an explanation. *Could she really be using wind magic to detect movements in the air?*

She couldn't see, yet she was somehow dodging his attacks. With her eyes closed, she relied solely on the flow of air to protect herself.



Suddenly, the old man was stunned to feel a blade of wind graze his shoulder.

How is she moving like that when she can't see? The thought sent a chill down his neck. Is she some kind of monster?

"Incredible! She dodged it with her eyes closed!"

"That little girl is really something!"

"Keep it up, half-pint!"

The little magician's acrobatic maneuvers and counterattacks had really captured the excitement of the viewers.

She's so calm and efficient under brutal conditions, a scout thought. She's undeniably a great talent.

Many other countries had also sent scouts to observe this match in preparation for the finals. They were all in agreement about the skills she had demonstrated.

Shame about the opposition, though. He isn't somebody you can beat with your eyes closed. The scout sighed, looking down at the current situation. *I guess this match will be her last hurrah.*



I'd never had my vision impeded so terribly in a battle before, but all the training I had done kept me afloat.

I loved magic, and I had no intention of letting *him* outdo me. I'd felt that competitive urge when I saw him training in the back garden until sundown, and I could still feel it now.

I knew I was a little more childish than other people. I was happy when things went well, and I was frustrated when they didn't. I still hung onto the belief that I had no limits. I was determined to keep getting better, and there was nobody who expected it more than myself.

I'd worked hard again and again, and all that effort had given me strength. I didn't need to be able to see, because I could rely on muscle memory. My

confidence growing, I found myself beginning to smile.

I'm starting to enjoy this.



She's moving with more precision than ever!

The girl was evolving in the heat of battle, and Rubens Mengelberg had realized it faster than anybody else. Based on what he'd heard from the scouts and what he'd seen in the duel so far, there was only one possible conclusion:

Her adaptability must be on an otherworldly level...

He could only suppose she had been through unimaginable horrors to develop such skills. There was just no other way she could have reached this level at her age.

Not bad, kiddo. I admire your spirit.

Rubens smiled, recognizing that her aura was much like his own. He remembered the first day he'd ever used magic, when he amazed everyone else in the classroom. Believing he might have a knack for it, he'd gone on to bury himself in grimoires. It was a fond memory, and he sensed that same pure joy and passion in her magic.

But you're still too fresh. You don't have what it takes to go toe-to-toe with me yet.

Even if the old magician's opponent was exceptionally adaptable, the anomalies he'd inflicted would continue to affect her. The techniques he'd developed over many years were sure to wear her down physically. He still had an overwhelming advantage. All he needed to do now was close any remaining routes to a comeback, and victory would be assured.

When it came to reducing both the opponent's strengths and the possibility of his own failures, there was nothing more appropriate than his anomaly-inducing magic. Together, the three afflictions of poison, paralysis and amnesia ate away at her, slowly but surely, and pushed her to the edge. Finally, Rubens activated one last spell to tip the scale beyond salvaging.

"Gorgon!"

This petrification spell was too much for the little magician to escape.

A low murmur swept around the audience. They saw that Noelle Springfield's legs had turned to stone; they knew this meant the end. Avoiding attacks through time acceleration meant nothing if she couldn't move.

Now I'll stay at a safe distance and finish this off. He was about to back away from her, but then something strange happened. *I...can't move.*

Something heavy was restraining him and preventing him from moving. He was shocked to realize what it was.

Wind magic?!

A fierce wind was pulling him forward. The girl was frozen to the floor of the arena, but she had used that to her advantage, turning her own body into an anchor while she dramatically dragged him toward her with powerful gusts of wind.

But this isn't more than I can handle, the old magician thought, dipping into his magic reserves to cast Magic Barrier. With a barrier constructed especially to combat wind-type magic, he could restrict her output.

However, what he saw next took his breath away. *The sheer amount of magic power...*

He still couldn't get away, and her capacity had just increased enormously. Concentrated magical energy roared in his ears. He couldn't fathom what was going on as the wind continued to pull him closer to her.

As long as her vision was impaired, she needed to bring her opponent to exactly where she wanted him if she was to be sure of landing an attack. Rubens watched in amazement as countless summoning circles surrounded him at an incredible rate. The magic sequences were loose and unrefined, revealing an astounding degree of passion.

Such a remarkable achievement at such a young age! Rubens couldn't imagine how much work had gone into this. The result was beautiful, but behind that beauty lay so much blood, sweat, and tears that he couldn't help but smile. *Well done, kiddo.*

A great cannonball of wind ripped through the air—the move that sealed his defeat.

Rubens saw the blue sky stretching out above as he felt hard paving stones against his back. The lingering scent of a cool breeze wafted by the tip of his nose.

I still have work to do.

The stands fell silent. Everyone in the audience was utterly speechless. They'd been so sure that Rubens Mengelberg had the upper hand. They'd seen for themselves how his anomaly-inducing magic had forced Noelle Springfield into a desperate situation. But strangely, just when the situation had spelled disaster for her, her magic levels had shot up.

What...? a scout thought. What just happened?

The scouts who had come to the match couldn't get their heads around this turn of events. The old magician was a veteran, the greatest duelist in Liesvania, and he had built up an overwhelming advantage—but Noelle Springfield had turned things around by force and won the duel.

Impossible... How could this happen...? Labored breathing and a dry mouth reflected the scout's astonishment. What on earth is she?



I'd finally secured my place at the finals of the World Magic Championships. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that I'd already achieved something that had eluded all of Ardenfeld's national representatives at the previous tournament. I was pleased that I hadn't ended up as a cheerleader after being the only team member to be eliminated. I would've hated to let Luke get ahead of me.

Well, I still felt like I was lagging behind a little bit, since he'd handily won his duel in only fourteen seconds, but I chose not to worry about that. After all, the outcomes were the same, and I'd had to deal with a tougher opponent too.

Yeah, we're basically on the same level, I thought.

Anyway, the most important thing was that I was going to the finals. I needed

to work hard to repay at least some of the kindness everybody had shown me.

My body was heavy with exhaustion, but there was something nice about that feeling. I guess it was just the satisfaction of a job well done. People had believed in my ability as a magician and had entrusted me with an important duty. In the dark days when I'd been treated like a waste of space, I never could've dreamed that I'd have such a fulfilling job. Once again, I felt so lucky to be in this position.

That afternoon, I was rewarded with some time off.

"Hey, Luke! Let's explore the town together!"

Luke acted surprised. "S-Sure. Let me get ready."

I waited outside for him to join me.

I guess they say girls always take forever to get ready... I thought. Suddenly, an uncomfortable realization made me freeze. Wait a minute. Shouldn't this be the other way around? Could it be...that Luke is more feminine than I am?

No. I can't accept that. I won't allow it!

I relied on my mother for absolutely everything—cleaning, laundry, meals—while Luke was so dexterous and precise. When I compared the two of us, I felt like the shock would destroy me, but with great effort, I managed to find a means of denying this inconvenient truth.

Actually, the true measure of a woman is how quickly she gets ready. See, I'm such a clever, sophisticated lady that with my efficiency in getting dressed, I can afford to sleep until ten minutes before I'm supposed to leave. Oh, silly little Luke. If you're still so careless about timekeeping, it's clear you have a long way to go before you're a true lady.

I was feeling smug about my success in spinning reality into a handy little lie for myself when Luke emerged.

"Thanks for waiting," he said. "Where do you want to go? I only looked briefly, but there's a café on the main street—"

"I wanna see the magic blacksmiths! They have a super famous workshop right around here!"

Luke stared blankly into space for a moment. “R-Right. Yeah, I knew that.”

His reaction confused me, but my excitement about visiting the workshop pushed my confusion aside.

The Magedom of Liesvania was known as one of the most advanced magic nations in the western continent. One in every five citizens was a magician. It was founded by Graham Liesvania, the great magician who had protected the people of the Central Nations from a rampaging wyrm and had sealed it within the Guardian City of Grambern.

Because of that background, magic was highly valued in this country. Many important posts were filled by magicians, from the royal court to the top ranks of aristocrats, and Liesvanian magic clearly stood out for its distinctiveness and technological advancement. This particular workshop was widely celebrated as the epitome of prime enchantments. Just imagining the kind of magic that might be used there had me beside myself with excitement.

We walked down unfamiliar streets in search of the blacksmiths’ workshop. Every time we took a wrong turn, Luke figured out the right way to go. When we arrived, we found a spectacular place befitting its widespread fame. On a huge plot of land, three buildings were surrounded by huge, weather-beaten storehouses filled with all manner of materials.

“Excuse me,” I said, approaching somebody who looked to be the foreman. “I was hoping I could have a tour of the workshop.”

“A tour?” he responded, looking annoyed. “Nah, we don’t do tours.”

Just at that moment, a little staff member in the background piped up. “But, sir! She’s the royal court magician from Ardenfeld who just qualified for the WMC finals!”

It turned out they knew who I was. The staff members seemed a little confused, but they soon explained the situation to the foreman.

“You’re royal court magicians from Ardenfeld, and you want a tour?” he confirmed, his tone short. “Well, I’m sure elites like you have no interest in the work of craftspeople. You should go. We have nothing to show you.”

“That’s not true at all! I have nothing but respect for the work that you do!” I

went on to explain that I'd previously worked in a mages' guild.

"What? *You* worked in a mages' guild? Don't make me laugh." He looked more irritated than ever. "I didn't expect an ivory tower elite to tell such an obvious lie. There's no way a big shot like you would be caught dead working in a workshop."

"But I really was a mage—"

"Fine. Why don't you prove it?" He shook his head and laughed. "If you can finish tidying this storehouse by the end of the day, I'll show you around. If you've worked as a mage, it should be second nature to you."

The craftspeople around him blinked in amazement. "But, sir! It's been a total mess in there ever since the busy season. You'd need more than just a day or two to—"

"So what? That isn't my problem."

"But no matter how you look at it, it's just too much—"

"If she can't do it, she can give up," the foreman said curtly.

I see, I thought. If I tidy the storehouse, I'll get a tour.

"Ah, if you say that to Noelle..." Luke began wearily.

"Tidy the storehouse, huh?" I butted in with enthusiasm. "Say no more!"



An hour later, the assembled craftspeople were gawking at the sight of the squeaky clean storehouse. The foreman was just as speechless as they were.

"H-How did you do this so quickly...?" one of the staff members stuttered.

"Am I dreaming?" another asked, breathless.

"If you run your finger along the shelves, you won't find one speck of dust."

"I can't believe she pulled off a request that'd make even a mean mother-in-law grimace..."

They couldn't accept what they were seeing.

"Back when I was a low-level grunt at the Mages' Guild, I constantly had to

sort out the materials, so I know all about this kind of work,” the little magician said cheerfully. “Now, can I have a tour?”

The foreman was in no position to deny her now that she’d breezed past what was supposed to have been an impossible task.

“O-Oh, right,” he mumbled. “Sure thing.”

Utterly flustered, he ended up showing her around the workshop and honoring every request she made along the way.

She’s got him wrapped around her little finger... one of the staff members thought.

This is so unlike him. I feel weird watching, another observed.

The foreman in charge of the blacksmiths’ workshop was known throughout Liesvania for his outstanding stubbornness. The unprecedented sight of him being treated as a plaything, totally at the mercy of an outsider, was something that the craftspeople in the workshop would talk about for years to come. However, the little magician was oblivious to the significance of this event.

“Hey, can I look at this too, sir?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind.”

“Wow, your attention to detail down to even a millimeter is amazing! Such incredible craftsmanship! I’m learning so much!”

Her eyes lit up as she eagerly examined every corner of the workshop.

Chapter 3: The World Magic Championships

One day, a letter arrived at the inn where the Ardenfeld team was staying.

A porcelain-class magician accompanying the team was in charge of receiving communications from the kingdom. From the state of the parchment, the letter appeared strangely old. It couldn't have actually been from that long ago, but the envelope looked as worn as if it had been produced over a century ago.

What's going on...? he thought, uneasy as he noticed that it was obviously unlike the other letters. *Some kind of hate mail? It might even be cursed.*

He deployed a magical barrier and cautiously examined the contents of the envelope. Upon reading it, his mind went blank with shock, and the letter drifted softly to the floor.

"I-I-I need to tell Lieutenant Letitia about this right now!"

He picked the letter back up and ran down the corridor toward the room where Letitia, the person responsible for looking after the national representatives, was staying. He could sense her powerful magic aura. He would normally need to steel himself before knocking on her door, but this time the urgency of the situation overrode his usual nervous instincts.

"Enter," a voice rang from inside the room.

"Excuse me!" he blurted, rushing into the room. "I have an urgent message! The secretary-general of the Royal Court Magicians' Division is coming for an inspection!"



We left the Magedom of Liesvania and traveled northeast by carriage. After a few days, we reached the Guardian City of Grambern in the Holy Empire of Vellmar.

A beautiful city facing a lake, its structure followed the lines of the summoning circles used by the legendary magician Graham Liesvania to seal a

wyrm deep beneath the earth long ago, dividing the place into perfect circles. Around four hundred years ago, the magical energy emitted by the thousand-year-old summoning circles and the wyrm had begun to transform the surrounding landscape. This had led Grambern to become a major producer of high-quality magic gems. More recently, as the wealthiest city in the entire western continent, the city had contributed significantly to the rapid growth of the Holy Empire of Vellmar.

Stretching out as far as the eye could see, the circular arena built in the center of Grambern projected a truly magnificent aura. On each of the four levels of the stone arena were arches of different styles. The stands were designed with shade in mind so that they would receive no more than twenty minutes of blinding sunlight per day, and they could seat up to eighty thousand spectators. The dizzying scale of the arena felt utterly unreal to me.

Mmm, wyrm crackers, I thought, munching on local snacks as I stared vacantly at the huge arena.

Meanwhile, many in the Ardenfeld delegation were on edge over an unanticipated development. Even though the coworkers with me in Grambern had vast experience, an upcoming event was sending shock waves through the group: a reported inspection by the secretary-general of the Royal Court Magicians' Division.

For those unfamiliar with magic, it might not have sounded that significant, but it was a huge deal. The secretary-general, known as the Split-Second Magician, was a genius without compare in the history of the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, known for discovering and categorizing time manipulation magic, which was previously believed to be impossible. Spell Boost, the spell I specialized in, was one of the secretary-general's inventions.

However, the greatest magician in Ardenfeld's history was busy with research. Since the Split-Second Magician had become immersed in magic research and had begun delegating all other responsibilities to subordinates, hardly anybody in the Royal Court Magicians' Division had laid eyes on the elusive magus. Twelve years had passed since the last confirmed sighting of the secretary-general. You would be more likely to spot a cryptid.

For all these reasons, it was extraordinary to think that this individual might appear, and the news had made my superiors quite restless.

“D-Do you think I’ll get a handshake?”

“Don’t be so presumptuous! Just being able to see the secretary-general in person is an incredible honor.”

“This sucks. I’m so nervous I feel sick!”

Their fawning behavior reminded me of the way I’d tried to get Gawain’s autograph on the day I joined the division. *I need to be ready to get the Split-Second Magician’s autograph too!*

But while many of the others were extremely agitated, at least one of us appeared totally unmoved; Luke, my friend and rival, was continuing with his regular training as if nothing had happened.

“Wow, you really aren’t interested, huh?” I asked him during a break.

“So what? It’s not like just meeting an important person will make me better at magic,” Luke replied matter-of-factly.

“What if you can learn some kind of secret to improve your skill level?”

“There is no ‘secret.’ There’s no such thing as a shortcut or an easy solution. The only way to succeed is through purposeful training and working harder than everyone else.”

“I mean, I guess so...”

He’s so by the book. But I do wonder sometimes if there’s some way to take it easy and still improve.

“You’re gonna be a great magician in the future, you know,” I said. “Keep up the good work.”

“Don’t act like you’re giving advice to your pupil.”

“Your mother will be pleased that her son is growing into such a responsible young man.”

“*Definitely* don’t act like you’re my mother.” Luke rolled his eyes and sighed. “I’m doing all this because I need to win.”

He'd said that last bit assertively, but it seemed like it was geared at himself more than at me. The resolute look on his face at that moment would stick with me for a very long time.



"What are you doing?" somebody asked reproachfully. "This is unheard of. How could you let some common girl from the back of beyond qualify for the finals?"

Two refined gentlemen were conversing in a dimly lit room.

"My deepest apologies, sir. We bought off the officials in charge of the draw and they assured us that she would have no hope of winning."

"Don't you understand that it makes no difference what methods you use if it doesn't get us the result we want?" the first man sneered, adjusting his delicately embroidered waistcoat. "Commoners are inferior to the nobility. The history and traditions created by our predecessors are evidence of that. We have been blessed with prosperity and important rights, and we mustn't give commoners an opportunity to take those away. We need to protect our way of life from being devalued." He broke off for a moment, staring at his interlaced fingers. "It's about time she had a run-in with the assassins. Ideally, she'll have to retire from the tournament due to injury, but if they kill her, so be it."

"But, sir...that would create an international incident."

"If there are no traces, it shouldn't be a problem. And if it *were* to create bad blood between Ardenfeld and the empire, that would suit me perfectly fine."

"B-But an assassination..." the other man stammered, his monocle almost shaking loose.

"If commoners gain power, then it comes at our expense. Just picture your sons, your grandchildren, losing their influence. Think of how they would suffer! We cannot allow that to happen. If our families are to continue to thrive in the future, we must eliminate those who would usurp our power." The beautiful gold thread and imitation jewels on his waistcoat wobbled as he spoke. Finally, he added in a calm tone, "The time for discussion is over. I advise you to heed my instructions."

“Understood, sir.”

The monocled man followed the orders and arranged for a team of assassins.

His heart felt heavy. He told himself he was doing the right thing as the head of his family, to maintain the prestige that had been handed down from generation to generation. He was protecting the future of his family, especially his sons. He was prepared to do whatever it took for their continued prosperity. The cruel reality of the world was that the strong preyed on the weak. This was necessary; it was essential.

But is this right? he wondered. That little girl may be a commoner, but does she deserve to die?

He did not arrive at an answer, but an uncomfortable feeling lingered in the back of his mind, as if he had just killed an animal with his bare hands.



In the west wing of a guest house owned by the Imperial Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Holy Empire of Vellmar was a greenhouse. Evangeline Runeforest, the Fairy Queen, had arranged the greenhouse specially for her own use.

Under huge panes of glass and bathed in sunlight, the inside of the greenhouse was in a state of perpetual springtime. Flowers bloomed in all colors, while beautiful azure butterflies landed on them to rest and drink their nectar.

Evangeline Runeforest was sitting before a white table laden with teaware. She sipped her drink—a beautiful deep red color. “Welcome back, Cynthia. It is good to see you.”

“I apologize for the delay,” the other elf said, bowing calmly. “I had hoped to return sooner.”

“No need to worry. I am sure this person was intriguing enough to warrant the time spent.” Evangeline’s cup swayed as she smiled. “What was your impression when you saw her up close?”

“She surpassed my expectations. Her casting speed and power of judgment are superhuman. Nevertheless, she still does not compare to we who have

studied the essence of magic over millennia. What deserves our attention is that she appears to become stronger with each battle.”

“I heard that this is her first time at a tournament for one-on-one duels. Inexperienced though she may be, she is growing fast. Most of all, she possesses something special, the limits of which we have yet to discover.”

Cynthia gasped. “How did you know about that...?”

“I know many things. I am, after all, the queen of this world.” Evangeline smiled again and took another sip of tea. “I wish to fight her soon. If only we had been drawn together in the first round.”

“I think the draw was compromised—machinations of those who disapprove of her appearance at the tournament. Humans have their own motives, you see.”

“What do I care about their motives? I demand this as the queen of the world of magic.”

“Perhaps only you see yourself as their queen, Lady Evangeline.”

“What a pain. Not only that, but now I hear that the Royal Court Magicians’ Division chief from Ardenfeld is on the way here too.”

Cynthia gulped reflexively. “The one they call the Split-Second Magician?” she asked with trepidation.

Evangeline pouted. “The very one! That foul ne’er-do-well.”

“But that person hasn’t been seen in twelve years. Some even claim the Split-Second Magician is dead.”

“Dead? Certainly not. If anything, that fool probably botched the time travel research again and got transported twelve years into the future.”

“True. That is a strong possibility.”

“But why now? How am I supposed to enjoy my game with that nuisance around?”

“Your game? What do you mean by that, Lady Evangeline?”

“My plan to start off proceedings with a battle fierce enough to crush the city,

of course.”

“No, we can’t have that. The contestants mustn’t be pulled into fighting outside of their scheduled duels.”

“Hmm...”

“Lady Evangeline?”

“When you tell me no, it makes me want to do it,” Evangeline muttered.

Cynthia immediately responded by silently establishing a magic sequence. In an instant, thorny vines coiled around Evangeline, preventing her from moving.

“I will not let you do this, Lady Evangeline. I have known you for a very long time. I anticipated your actions and planned accordingly.”

“An impressive spell. Magnificent. As your master, I applaud your work.” Evangeline smirked fiendishly. “But I must spoil your fun. This is not enough to stop me.”

A swarm of luminous butterflies suddenly filled the air—Evangeline had transformed the vines binding her. The two elves were surrounded in vibrant light as the butterflies fluttered around them. The light condensed into a single beam, and once it had faded, Evangeline was nowhere to be seen.

“The queen is as difficult as ever...” Cynthia muttered irritably, before hurrying out of the greenhouse.

This is a recipe for disaster, she thought. I must do something.

But at the same time, a part of her realized that she lacked the means to stop her master, the free-spirited elf who called herself the queen of the world of magic.



That evening, somebody was watching Noelle train in the training ground for the Ardenfeld national representatives.

“She’s training this late?” the figure mumbled to himself. “I’m impressed.”

The air around him was perfectly still. A barrier made with high-level concealment magic had separated him from the real world.

“Now, then... I was hoping that I would have a chance to take a break today, since I only just got here.” He stared into nothingness. “But it looks like that was never an option.”

Behind the invisible barrier created with an illegally modified dungeon relic, he watched more intruders appear.

“Isn’t this too many to fight one person...? No, I suppose it’s reasonable when it comes to this girl.” He sighed with exasperation. “Fine. I’ll have to work overtime.”



What was that? I thought. *I have this feeling somebody’s watching me...*

I had just finished my individual practice in the training ground provided to us. My animal instincts, honed through a childhood of running around in the wilderness, were making the hair stand up on my neck. I shouldn’t be here—someone was watching me.

I deliberately tried to appear casual and made my way toward the exit, acting like I hadn’t noticed anything.

“You know we’re here, don’t you?”

In the blink of an eye, men dressed all in black surrounded me.

“I’m amazed that you caught us,” one of them said. “But it’s to be expected from the girl who foiled the plot at the Red Rose Ball.”

I instinctively knew that these men, all wearing skeletal masks, were not normal. Just the way they walked was unusual.

“Isn’t there some way we can talk this out?” I asked.

The man who had spoken to me shrugged. “Unfortunately, that won’t be possible. We became your enemies from the moment our client asked us to eliminate you. And this is our one and only opportunity to catch Letitia Lisette-Stone off guard.”

Their client had asked them to eliminate me. Were they under orders from somebody who would be inconvenienced by my progress in the WMC?

“Sorry about this, but we can’t afford to go easy on somebody like you,” he went on. “We need you to die now.”

He pulled out a knife. I cast Spell Boost and dodged the attack, but I gasped when I saw how quickly he’d reached me. His speed was formidable. His movements were refined and efficient, right down to the tiniest detail. It could only be the culmination of long experience in an environment where a single slipup would prove fatal.

I was still in a position to react, and I could see him clearly. I would’ve been more than a match for the man if he was the only one. However, there were at least ten assailants that I could see—and probably more lurking in the shadows than I could count. If I’d only needed to deal with the people currently attacking me, it wouldn’t have been impossible, but the problem I had was that there were others ready to jump in at the slightest opportunity.

“We’ve been studying the way you fight,” the man said. “We know all about how your remarkable adaptability lets you exceed your own limits. But you can’t adapt to something you can’t perceive. All we need to do to kill you is catch you unawares with one quick strike.”

They’d been watching me. Worst of all, I couldn’t concentrate on their attacks. I didn’t know where they were coming from, or even how many were there. It meant that I had to take every possibility into consideration while fighting—and there was just too much that I needed to anticipate.

A knife came flying in from outside my field of vision. The attack came from behind me, not even giving me a chance to see what was happening. By the time I realized, the blade had already reached my neck.

That moment felt drawn out, like it was in slow motion. I was struck by an inexplicable feeling that I’d never experienced before.

What...happened?

I couldn’t breathe. I’d been ambushed by assassins, and now I was staring death in the face. But even this intense moment paled in comparison to the bizarre magical energy I suddenly sensed.

“Can I ask you not to bother our new recruit?” somebody asked.

I saw long, flowing lavender hair and an androgynous face that revealed neither the person's gender nor their age. This person had an unreal air about them, like they were not of this world. The knife thrown at me was stopped between their fingers.

Magic that freezes time for the target... I thought. I'd never seen nor heard of such a thing, but there was no other explanation for what I was seeing.

At the edge of my vision, I spotted a swaying pocket watch inlaid with glittering lapis lazuli—the stone of the magi.

"Hi there. I've heard a lot about you, newbie. You're looking well." The magus grinned, as calm and friendly as if we were having a casual conversation at lunchtime. "I'm Chronos Casablanco, secretary-general of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. They say I'm Ardenfeld's greatest magician, but you can just think of me as your awesome big brother."

The secretary-general of the Royal Court Magicians' Division had appeared before me. Of course, the way this person had come right up to me without my ever noticing had surprised me, but the real shock was the great speed and precision of the magus's spellcasting. Chronos had responded to an attack before I could even react, using magic that seemed impossible from my perspective.

Amazing... I thought, frozen in surprise.

Chronos peered at my face. "You got a little cut. Don't move."

The Split-Second Magician's magic sequence glowed with a golden light. Under the touch of those fingers, my wound vanished just like writing in the sand being washed away by waves.

"Impossible..." an assassin murmured in the background. "That knife was enchanted to prevent healing..."

"My healing magic is a little different from other people's," Chronos said. "I hate to break it to you, but that enchantment isn't enough to stop my magic."

"Does that mean...it turns back time within the targeted area?" I asked.

"You got it." Chronos nodded and grinned. "It's pretty nice to have such a

smart kid around.”

Turning back time. Even the writers of the most innovative papers weren’t so much as suggesting that magic like that was possible. Time manipulation magic required ancient technology that was lost to us. We had basically no way to even explain how it would work. It was hard to imagine that somebody could wield that kind of magic—and use it with such skill too.

For a moment, I could do nothing more than stare in astonishment, but then I whispered to the secretary-general, “Um, could you give me some private lessons on your magic?”

“Huh?”

“It’s so fascinating. I want to be able to do it too.”

“You know you’re surrounded by assassins, right? Is now really the time to ask for magic lessons?”

“I know the timing is kind of awkward, but I can’t hold back my excitement! Please, *please* teach me just a little bit!”

Chronos chuckled. “I see. You really can’t help yourself. Well, if you want it that badly, who am I to say no?” The magus smiled. “I like that about you. For a magician, it’s good to be a little weird and indiscreet.”

“Wow, the secretary-general just complimented me!”

I could hardly believe I’d earned the praise of a magician destined to go down in history. I would need to brag to Luke about this once I got back.

“Pride comes before a fall,” the lead assassin cut in coldly, just as I was beaming at the mental image of Luke’s jealous face. “Looks like this great magician doesn’t understand the situation you’re in.” He glared at Chronos. “I don’t care if you’re the so-called Split-Second Magician; you’re still a flesh-and-blood human. If we kill you, you won’t come back. And that means we’re in charge here.”

The surrounding assassins brandished knives and closed in on the two of us.

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand,” Chronos said.

A wave of cold gave me goose bumps from head to toe. My mind couldn’t

keep up as something happened that contravened all logic.

Before I knew it, the assassins were all collapsed on the ground, unable to stand. Their heads hung forward and their hands were flat on the ground. It was taking all their energy just to support their bodies.

“What the hell is this spell...?” one of them muttered.

“I didn’t cast a spell. I just released a little of the magic energy I normally hold back. That was enough to take you out. Don’t be too disappointed, but you’re really not worth my time.”

All the magus had done was release some magic. It didn’t even count as an attack. Without the need to establish a magic sequence, the secretary-general had handled a huge number of skilled opponents with ease. That magical ability was clearly on an entirely different level from any normal person.

So this is the kind of person at the very top of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division!

I had still been silently enraptured when an incredible magical presence came out of nowhere.

“Ngh!” I grunted as a burning pain rushed through my head. I felt like I was going to pass out, but I was still hanging on by a thread. I staggered and fell to my knees, only just able to hold myself up off the ground.

“Are you okay?” Chronos asked.

I saw the flash of another magic sequence, and my body began to feel lighter. I could breathe again. I realized the secretary-general had protected me from that intense magic power.

“Ugh,” Chronos groaned. “I don’t feel like playing games with the queen right now.”

This magic power I’d felt didn’t belong to Chronos. It was something else—something like a star burning everything it touches.

The assassins were all in a mess on the ground. The sight of over thirty men crumpled in a heap and foaming at the mouth hit me with an instinctive terror.

“How do you do?” a new person greeted. “What a beautiful evening.”

The first thing I saw was a butterfly emanating a pale green light. Then, more and more butterflies appeared, until a whole swarm was dancing in the air, glowing like fireflies.

“There is an unexpected opponent here, but I shall see that as a positive. I am sure it will be a most enjoyable experience to fight you both at once.”

Somebody appeared from within the swarm of butterflies. I knew her name: she was Evangeline Runeforest, the queen of the elves who controlled the Great Forest in the east of the empire. She was one of the Three Mystic Rulers—the leaders of the nonhuman magical beings, who possessed magic that went beyond what we could grasp. The Fairy Queen was the most powerful magician in the Empire of Vellmar, and she had won the last three World Magic Championships.

“I must be grateful for this stroke of luck. There is no need for us to wait our turn.” Fairy Queen Evangeline Runeforest smiled sweetly. “Now, you two, face me. Entertain me.”



Suddenly faced with the most powerful being on the western continent, Chronos merely shrugged and sighed.

“Nah, we can’t fight here,” the secretary-general said. “The buildings around us wouldn’t make it out in one piece if we did. I can see this whole area getting flattened and officials from the empire putting us on their wanted list.”

“Is that a problem?” Evangeline responded. “Perhaps it would be fun.”

“You have no sense of care for your surroundings, do you?”

“Humans are limited. It is a waste of my time worrying about creatures that will meet their end soon enough anyway,” the elf pontificated. “I am the queen of the world of magic. I make the rules and I pass judgment. It is quite simple.”

“Declaring yourself queen of this world isn’t enough to make you one.”

“If I say I am the queen, then I am the queen. This world is mine. I have decreed it.”

“Well, at least you’re staying healthy.” The secretary-general smiled wearily and took my hand. “I’m the kind, thoughtful big brother to everyone in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division. I don’t enjoy causing people problems, so we’ll be taking our leave now.”

Chronos’s fingertips glowed gold with a magic sequence. It was Spell Boost, the same spell I always used, but the magic sequence created by the spell’s inventor was nothing like my own. Everything about its construction conveyed clear intent. Its beauty was so great that it was almost like an art form. The miraculous efficiency of the technique bestowed incredible speed on the two of us.

However, nobody in the empire was stronger than the Fairy Queen, and she had the better of us.

“You must think you’re fast enough to escape me,” she said.

She wielded the mysterious arts of spirit magic passed down in elven society—including teleportation magic. In an instant, she appeared right before our eyes.

We’re done for!

Her powerful aura sent a chill down my spine.

“Did you think teleportation magic was enough to catch me?” Chronos jeered. I would never forget the magic sequence that I saw next.

“Chronostasis!”

The spell froze time for everything except for the user. I stared forward like I was in a trance. I couldn’t think; I could do nothing at all but watch.

What is this...? I’ve never seen such a beautiful magic sequence. I have to remember this moment forever. If I burn this into my mind’s eye and remember as much of it as possible, maybe I’ll be able to do this myself one day.

But despite my intentions, the magic sequence was so dazzling and so unlike magic as I knew it that I totally lost track of time. I could hardly even attempt to memorize what I was seeing.

I didn’t know how much time had passed. For me, it was pretty much over in the blink of an eye, but it had probably been much longer for the Split-Second Magician.

Before I knew it, I was standing in the courtyard at our inn.

“You’ll be safe here.” Chronos smiled.

Though we’d already come a long way, I still felt like I was back there, seeing what had unfolded mere moments ago in addition to that incredible, beautiful, shining magic sequence.

“Just now, you stopped time, right...?” I murmured, not fully convinced of what I’d seen with my own eyes.

“What makes you think that?” The secretary-general looked surprised.

“I just got that impression when I saw the structure of the magic sequence.”

“I see. You’re very perceptive.” Chronos watched me curiously. “Time manipulation magic is an example of highest-order magic that very few people

even know of. Stopping time is a signature move that yours truly spent five hundred years researching.”

“F-F-Five h-hundred...?”

“My research took place in an environment where the flow of time is very different from normal. In reality, it wasn’t nearly that long.”

I was speechless as I realized how advanced this magic must be. Chronos didn’t look any older than Gawain despite having obviously been active for many, many years. This was no ordinary person.

“Anyway, that Fairy Queen is a very intriguing individual,” the magus said. “She’s so strong that even this magic isn’t always enough to beat her.”

“You can lose even if you have the power to stop time...?”

“The world is full of surprises.”

It really is... How amazing...

I’d been truly dumbfounded by the glimpse I got of an entirely different realm of magic. What I came away with, though, was a powerful desire to emulate such spectacular magicians myself. What kind of spells would they use? I wanted to experience it for myself, in the flesh, so that one day, I too could do what they could.

“I’m gonna do my very best,” I announced. “I want to become like both of you.”

“I look forward to seeing it.” Chronos nodded emphatically.

At that moment, the other royal court magicians accompanying the national representatives came running over.

“Noelle! Are you all right?!”

“Lieutenant Letitia discovered that there was an intruder and—”

My coworkers were talking frantically until they saw who was next to me and immediately froze.

“Th-The s-secretary-general?!”

They all dropped a knee and bowed deeply.

“I am grateful that you have honored us with your presence,” the nearest one said solemnly. “Please forgive me for my failure to recognize you.”

“It’s cool. You can stand up now. No need to bow to me.” Chronos smiled amiably. “We all seek the deepest truths about magic. I see you all as my family. Feel free to call me your big brother—”

“Certainly not, Your Excellency! I wouldn’t dream of speaking to the secretary-general so flippantly!”

“So distant...” Chronos sighed, turning to me. “It makes me sad.”

Wow, I really am talking to somebody special here! I can’t believe that’s how the secretary-general really feels!

“I’ll deal with the Fairy Queen and the assassins,” Chronos said quietly. “You don’t need to worry. Just focus on your matches. And make sure to tell everyone how cool I was.” The enigmatic magus winked. “It’s my responsibility as your elder to cheer on a hardworking young person like you. I know I haven’t shown up to work in twelve years, but this duty is one I take very seriously. That’s just my style.”

Wow... I can’t believe the most important person in the division is so nice and friendly to a newbie like me.

The arrival of the Split-Second Magician soon became the day’s hottest gossip among our delegation.

“Hey, Noelle! Is it true that you spoke to the secretary-general?”

“Tell me *everything*! I need to know!”

It made me feel pretty special to be inundated with questions like this, but the most important thing of all was knowing that they’d all been so concerned about me being attacked.

I was shocked when Letitia of all people came and hugged me tightly. I’d always thought she was the kind of distant person who hated touchy-feely behavior.

There were people around me who believed in me. They supported and protected me. There was somebody I wanted to catch up to as well, and even if

there were others who would stand in my way, giving up was not an option. All I could do was fight with everything I had—for the sake of the people who stood by my side.

“First round results from the WMC finals! A resounding victory for Noelle Springfield against the Judicate of Figaro’s Blue Giant, Sidneia Randello! What a performance! Could this be the eye of the storm in this year’s competition...?”

Amid all the excitement, the national representatives from Ardenfeld had begun progressing further into the tournament.



Two refined gentlemen were conversing in a dimly lit room.

“What happened?!” one barked. “You were supposed to rig the duels and wipe her out!”

“We did the best we could, sir. We bribed the referee and made a deal with her opponent before the match. We even had her opponent use a magical item that temporarily prevents the target from being able to use magic. I was sure we’d created the perfect conditions for victory.”

“Then why did *she* win? What happened?”

“It would appear that once she couldn’t use magic, she resorted to punches and headbutts. Her opponent was so focused on using the magical item without being caught by the other officials that the girl got to use her plan B.”

“But she’s just a little girl. What’s the problem?”

“I think she may be stronger than she looks. Her opponent remarked on the girl’s extreme stubbornness...”

The duelist involved in the dirty trick, stunned, had muttered, “That shouldn’t be allowed...” when watching the little magician not hesitate to use brawn in battle. Punches weren’t against the tournament rules, but it still didn’t seem like an appropriate way for a magician to fight.

Neither of these men had a clear solution for how to handle that Ardenfeld magician, but the outcome was clear: that girl kept on winning. She was

shrugging off every obstacle the aristocrats put in her way.

“Did you see that, Cynthia?” Evangeline exclaimed, rising excitedly from her VIP seat in the stands. “That was a headbutt! A headbutt!”

“Only the very best magicians can move that quickly,” Cynthia replied uneasily, “but even so, I cannot help but wonder if a headbutt is in the proper spirit of a tournament focusing on magic prowess...”

“I see no problem. How can one become a great magician if one is bound by precedent? It is important to act freely!”

“Yes, but that isn’t magic...”

“If I say it is acceptable, then it is. I am the incomparably beautiful queen of the world of magic, and what I say goes.”

“Well, I know *you* say that, Lady Evangeline, but...”

“If it makes me laugh, anything goes! And oh, how it made me laugh!” Evangeline cackled wildly.

“Could I ask you to restrain yourself a little?” Cynthia sighed. “I hear that you tried to infiltrate the Ardenfeld representatives’ inn last night and needed to be stopped by the Split-Second Magician.”

“Well, it *is* fun to play with powerful magicians, after all. I went to visit that girl, and the Split-Second Magician came to stop me. It was an easy way to get that human’s attention.”

“Please refrain from getting into fights on a whim.”

“But that ne’er-do-well enjoys fighting me!”

Cynthia stared off into nothingness. “Why is it that as magic advances, more and more unreasonable people emerge...?”

Just then, a man appeared in the VIP box, giving off an oddly ominous energy as he said, “I would like to talk.”

He talked for a bit, giving Evangeline a proposal. Once he was finished, she confirmed, “Thus, you want me to destroy the Kingdom of Ardenfeld’s national

representatives.”

He nodded. “Ardenfeld’s recent developments in magic pose a threat to all the nations of the western continent. It is our patriotic duty to protect our countries, and so we have been plotting against Ardenfeld for some time. This is our latest operation.”

“Then I trust there is some benefit to me should I cooperate with you?”

“I promise that we can repay you beyond what you could possibly ask for. Furthermore, I have heard rumors that you wish to personally compete against Noelle Springfield.”

“Oh? Where did you hear that?”

“We have eyes and ears all over the world.” He sounded confident. He interlaced his fingers and continued. “Shall we rig the next draw so you can fight Noelle Springfield? You can fulfill your wish, and we can achieve our goal. I’m sure you’ll find that we both stand to gain from this agreement.”

“Yes, I understand. Indeed, there is no reason to refuse the offer.” Evangeline smiled and swirled her teacup, sending gentle waves across the surface of the tiny red sea inside and wafting a sweet, refreshing scent. She set down the teacup on the table in front of her. “Nonetheless, I refuse.”

Everyone in the VIP box was on edge.

Eventually, the man broke the silence. “May I ask why?”

“One: I am the queen of this world, and I have no interest in any plan that seeks to use me as a pawn. Two: the arrogance of presuming that you may negotiate with me on equal terms does not deserve the dignity of a response. Three: it is my personal preference to completely refuse anybody who is certain that their request will be granted. Now, I bid you farewell.”

Evangeline waved her hand elaborately and left the VIP box. In her wake, the box was silent and icy with tension.

Huh?! Cynthia thought, dumbstruck. She’d missed her chance to leave the box herself. She mustn’t overdo it... Even people from the Imperial Foreign Affairs Bureau said they wanted the Ardenfeld representatives to lose. This is no way to

avoid making enemies...

Two hundred years had passed since the Holy Empire of Vellmar invaded the Great Forest. The Fairy Queen's power had reverberated around the world, but things could have gone differently if Evangeline hadn't been the queen. Cynthia had no concrete evidence, but she believed that very experience had left Evangeline with a strong inclination to avoid fights if she could help it.

The man whispered uneasily to Cynthia, "Can you help us out?"

"I suppose I shall," the cool voice of another elf rang out. "Lady Evangeline has a keen personal interest in one of the national representatives from the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, but I would be willing to take on the other two." Her emerald hair flowed around her leaf-shaped ears. "No weaker opponent than them would be worth my time."

This elf was the runner-up from the previous World Magic Championships, the one touted as Evangeline Runeforest's heir as ruler of the Great Forest. The Holy Empire of Vellmar had worked to shape the world of magic on the western continent, and she was said to be second only to the Fairy Queen herself within that sphere. This formidable individual's name was Esther Blueforest.



For Albio, a porcelain-class magician accompanying the Kingdom of Ardenfeld's national representatives, First Unit Lieutenant Ryan was an ineffable idol. He was a fire-type magic user who had gained experience working under Gawain Stark and now carried out vital duties in the First Unit, which was known for employing the sharpest minds in the entire division. Many regarded him as the magician closest to the historic achievement of becoming the eighth magus.

"Hey, Albio," Ryan had said to him one day. "You feeling fired up?"

Sometimes his enthusiasm seemed a little gratuitous, but he was truly warmhearted and fully deserving of the other magicians' respect.

"Yes, sir!" Albio had replied. "I'm stoked!"

"Glad to hear it. Good work again today, by the way. I look forward to seeing your progress."

What Albio most appreciated about Ryan was that the man gave everyone his full attention. Even though he'd reached the lofty heights of the adamantite class, he still carefully watched over his porcelain-class juniors, the lowest-ranked magicians in the unit. The Royal Court Magicians' Division was one of the kingdom's best workplaces, but even there Ryan stood out as an unusually caring superior officer.

He's kind of a weirdo, but he's such a great guy to work with, Albio thought. I bet nobody else understands what's so good about him quite like I do.

Now, on this grand stage, Albio's hero was the kingdom's team captain. The Ardenfeld team had performed outstandingly so far. Ryan's air of self-assurance was next to none. Even against the leading magician of another nation, he'd confidently progressed to the second round without ever losing his composure. Meanwhile, Luke Waldstein, the prodigy known for smashing records by rising through the ranks faster than anyone before, had swept away his opponent without taking a single hit. Finally, there was the extraordinary rookie, Noelle Springfield. She'd secured another win with her unprecedented technique of knocking out the other magician with a headbutt.

The draw for the next round is today, right? I hope everyone—well, especially Ryan—gets lucky.

That evening, Ryan Archbret heaved a great sigh as he sat in his room thinking, *I ended up with the opponent I most wanted to avoid.*

The opponent he'd just drawn was Esther Blueforest: an elven magician who had spent a lifetime of thousands of years on her magic training. In the Great Forest where the elves dwelled, she was second in power only to the Fairy Queen. Everyone recognized her as one of the leading duelists in the western continent; she had been the runner-up at the previous World Magic Championships.

As the lieutenant of the First Unit, home to some of the most elite personnel in the Royal Court Magicians' Division, Ryan knew better than most how strong she was. He, too, was among the best duelists on the continent, but he couldn't deny that against such powerful opposition, his chance of victory wasn't looking

good.

She clearly has the upper hand. One mistake in this match, and I'm done for. How the hell will I even fight her?

The more he tried to think about it objectively, the more obvious it was to Ryan that there were fundamental differences between him as a human and Esther Blueforest as an elf. A being that lived longer simply had so much more time to devote to magic. She also possessed spirit magic, developed by the elves. Finally, elves had a greater capacity for magic than any human. It would take transcendent talent and ability to overcome all of those disadvantages.

"I wish we'd never had you."

Those cruel words from the past still lingered in the back of his mind. He remembered holding his knees and weeping as he failed to live up to the achievements of his siblings.

However, it was those memories that had driven him to become a better person—somebody with the power to save that child whom everyone had belittled.

No, I can't lose heart this easily. I have a responsibility to support and guide those two youngsters. I must stay strong and resilient so that they can concentrate solely on their own challenges.

His pre-match preparations went even better than usual.

I know you've worked so hard for this! a voice in his head cheered. *You can do it! You've got this!*

"Heh. You're always so good to me, Little Ryan," he said aloud, flashing an intrepid smile.

Luke glanced at him dubiously. "Are you talking to an imaginary friend? You're full of surprises, Lieutenant Ryan."

"Oh, are you jealous of Little Ryan? Well, Waldstein, you can rest easy. Unlike you, Little Ryan is like my cheerleader—nothing more, nothing less. He's no threat to a true friend. You alone are my bosom buddy."

"I'm not jealous, and I'm not your... 'bosom buddy.'"

Luke acted like a grouchy cat, but deep down, Ryan enjoyed their little back-and-forths. Since joining the Royal Court Magicians' Division, Luke had shunned other people's offers of assistance and sometimes scared them off, but it hadn't stopped him from racking up one impressive achievement after another. Ryan had seen how uptight Luke was, and that made him want to loosen up the guy a little.

Oh dear. This young man is going to need some more work.

Ryan supposed that Luke saw him as overbearing, but he could accept that. He wasn't cheering Luke on to earn his friendship; he was doing all he could to help improve Luke's life, whether Luke liked him for it or not. That was the whole point of offering support.

I must follow my own path with everything I've got!

Throwing up before duels had become a routine for Ryan, but it showed him how important it was to keep on fighting. It was proof that he was taking the challenge seriously.

All the signs are good. The wind is at my back. The whole world is rooting for me!

"See, Lieutenant Ryan? The trick to a good punch lies in the footwork!" Noelle said before Ryan's match, demonstrating how to throw a punch from the hips. "You have to put your entire lower body into it!"

Luke followed with, "Um, most people don't use their fists in a magic duel."

"They don't? Are you sure?"

As Ryan Archbret stepped out into the ring shortly after that exchange, Noelle and Luke's words of support rang out in his mind. With all their encouragement, he was ready to face his superhuman opponent.

Ryan saw Esther Blueforest's fluttering emerald hair and dignified posture. He sensed her overwhelming magic power. His opponent's strength was extraordinary, but it was no greater than he had anticipated.

It was wise to be overly cautious. Better to plan for an unimaginable monster

than be sorry and unprepared, he thought.

She had the advantage, but it wasn't as if there was nothing at all that Ryan could do. If anything, he felt most at home when he was battling an opponent too strong to defeat with talent alone. Since his earliest memories, he'd had countless experiences of that sort—so many that they'd become ingrained not merely in his body, but in his very soul.

My best chance of winning lies in the element of surprise. There aren't many people who use weaponsmithing magic. I need to use my strongest spells as much as possible before she gains her footing, and quickly claim victory.

“Flame Spear!”

Ryan conjured up a burning spear taller than his own body. Built like a multisection flail, it could change shape at will. The spear coiled around behind his legs like a dragon, where it began to vaporize the stone floor of the ring. Heat rose into the air, producing a shimmering haze.

This was never going to be an equal contest. If I'm going to win, it needs to happen in the opening moments. Everything has been leading to this.

The spear flew forward, rushing through the air and obliterating everything in its path like a rampaging wyvern. But Esther, the Fairy Queen's heir, did nothing.

Isn't she going to cast a spell?!

He couldn't have expected this kind of nonresponse to his Flame Spear. However, Ryan's judgment was swift. He didn't understand why the elf wasn't using magic, but he knew that this was a one-in-a-million opportunity.

“Dragon Storm!”

Serpentine spears of fire rained down continuously, offering not even a brief chance to recover. Fifty-seven spears fell in the space of eleven seconds.

Ryan could feel all his muscles burning. His instincts were screaming out to take a breath, but he overrode them through force of will. Everything he'd cultivated was going into this—all the countless experiences he'd had ever since being treated as a failure when he was a child.

“Why can’t I be as good as my brothers?”

In those days, he’d practically spit up those words every day. Even when he had worked as hard as he could, he’d found himself losing to classmates who didn’t even try. That was how he learned that people were unequal. He didn’t have the same natural ability as others. Even when he’d been careful to do exactly as he was told, he’d lagged behind others.

But that had made him determined to come up with ways to improve, and to make up for what he lacked in innate talent. He’d hunted through a haystack of weaknesses for a needle of something he could do well. Each time he came up with a potential solution, he’d taken those bits and pieces and built them into something bigger.

A lack of ability could be a special feature too. He’d taken his inadequacy and turned it into his greatest weapon. He didn’t have many particular talents, but he’d found what he was good at and honed it with all the love and passion he could muster. The answer to his problems wasn’t to brush up on his weak areas, but to build on his strengths so much that they drowned out the shortcomings.

He didn’t mind not being able to do certain things, or even being bad at them. He didn’t care if he wasn’t the best at everything, as long as he could be the best at the magic he specialized in.

The paving stones crumbled under the intense heat and disappeared. Ryan stood his ground against the feel of the scorching air on his skin and the smell of molten rock. While he launched his frantic barrage, nobody could even speak. The arena was quiet, as if time had stopped.

Finally, a cold, high voice cut through the cloud of dancing dust.

“Your magic is impressive. I can see that your magic sequences are carefully refined. I am sure you have given a great deal of time and passion in pursuit of magic. I, too, have followed that path, and I truly commend your work.” Esther Runeforest paused. “However, I have had over a millennium to grow.”

No... Ryan thought, blinking in disbelief as he saw Esther emerge.

She was perfectly uninjured. The attack had certainly hit its target—there was

no sign that she had cast Magic Barrier—but she didn't have a single scratch on her.

She's nothing like me. The difference is just too great.

"As a token of appreciation for what you have shown me," she said, "please allow me to use my full power to bring this duel to a close."

Ryan felt an eruption of magic power. He could barely breathe; it took everything he had just to stay standing. Even making it out alive would be no easy task.

Go Ryan! Give it your all!

This was an opponent that Ryan couldn't match no matter how hard he might try, but regardless, he pushed on as much as he could. He established a new magic sequence to unleash another salvo of flaming spears, but it was met with a different spell.

"Undine's Breath."

A great deluge blotted out the sky. Gasps could be heard among the spectators as they witnessed the clear difference in power between the contestants. They all understood that there was no hope for Ryan. Still, they saw something that they never could have imagined.

S-Such a powerful attack! they thought. *How can he endure it?*

The two duelists were in perfect balance. Ryan still had his solitary spell, the one he'd spent his life working on despite all the failures and pain.

For those few seconds, Ryan's magic lived up to Esther's millennia of experience.

"That was beautiful," Esther said.

The next moment, the powerful waves swallowed Ryan up. His Flame Spears gently faded away.

Quietly, the duel ended in a whimper.

"No way..." somebody breathed. "What on earth was that?"

The sight of Esther Blueforest's staggering power came as a great shock to the Ardenfeld delegation. Everyone was silent and stony-faced. She had endured a continuous attack at near the height of Ryan's power without even casting Magic Barrier.

How is that possible...?

It was hard to take. The other two representatives on the Ardenfeld team were lost for words. Noelle Springfield looked utterly dumbfounded. Her mouth hung open vacantly as she gazed into space like she wasn't fully conscious.

On the other hand, they'd had remarkable experiences in quite a different respect. In the middle of all Ryan's drama, his juniors had wiped the floor with some big shots from other countries.

Springfield shouldn't need to worry, Ryan thought. He grimaced as he looked around at the other magicians' awestruck faces. Waldstein, though... In the next round, he'll have to face Esther Blueforest too...

When Ryan woke up after his wounds had been treated, his body hadn't wanted to move. Even so, he'd dragged himself back to the lounge so he could comfort his juniors.

He remembered a conversation from before the tournament had begun.

"You want me to be the team leader?" Ryan had asked Gawain Stark.

"We've agreed that you're the most qualified. With you on their side, they'll find it easier too."

The captain of the Third Unit had always been a target of Ryan's admiration, as a fellow user of fire-type magic. Earning his praise was wonderful, but what really touched Ryan was the fact that he'd been chosen to lead the national representatives in the first place.

People used to say I was worth nothing. To think that I'm a national representative now... And the team captain, to boot! Excitement and a real sense of satisfaction swelled from within, not to mention a growing feeling of anticipation. At this rate, even they might see my true worth.

At the age of fifteen, Ryan had failed the entrance exam for the academy of

magic attended by his brothers. His parents had given up on him after that. As far as they were concerned, he was of no help to their goal of reviving the ailing fortunes of the Archbret family.

Ryan's parents had a responsibility to protect the family name and their long-standing tradition of water magic. Under that intense pressure, they had become unreasonable. Their extreme expectations had ultimately turned to violence, in the form of merciless training and corporal punishment.

He had no happy memories of that time, and yet, a lingering feeling of incompleteness had made him decide to go and tell them about his achievements. After all this time, he wanted his mother and father to accept him. He wanted them to be proud of him. He wanted it so much that one might have thought all his hard work had been an effort to win their acceptance.

"Mother, father, it's good to see you both again," he'd said when he'd arrived. Going there was easy enough, but when he saw them again after eleven years, what they'd said in response was nothing like what he'd hoped for.

"You know what we've been through. Did you just come back to gloat?"

"I can't believe you turned your back on the Archbret family tradition of water magic."

It wasn't always possible to express his true feelings. The dreams he cared about the most might go unfulfilled. Life was full of hardships and cruel twists. It made it hard to go on.

And yet, he did go on. He kept looking forward, determined not to fold under the trials of life.

"Waldstein," he said, firmly in the present as he stared at Luke. "I want to talk to you."

They were the only ones in the room. Ryan might have lost his duel, but he had a responsibility as the team captain to help his juniors blossom.

"You're stronger than I am," Ryan declared. "Most importantly, you plan and train unlike anybody I've ever seen. Just focus on showing everyone what you're made of. Do that, and success will surely come." He gritted his teeth

through the pain racking his body, and put his feelings into words. “If anybody can do this, it’s you. You’re gonna be fine.”

Luke was silent for a moment, but finally he sighed and said, “You’re a real softie, Lieutenant Ryan.” His sapphire eyes glinted. “I don’t need you to tell me what I’m capable of. I already know; I came here to win, after all.”

Luke was calm and unwaveringly confident.

Nothing has changed, even after he saw that match, Ryan thought, smiling at his impressive young teammate. *I needn’t have worried.*

Luke noticed the relieved expression on Ryan’s face. “You’d better not lose heart either. I’m going to make up for your defeat. Seeing your determination in that duel helped give me the courage to take her on.”

Ryan hadn’t expected that response. It was a shock to hear words of encouragement from the normally prickly Luke. Ryan took a deep breath.

“My bosom buddy!”

“I am no such thing.”

Good grief... I can’t focus anymore, Luke thought, massaging his temples as he remembered the conversation he’d had with the meddlesome team captain.

Ryan Archbret, lieutenant of the First Unit, was the biggest obstacle to Luke’s pursuit of a promotion to the rank of magus. Previously, Luke would’ve stopped at nothing to bring him down, but now he found himself cheering the man on. Knowing that he had failed to be as ruthless as he’d intended, he blamed himself for becoming too lenient.

Concentrate! I must pay attention only to what’s in front of me.

The result of the draw was unlucky for Luke in the extreme: he had to fight an elven magician who was one of the strongest competitors still in the tournament.

Luke still hadn’t fully recovered from the injuries he’d sustained in the Weissrosa Abyss. In truth, he wanted to avoid fighting at all so that he wouldn’t become totally exhausted.

To be honest, it does feel as if the matches were drawn this way on purpose...

Ardenfeld's advancements in magic were among the greatest of any nation on the western continent. Luke was sure that there were people in Vellmar and other nearby countries who didn't want to see the Ardenfeld representatives catching attention and winning praise.

Anybody who stood out would duly be taken down a peg. Upstarts would be nipped in the bud. As the heir to a prestigious family himself, Luke was all too familiar with the outlook of people with vested interests to protect.

Fine. I'll just have to overcome any obstacles they lay in my path. It's that simple.

It didn't take Luke very long to prepare himself emotionally, but the other magicians accompanying the national representatives were a different matter.

"Waldstein has to fight her too...?"

There was a strong expectation that the match would be a real struggle. Of course, being adults, Luke's superiors took care to approach the upcoming duel constructively, but it was hard for them to fully disguise their apprehension. Everyone understood that Luke's opponent had the advantage. Her long career as a magician was clearly in a different league from a young man like Luke.

Well, I won't let anybody else's opinion bother me.

He simply prepared for the match as he normally would. He set his goals and readied himself to fight for them.

While he prepared, there was one person he didn't want to talk to. He knew that she would influence him. The impact of her voice was unlike anybody else's—it was much more precious. Given the choice between her and anything else in the world, he would choose her without hesitation. Therefore, in order to calmly confront his next challenge, he chose to avoid speaking with her in the time leading up to the duel.

But despite his best intentions, she showed up to hassle him.

"Hey!" she called.

"What is it?"

“I just figured this was, you know, the Big One. I wanted to come and cheer you on. But then I saw the look on your face, and I realized I didn’t need to.”

“Why not?”

“Because of course *you* can win. I’m your rival, so I know exactly how tough you are when you go all out to study your opponent.” There was that knowing grin of hers. “So kick butt out there and show everyone that you’re the best when it comes to tactics.”

Luke couldn’t understand why that alone encouraged him so much. *Noelle...*

“But—I mean, I’m just as strong!” Noelle frantically added as Luke covered the expression on his face. “I’m not letting you beat me! No sirree!”

She hadn’t lost her competitive spirit. Even in this overexcited mode, her voice still made Luke smile.

Clearly, she sees me as more than her equal. She believes in me. And that means I need to prove myself. I have to live up to her high opinion of me, and show that nobody can beat the two of us.

I’ll make the impossible possible. I can climb any wall, no matter how foolish it may seem. I could even fly if I wanted to. Nobody can stop me.

Of course, this was all easier said than done. His next opponent had superhuman power, nearly unsurpassed in the entire continent. She had lived for thousands of years already. In terms of experience, there was no way he could match an elf.

If they were competing to research their opponent the best, however, Luke was in with a chance. He had been quietly planning for this since long before the tournament had begun. He could say with confidence that there was no other magician better than him at studying difficult opponents.

His bedroom was full of files and his own notes.

Mainly uses water-type magic. Can use other types too, but relies more on water magic at important moments. Main weapon is spirit magic using the power of Undine, one of the Four Great Spirits. Its key feature is its versatility. Spells are easy to apply and good at adapting to unpredictable situations. Pays

little attention to her surroundings. Has biases due to a sheltered upbringing without room for varied perspectives and attitudes. Not a talker.

Expressionless. Does not show emotions. Lack of symmetry in her abilities, typical of someone raised under excessive expectations from an early age. Good eyesight. Moderately slow walking pace. Signs of having been strictly taught good posture. Rarely communicates using gestures. Indifferent tone of voice. Tends to worry about coming across as cold. Often on guard. Feels guilty about overindulgence of alcohol use. Erotophobic. Prefers peace and stability. Poor sense of pitch. Somewhat uncomfortable with affection. Accepting of reality. Unafraid of death. Perfectionist. Tends to have strong ideals; punishes herself for failing to uphold them. Composed, like she knows she cannot lose. Uses many magic sequences with unclear purpose. Right arm rises slightly when casting high-level spells. May have something that gives her an advantage beyond mere difference in ability.

The point of all this preparation was to make the impossible possible. He'd found his path to victory, and now he just had to make it a reality.

Time to banish this monster.

Luke Waldstein's battle was about to begin.

"Why have you opted to remain in the competition?" Esther asked Luke, standing in the middle of an arena packed with spectators. The match was just about to begin.

"What do you mean by that?" Luke responded. His voice was quiet.

"It is a genuine question. I defeated your team captain. You must be stronger than he is, yet my power is greater still. With my thousands of years, the chasm between us is vast, in terms of both magical power and experience in studying magic. Now, I believe you would have stood a chance at full fitness." She paused, carefully selecting her next words. "But you are injured. Indeed, it is an injury so great that if you make the wrong move, it may impact your future life as a magician."

Luke opened his eyes wide.

"You cannot beat me in your current state," the elf continued. "Our match has yet to begin, but the result is guaranteed. In the interests of your own

future, I believe the correct choice would be for you to forfeit the duel.”

At first, Luke said nothing. He breathed deeply and slowly, and closed his eyes. Eventually, he opened his mouth and murmured, “I would hate giving up without even trying. I once made a mistake that I greatly regret. Because of that, I learned that if something is truly important to me, I must do everything in my power for it. I must know that I have done all that I can. As long as I have, I can bear to be human in an irrational world. I can go on living.”

“I cannot understand you. This choice is illogical.”

“Well, there’s something else you’ve misunderstood too.”

“Misunderstood?”

“I’m stronger than you think I am,” Luke said. “Don’t underestimate me. Careful—I might not be able to hold myself back. Don’t you know how ferocious a wounded animal can be?”

“I had hoped to avoid a pointless battle, but very well,” Esther replied. “In the name of the great spirits who rule over all of creation, I shall make you pay for your hubris.”

The ringing of a bell marked the start of the match.

Luke Waldstein established a bright yellow magic sequence, and in an instant, the ring was bathed in light. He cast Purifying Lightning, causing the ground to shake as thunder roared around the arena. He silently used Multicast—an advanced technique the average magician couldn’t even begin to attempt. On top of that, every one of his multiple magic sequences was far beyond what most could achieve.

Light assaulted the spectators’ retinas, burning as brightly as if the sun were right before their eyes. Their knees went weak, and they could no longer tell up from down.

So, this is Luke Waldstein...? many spectators thought, dumbfounded.

Those few short seconds would surely be etched in their memories forever. This extraordinary prodigy had demonstrated lightning magic the likes of which they never could have imagined. A burning smell now wafted through the air,

mingling with a gritty haze of dust.

However, the elven magician emerged from the dust, totally unscathed. “Do you know of despair? I understand that the pursuit of magic has taken up much of your life. However, I have devoted over a millennium to magic. I do not need to cast Magic Barrier to avoid sustaining injuries from your attacks.” She coldly went on. “That is the difference between the two of us. Perhaps you now see that this situation is one of true despair.”

Luke stared back at her, as silent as if the world had stopped. “You’re wrong,” he said finally. “I know what it means to fight with all my might and be unable to catch up to somebody—and to me, that is happiness. Because you exist, I can become stronger. I can become strong enough to overcome you.”

“What nonsense is—”

“Please don’t despair,” Luke Waldstein said. “I might become a little too strong.”

“I see you are committed to having this duel go on. What a shame. I did not plan on stunting your growth, but nevertheless...”

With a straight face betraying no emotion, Esther established a magic sequence. Magic surged around her, warping the air with concentrated magical energy. Her summoning circle glowed emerald green, but the expected devastating salvo of water didn’t come.

There’s some kind of interference... Esther thought.

She had deployed her summoning circle, but it was incomplete. Her vast magic power looped around wildly before the magic sequence collapsed entirely and projectiles of water rushed in on her.

Did he do something to my magic sequence?!

That realization shook her. Such a thing was conceivable in theory, but it was certainly no mean feat to interfere with a magic sequence that was constructed in much finer detail than what humans could achieve. Furthermore, Esther’s spell was spirit magic, a form that worked differently from all other modern magic. Merely analyzing such a sequence would normally take weeks, even for a specialist researcher. Constructing an anti-magic sequence that could cause

interference would take much longer still.

It was by no means a technique to be used in a one-off duel. However, Luke Waldstein had taken advantage of the blind spot engendered by that accepted logic.

This human must have expected to face me, so he began preparing before the tournament had even started...

Moreover, that he had used an anti-magic sequence meant he'd come ready. He knew something that could significantly turn the battle to his favor.

He knows my exact location. He'll see through any illusion.

Esther Blueforest had a secret: there was a trick to how she had brushed off Ryan's fire attacks and Luke's lightning attack without needing to cast Magic Barrier. Thanks to cleverly concealed spirit magic, a fine wall of innumerable water droplets—like a blanket of feathers—surrounded her. It refracted the light, so that the Esther her opponents saw was not the real thing.

Through the power of illusion, she had disguised her location and gained the upper hand in battle. She had developed this secret method so that she could begin catching up to the Fairy Queen, who excelled in all ways.

This is not a problem. I still have the advantage in a battle of strength alone. I commend the effort to study my spells and prepare a strategy, but he is still powerless against magic that I have yet to reveal.

She cast Undine's Song, a high-level spirit magic technique that would put all living things within range to sleep—but again, her magic sequence went awry and fell apart.

How could he plan even for spells he hasn't seen?! Esther was astonished that his anti-magic sequence had managed to interfere with her spell almost as soon as she had begun casting it. Could he be anticipating my actions...? Surely not! How in the world could he do such a thing?

She gritted her teeth and established a new magic sequence.

"Saw it coming," Luke's icy voice rang out. "That one too."

There was an explosion, and a spray of water slashed at Esther's body. She

could no longer deny what was happening.

How much training could he have possibly done?



He must have spent a ridiculous amount of time researching and strategizing for this battle. He might even have succumbed to madness, all for the sake of triumphing against an opponent he couldn't beat in terms of pure power.

"It isn't true that the strong are the ones who win," he said coldly. "Winning *makes* you strong. And I will stop at nothing to win."

Thunder rocked the floor of the arena.

The people in the audience would never forget the amazing spectacle of that moment. Esther Blueforest was an absolute monster in the WMC: she had blown away every opponent before her and was recognized as one of the tournament's clear favorites. Even so, it took the young prodigy from Ardenfeld just sixty-two seconds to trounce her.

Letitia Lisette-Stone couldn't believe what she had just seen. Luke had soundly defeated Esther Blueforest, a duelist who had been practically untouchable until now.

The scariest part was that he'd done it thanks to his non-magical abilities. He had thoroughly analyzed the opponent and watched her attack patterns. He had anticipated her actions and responded so effectively that it was as if he'd been able to see into the future.

How much time did he spend planning for this match...? Letitia wondered. The very thought of what had gone into Luke's performance sent a chill down her spine.

Luke was among the hardest workers in the Royal Court Magicians' Division. Letitia knew this all too well after the effort she had put into trying to make him take a break back when he was covering up his overtime hours. He couldn't have had much free time to work with, but he had still devoted a maddening amount of effort to research and training. His whole life went into it.

And it's all to get closer to somebody who has no idea how he feels. Is he sweet, or is he just stupid?

But because of his utter devotion to his cause, Letitia felt like she couldn't leave him to his own devices. She couldn't suppress the instinct to meddle a

little bit, wanting his efforts to be rewarded at least somewhat. Even if it was all for the sake of a fleeting, unrequited crush, she wanted it to end in as little pain as possible for Luke.

I guess I'm just as stupid as he is.

Sitting next to her was the object of Luke's affections. Letitia gazed at the girl, wondering what she must be thinking.

"Luke..." Noelle whispered, her eyes bulging.

The look on her face was hard to describe but seemed full of significance. It looked almost like the expression of a smitten young girl.

Oh? Could it be...?

Letitia's heart began to race as she awaited Noelle's next words with growing anticipation.

"Damn it..." Noelle muttered. "He's become tougher than ever! I can't let this slide. Just you wait, Luke, I'll be on your tail again before you know it!"

Letitia was speechless. What was going on? She couldn't help but knead her forehead and let out a chuckle after that left-field reaction.

These two adorable fools, she thought. Well, it takes a fool to know one. I wish them all the happiness in the world.

"I apologize for losing the duel," Esther said afterward in the contestants' lounge.

"Worry not. Fate decides who wins and who loses. Today was simply not your day," Evangeline replied, raising her teacup and taking a sip. "For that matter, you should take this as a learning opportunity. Pure magical power is not absolute, nor is time spent on magic. Today, your years of experience were no match for his specialized training for this single battle."

"That is true. I could never have dreamed that he would learn so much about me to plan his strategy."

"It is truly a wonderful thing. I daresay he must have spent his whole life preparing for this day. It is certainly a special situation when someone gives so

much of themselves to a cause. He may one day reach my level as well.”

“‘As well’? Are you also thinking about that little girl?”

“Indeed.” Evangeline nodded flippantly.

“With all due respect, Lady Evangeline, I do not believe that she has that kind of power. She is certainly a talented magician. Indeed, I imagine that her exploits may go down in human history. However, you are one of the Three Mystic Rulers, the great leaders of the western continent’s nonhuman beings. Surely, she is unable to achieve such heights.”

“I understand what you are saying. It is, I expect, the majority opinion. Nevertheless, what is essential is invisible to the eye. I am waiting to see the monster that lurks within that girl.”

“Did you say ‘monster’?”

“Yes. The girl has something that is as yet immeasurable.” Evangeline beamed like a child on the eve of her birthday. “I wish to unearth it. In fact, I can hardly wait.”



The World Magic Championships moved on to the next round. After Luke reached the quarterfinals by defeating the previous tournament’s runner-up, people had suddenly begun to see him as a favorite in the tournament.

Uh-oh... I thought. He’s leaving me in the dust!

Naturally, I’d been seized with a strong feeling of frustration when I saw his victory. I didn’t generally mind being beaten—well, it bothered me a little bit, if I was telling the truth—but I definitely didn’t want *him* to get the better of me. This was no time to rest on my laurels.

I gotta do whatever it takes to get on his level!

I’d progressed to the quarterfinals too, seeing off experienced magicians by catching them off guard with techniques like my (not magical) Magic Punch and (not magical) Magic Headbutt.

My extremely unusual dueling style was earning me a reputation as the Dirtiest Fighter in the WMC, and I’d noticed kids around Grambern calling out to

me a lot, saying stuff like, “Hey, your headbutts rock!”

It was a little embarrassing for a refined, elegant, modest lady like myself, but I’d decided to give them a positive response all the same. And to live up to their expectations, I needed to train with all the enthusiasm I could muster!

My focus right now was on trying to master the time-stopping magic that the secretary-general had shown me. I wanted to be able to form those same golden magic sequences. I was trying to copy what I had seen, but I just couldn’t get it right.

“Hmm, I could’ve sworn it was constructed like this...” I murmured to myself, carefully examining my attempted magic sequence. “Yeah, this is pretty good. I’m sure there aren’t many magicians who could reproduce it this well after only seeing it for a millisecond.”

Suddenly, I caught the scent of waterlilies and saw a flash of flowing lavender hair. I was taken aback to see that the secretary-general was right next to me, in the flesh.

“G-Good afternoon, Your Excellency!”

“No need to be so formal,” the magus responded. “Feel free to call me your big brother Chronos.”

“Oh, but I c-couldn’t...”

“Nobody wants to call me their big brother. What a shame.” Chronos looked a little sad despite calmly changing the subject after just a moment. “The reason you can’t make that magic sequence work is because it isn’t your own. It’s constructed in the ideal way for *me* to use it. I designed it based on my build, my mannerisms, my capacity for magic, my skill level in magic, the length of my arms, the speed at which I can form a magic sequence, my bone structure, my muscles—everything. Because of that, you can try using it, but it’ll be hard for you to deploy it well. The important thing is to create your own magic sequence. Imagine you have a totally blank canvas and make something new, just for yourself. Design it with love in every detail; pour your dreams into it; make it *in your image*. Once you’ve done that, keep on learning through trial and error.”

“No problem! I’m great at that kind of grunt work!”

“Good. I’m sure you’ll do a wonderful job.” The Split-Second Magician nodded amiably. “By the way, I came here today to ask you for a little favor. I considered a few options, but I’ve decided you would be the best person to ask.”

“A favor? What is it?”

“It’s about Luke, your mentor and friend.”

“Oh, I see. Has he let being the new tournament favorite get to his head? Well, that’s fine. I’ll take care of it.”

“No, it’s not about that.”

It isn’t? Then what is this about?

I acted like I was cluelessly wondering what was going on, but actually, something had occurred to me recently. I knew what the secretary-general was concerned about, and the reason Letitia was watching Luke’s training so closely. I had decided that if he wanted to keep it a secret, I would pretend I hadn’t noticed, so I’d gone on acting like I had no idea.

“Is this something to do with his injuries?” I asked.

“So you’ve realized.”

“I’ve known him for a long time. Of course I noticed.”

“True. It looks like something is affecting his back, beyond where healing magic can reach. I think his spine is injured.”

I was no expert in medical magic, but I understood instinctively that this wasn’t something to take lightly.

“It isn’t too severe yet,” Chronos continued. “Considering he can still move around, I’m sure it would take only a month’s rest to make a full recovery. But if things get worse during battle, that changes everything. Depending on how things go, he could suffer aftereffects. He might not be able to work as a royal court magician any longer.”

Hearing that shook me to the core. Was it really possible that Luke couldn’t

continue to be a court magician?

Calm down, I urged myself. *Don't get worked up*.

I couldn't let my emotions get the better of me and cause me to make a big mistake. I had to do the right thing for him as his close friend.

"I understand," I said finally. "I'll speak to him."

After dinner at the inn, I was standing outside Luke's bedroom. I could see the distant mountains dimly lit by the day's final rays of sunlight. I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"Hey, I wanted to talk to you about something..." I began.

Luke hesitated a little.

"It's important," I insisted.

At that point, he seemed to understand, and let me into the room. I could smell a clean, sophisticated, soapy aroma—Luke's scent.

"So, Luke," I said. "You've been hiding some injuries, haven't you?"

For a moment, he didn't react at all, but then he finally responded with a quiet nod.

"I pretended not to know about it," I continued. "I think Letitia has been doing the same thing. We both know you should stop, but we don't want to make you. We know how much you've done for this competition. We've seen all your hard work and preparation. Nobody else has trained the way you have. I'm sure the WMC means something special to you. I guess this is what you told me was more important than anything in the world. It's all about the dream you want to bring to life, right?"

I paused, knowing I had to choose my words carefully, then went on. "I don't know what the best solution is, but I know that I don't want you to overexert yourself. I'm scared that your wounds will get worse and you'll never recover. I don't want you to have long-term injuries, and I don't want your career to end. But I know that your dream really matters to you. Sometimes, giving up on something can mean losing a part of who you are. That's the way I felt about

magic when I used to work at the Mages' Guild. If your dream is that important, then I feel like it's my duty as your friend to support you."

Luke was silent.

"Now, I'm going to ask you a question. Please answer me, so I know what the best solution is. So that nobody needs to have any regrets." I took a breath.

"What is the thing you want more than anything?"



"What is the thing you want more than anything?"

Noelle's question threw my mind into disarray. I couldn't think straight. I couldn't get my head around what I was being asked, nor how to respond.

But of course, I did understand. I understood perfectly well, and that was what had brought me to a standstill.

Our social positions were so far apart; Noelle was an unacceptable partner for the heir of the Waldstein family. I knew that if we were together, there would be no shortage of scandalous rumors. High society was a constant tug of war. There were always people waiting to attack the moment they smelled blood. It was a ridiculous and cruel world, and Noelle was too important for me to subject her to it. I wanted her to lead a happy life.

On the other hand, I had another side to myself, urging me to spill the beans. *Why not?* that self-destructive voice goaded. *Tell her everything and bring the story to its conclusion.*

"The truth is, I've loved you for years."

If I uttered those words, how would she react? Would she be surprised? Scared?

Would she reject me?

Or would she be happy?

Competing hopes and fears were making me restless.

I do want to tell her everything, I thought. If she accepts my feelings, I would be overjoyed. As long as she's with me, I'll be happy. I'd willingly lose everything else.

My brain was full of visions of a possible future. I saw the two of us sharing our lives together. I saw myself waking up to see her beside me, then getting up first to make breakfast. I saw us splitting a single bottle of orange juice before sprawling out on the same sofa together. We differed in our interests, but I wanted us to love each other for those differences. Even if we didn't walk through life at the same pace, I wanted us to walk together regardless.

I had an impulse to surrender myself to my feelings and bring an end to all the planning and pondering. However, my logical side wouldn't allow it.

"I...can't tell you," I said.

After the harsh education of my youth, I was too used to stifling my emotions. Surrendering myself to my feelings was something I just couldn't do.

"All right," she replied. She sounded cold, disappointed.

Of course she didn't like my answer. From her perspective, I was prioritizing a secret over my friend. The atmosphere felt heavy and strained.

"I guess you're a bit more grown-up than I am," she continued in a quiet, hollow voice. "If it's some family matter, it's probably pretty hard to talk about. You should do what you want to do. But as your friend, I want to make a request: make sure you don't overdo it. If you find yourself in danger, I want you to get out of there. And don't come out with some bigheaded nonsense about how it's your business. I'll be upset if you get hurt. Lots of people will be. Don't go telling me you have to 'see this out' or 'end this right now' or whatever. You need to return safely. That's the rule I want you to follow." She placed a hand on my shoulder. "Whatever anybody else says, I'll support you and your dreams. I know nobody has worked as hard as you have. So go out and prove it. Prove that you're the best."

I hadn't expected her to say anything like that. Her words carried a power I

couldn't resist. It made me so happy to have her dainty hands reaching out to help me. I couldn't understand why it made me feel so much stronger. As long as she was looking my way, I felt unstoppable.

"Thank you," I responded. "I'll do my very best."

The following day, I discovered my quarterfinal opponent. It was the worst possible outcome—Evangeline Runeforest. As one of the Three Mystic Rulers, she was a monstrous entity ranking among the very strongest on the western continent. The Fairy Queen of the Great Forest was regarded as the tournament's greatest threat.

"Damn, poor Luke," my colleagues moaned, exasperated. "Of all the possible opponents..."

I, on the other hand, was calm. "Actually, I think this is lucky," I said. "If I beat both the winner and the runner-up from the previous WMC, nobody would have any reason to doubt my ability."

I had a silver lining to this cloud. I'd take misfortune in stride and face the challenge. This was my big chance to prove myself in battle in a way that nobody in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld could deny. If I were to defeat the strongest magician on the western continent—the one at the center of the new magical order the Holy Empire of Vellmar was seeking to create—then I could be with Noelle.

It was time for me to fight.



"We've reached the business end of the tournament," a man said, sitting in a VIP box in the stands. He was wearing a black signet ring.

"Yes, indeed," an elderly steward replied.

"We're in luck. Our attempts to rig the draw might have failed, but some divine power has given us what we wanted. Good things always come to me. If there is a god, he must be pure evil. Otherwise, I would surely have been punished long ago."

“Of course not, sir. You are a wonderful person.”

The man with the black signet ring smiled. “Thank you. How blessed I am to hear you say that.”

“Who do you believe will win the match?” the steward asked.

“That’s a good question. In his last match, the young man proved he has what it takes to reach the top. If fate smiles on him, he is in with a chance of victory.”

“But would that not cause problems?”

“Not at all. Everything is under control,” the man responded stoically. “For now, let’s just enjoy the show. This is the main event of the last ever World Magic Championships.”

The entire arena was buzzing with cheering spectators. With the throngs of people who had come to see the quarterfinals, the venue was unusually hot and humid.

Evangeline Runeforest was the undisputed champion of the World Magic Championships. The Fairy Queen of the Great Forest was one of the Three Mystic Rulers, together with the Dragon Emperor and the Lord of the Night. She was unrivaled when it came to one-on-one duels, having swept the previous three iterations of the WMC without a single setback. However, a peculiar tension surrounded today’s duel.

The Kingdom of Ardenfeld had historically approached the World Magic Championships with a negative outlook despite the kingdom’s status as a leading force in magic on the western continent. It had developed a reputation as a potential sleeping giant. This time, Ardenfeld had entered a boy wonder rumored to be the greatest genius in the kingdom’s history: Luke Waldstein.

The incredible spectacle of Luke Waldstein’s commanding victory over Esther Blueforest was ingrained in the minds of all the spectators. It made them feel like anything was possible this time around.

People swallowed nervously as their stares were glued to the ring. They hardly dared to blink. The air was hot with excitement and anticipation; fanfares and passionate cheers.

In the circular ring, the two duelists faced each other. The time had come for the start of the match.

As soon as the duel started, Luke released a swift flash of lightning with Blast Rising, a spell specially chosen for this match. By silently using Multicast, he was able to deploy nine magic sequences at once, each of them carefully polished in preparation for this moment.

Instantly, the magicians watching could see that Luke Waldstein was a truly outstanding talent and that he'd made absolutely sure he was ready for this day.

"Good work, but that will not be enough to stop me," Evangeline Runeforest said as lightning attacks rained down around her. She got ready to strike back with spirit magic. "Air Grace!"

Evangeline suddenly appeared right behind Luke. This was teleportation magic—a form of magic otherwise lost to history, which bent the very laws of physics. Defying the basic principles of worldly logic granted her preposterous agility.

"Yes, you *would* move there," Luke murmured.

Could he have predicted how I would move?! Evangeline thought.

Using teleportation magic to shift her position instantly, the Fairy Queen narrowly avoided another barrage of lightning—but it turned out that Luke had also anticipated that his attack would miss.

His true target was—

Electric flashes came from all directions. Evangeline Runeforest didn't have a chance to even cast Magic Barrier.

"Return Strike!" Luke called out.

Light brighter than the sun filled the arena as thirty-nine lightning bolts struck within one second. The spectators' minds went blank. Nobody could tell what was going on. The only thing they understood was that right now, Luke Waldstein was in control.

This intense bombardment was nothing like everyday magic. The constant rush of lightning obliterated the paving stones of the ring, whirling debris into the air. When the breeze cleared the dust cloud away, a hole was left in its wake, like the impact crater of a meteorite.

“Impressive. Were it not for the protection of the Four Great Spirits, that might have been too much for me to bear.” Standing in the great hole, Evangeline Runeforest brushed away some dust and smiled. “Are you disappointed?”

“Not at all. I expected you to withstand the attack.”

“Very good. I respect that attitude.” The elf smirked and looked up toward Luke. “Now, entertain me some more.”

The Fairy Queen was the strongest individual in the Holy Empire of Vellmar’s territory. She possessed power beyond that of humans.

Faced with such a terrifying opponent, Luke Waldstein was showing true intent to unseat the undisputed champion. He was anticipating her actions with what looked like clairvoyant certainty, and perfectly targeting her weak points. His strategy was completely focused on eliminating her advantages. It was all made possible by the insane level of effort he had put into studying for this fight.

The audience members were stunned.

“He’s so strong...” somebody said, breathless.

“I-Is this even possible...?” said another.

Luke was brimming with confidence. *I feel so light*, he thought. *It’s working. I can see the way through.*

Even his back didn’t hurt. The sedatives must have been working well.

Evangeline Runeforest cast Air Blaze, an attack that could spell instant death if it landed. It was destructive enough to render Magic Barrier meaningless.

However, Luke already knew that it wouldn’t land. Throughout this duel, his pride was keeping him afloat all along. Since a young age, he had endured

grueling training for as many as sixteen hours each day. He hadn't been given a chance to take a break, let alone play like a normal child.

"Do you know what your grandfather put me through, boy? I didn't have it this easy. You should count yourself lucky."

"I'm not interested in what you think. You have a duty to fulfill as the Waldstein family heir."

It had been typical for Luke to face beatings and have his hair pulled. He would find himself lying in a pool of his own blood. No matter how much he had cried, there had been no mercy.

Just to live through it, he'd had no choice but to harden himself. He'd expressed no feelings or hopes.

"Success is everything. If you can't win, there's no point in trying."

Luke had turned himself into a machine, built to carry out his father's wishes.

"Losers are worthless."

He had endured criticism and violence. He had no happy memories of that time. He remembered only unbearable fear and pain.

But that was when he met her.

"You act all cool as a cucumber, but you're actually a hard worker, aren't you? I like that about you. If I'm going to compete with you as a rival, I'd much prefer to know that you're a real hard worker. It encourages me to do my very best too."

She was his first friend and equal.

"There may be tough times ahead, but stay strong. Let's work together, Luke Waldstein."

She'd made him feel like everything was all right, like it was fine for him to be himself. She probably had no idea how happy that had made him. She had rescued him.

I love you more than I can handle. I want you with me. I want to see you by my side, smiling.

God, please. There's nothing else I need. I won't make any selfish requests, like asking for her to feel the same way I do. I just want you to do something so I can be near her.

Predicting where Evangeline Runeforest would move next, Luke launched another lightning attack. The attack struck her on the shoulder.

I have what it takes. I can win.

He put his hopes into his next magic sequence. This was his golden opportunity. If this spell hit its mark, he might just cause a great upset.

Luke had prepared this spell to be his final blow. It was far beyond anything Evangeline had expected from him.

But in the same moment, Evangeline cast another spell that was far beyond anything Luke had expected.

"Air Flügel!"

Suddenly, Luke was in the middle of a forest. Trees had grown to cover the entire ring.

"This spell causes one's mental world to materialize," the Fairy Queen said. "It is a costly move that requires all my power, but the mana from the trees will immediately replenish my lost magical energy. This space provides me with limitless energy. As long as I am in the forest, I cannot run out of magic. Now, I shall use the full extent of my magical energy to summon the most powerful of the spirits."

She'd had sixteen high-level spirits emerge for her protection, beings possessing power that surpassed even the most talented magicians.

"Do you really think that's enough to take me on?" Luke sneered.

"I would expect you to say that. Of course, you may be strong enough to be a match for these spirits. However...how will you fare against a thousand of them?"

Even more of them filled the air, forming a great wall. The sheer volume of magical energy caused the air to bend and shift.

"You performed valiantly," she said coldly. "Farewell."

Faced with a deluge of spirit magic, Luke lost consciousness.

Is there value in an unfulfilled dream? Luke thought, alone in a world of utter darkness.

I did everything I could. Even when I was busy, I forwent breaks and sleep so I could go on gathering information and devising my strategy. But all I have now is regret.

Was there another way? Could I have changed the outcome somehow?

As much as he racked his brains, he knew there was nothing he could have done. He knew it, but he couldn't bear to admit it.

Just a little more, and I could've pulled it off. And to think I'd finally become worthy of being with her. Maybe the future I wanted was within my grasp.

He couldn't let go of his shattered hopes. They tormented him.

He couldn't win. All the time he had spent preparing had been for naught. It was all meaningless. Worthless.

It was his father's words that had made him come to think this way: *"There's no sense in living if..."*

Luke didn't like that way of thinking. He despised it, and yet, before he knew it, he had started to do it himself. It was like a curse—a deformity. When he didn't get the results he wanted, he would punish himself.

"Losers are worthless."

There was no value in unfulfilled dreams. He had failed, and he would forever bear that brand.

Still out cold, Luke felt a warm sensation enveloping his hand.

What is this?

Somebody was gripping his hand, but who?

When he opened his eyes, his vision was blurred. Above him, with her eyes full of tears, was the one he loved.

"Luke... I'm so glad you're okay!" she sobbed, her voice shaking. "They say

there won't be lasting damage. It'll require powerful healing magic, and your reaction to it will probably put you to sleep for about two weeks, but if you rest, you should be able to keep on being a royal court magician. Everything's gonna be all right!"

That was when Luke realized that when Noelle had sent him out to fight, she'd been more apprehensive than he'd thought. She believed in him and cared about him more than he'd thought too.

I see. There is value in an unfulfilled dream. Your concern for me moved you to tears. Knowing that is more than enough for me.

That's why I can't keep this to myself. After all this effort, I have to make it mean something. As your friend, I need to support you. That's my true duty.

"Noelle, you can do what I couldn't," he croaked, doing his very best just to stay awake. "You can beat the Fairy Queen. You can become the greatest magician in the world. Listen, and I'll tell you how."

Luke had been provided with two rooms at the inn. One was where he slept. The other was his archive room, where he kept an array of details on each of his opponents. The entire room was filled with books and stacks of papers, piled up almost to the ceiling.

"I can't believe there's this much..." I breathed.

The sight blew past "amazing" into the realms of "troubling." It was an insane amount of research, and he had brought all of this into the tournament, all to attain something he wanted more than anything else in the world. I didn't know what that thing was, but there was something I understood clear as day.

"Listen, and I'll tell you how."

I needed to use the information Luke had entrusted to me to defeat the Fairy Queen. I had to make all his hard work worth it.

Evangeline Runeforest was the undisputed champion, the one said to be the strongest fighter on the western continent. She was the real deal; she had beaten Luke. Even so, I believed that we had the power to win. I couldn't do it alone, but together, it was possible.

Following Luke's instructions, I turned the pages of the old tomes in his room. The grimoires explained the magic sequences and system of spirit magic, all of which were nothing like modern magic. Understanding spirit magic was no easy task, but I didn't have time to waver.

I became passionately absorbed in the books. After all, this was magic, the thing I loved above all else. I was sure nobody loved it the way I did.

I believe in you, my beloved magic.



Letitia Lisette-Stone leaned back against the door of the archive room, the place Luke had prepared specially to house his vast quantity of resources. Letitia had learned from him that Noelle was working on something in there. Most likely, it was in preparation for fighting her next opponent, Evangeline Runeforest.

There was a limit to what could be achieved in a day. Knowing that the duel was coming just the next day, many would probably have focused on getting some rest. But if this was what her hardworking junior chose, Letitia was determined to back her up. Having seen Luke herself, she knew all too well how much this tournament meant to him. She had a responsibility as Luke and Noelle's superior to validate their wild ideas, as well as let them get all the rest they needed.

When she listened carefully, she could hear the quiet turning of pages on the other side of the door. The soft sound continued long into the night.

Should I stop her? Letitia thought. *No, but I can't leave her too much longer.*

She'd stayed frozen in her indecision for a while before she heard gentle snoring from inside the room. She opened the door carefully, making sure not to make any noise, and saw Noelle, sleeping flat on the desk. Letitia lifted her up and carried her to bed, where she laid a blanket over her.

It's the least I can do for her.

She heaved a sigh of relief and returned to Luke's archive room to tidy up. She found a haphazard heap of books and papers, and she set about trying to sort them without moving anything too far. Once she started clearing the

documents, she noticed something that took her breath away.

Did she really get this far in only half a day...?

There was an entirely new magic sequence designed to combat Evangeline Runeforest's secret weapon. The approach to its construction wasn't like the anti-magic sequence Luke had used. It was incomplete, but Noelle had done enough for Letitia to see what she was aiming for.

It's a shame she didn't have enough time. It would've taken too long to do all the calculations and testing needed to make this magic sequence suitable for real-life application. The average magician would need months. Even a court magician would probably take at least two weeks to get it all done.

"She's taken an intriguing approach, hasn't she?" somebody said suddenly, speaking from the doorway. "I had a word with everyone who was still awake. With our powers combined, maybe we can help this youngster become the western continent's greatest magician."

It was Ryan Archbret, the team captain, backed by the other royal court magicians who had accompanied the Ardenfeld delegation.

"Why don't we work together?" he said. "Let's all pitch in to help her face this great challenge."



Morning light was shining in through the curtains. I opened my eyes, looked at the magical alarm clock beside me, and felt my heart stop.

I fell asleep?!

Oh no, I messed up. This is a disaster!

I'd only managed to prepare an early draft of my magic sequence. Here I was, even though I'd known it would still take much longer to complete my calculations and testing. Despite the dire situation, I must have unthinkingly made my way back to my room to sleep.

Cursing my love of lying in bed, I ran from my room.

All I can do is get back to work and finish as much of it as possible!

I was in no position to worry about my bed head. I raced frantically along the corridor to Luke's archive room and opened the door. What I saw there was something I could never have expected.

"To produce an anti-stable effect, you'd need to analyze this using the Law of Unfixed Multipliers."

"Can we use the data from this book? There are some similarities with secondary support sequences."

"We've tested it and proved that the system works! Now all we have to do is polish it up so it's ready to use in battle!"

I saw the magic sequence I'd been working on, surrounded by a crowd of my coworkers struggling with it. They spotted me and burst out laughing.

"Look at your hair!"

"At least go and wash your face first. You can leave this to us."

I couldn't believe my eyes. *Why are they continuing the magic sequence I started...?*

Before I could ask it, a maid from the court who had been helping the team answered my question for me.

"They thought that if they worked together, it might be possible for the Ardenfeld team to win the tournament," she explained, covering her mouth to hide a chuckle. "The people from the Third Unit were particularly eager. Those scoundrels."

"Don't get the wrong idea!" one of the Third Unit magicians shouted. "This isn't for your sake!"

"We'll get a bonus if we win the WMC! We were just along for the ride, but this'll do wonders for our reputations too!"

Among the boisterous court magicians, Lieutenant Ryan was continuing to work on his calculations.

"We're on top of this, Springfield. You can just think about your own preparations." He grinned. "Don't hold back. Do what you've done to all the other big shots. Go out there and give them hell!"

They were all doing this for me. They wanted to be able to help. Nothing could have made me happier. I was filled with a warm feeling from head to toe, knowing that my coworkers were on my side.

I set about getting ready for the match. I warmed up and got my thoughts in order. I was in the semifinals of the World Magic Championships, and standing in my way was the most powerful magician in the western continent.

It's not like I wasn't afraid, but I didn't mind. Others had given me courage.

With the magic sequence completed by my comrades at the ready, I faced my greatest opponent yet.

Chapter 4: A Never-Ending Day in the Guardian City

The man with the black signet ring was in the VIP box, observing the crowds.

“Another full house,” the elderly steward remarked. “It seems the excitement has died down a little since yesterday, though.”

The man with the black signet ring nodded. “No wonder. I’m sure the majority of people see Noelle Springfield as an interesting prospect, but not as somebody who inspires the same level of expectation as Luke Waldstein.”

“Of course. We witnessed the dramatic reveal of the Fairy Queen’s secret weapon yesterday. Isn’t it natural that after such a display, people would feel there is only one possible outcome today? That highest-order magic allows her to create the perfect environment for herself. By materializing her imagined world of the Great Forest, she can summon over a thousand high-level spirits. In every respect, that strategy goes above and beyond the capabilities of modern magic.”

“But the girl from Ardenfeld gets stronger with each battle. I suspect she’s used to one-on-one duels by now. Then again, I must admit that she’s up against an utterly formidable opponent this time.”

Many of the people filling the stands felt the same. Not only was Evangeline Runeforest the three-time champion of the WMC, but she had also overwhelmed all of her opponents without once losing or even truly breaking a sweat. Furthermore, against Luke Waldstein, her strongest challenger yet, she had boosted her profile even further by revealing a spell that could create something out of nothing.

The Holy Empire of Vellmar had worked to build the World Magic Championships into the world’s greatest stage for magic. Under such scrutiny, the Fairy Queen’s reputation was reaching new heights. By now, there was surely nobody left who doubted that she was the very strongest the western continent had to offer.

Eager to see what would happen today, spectators were in a rush to get to their seats.

“Hurry up! You’ll miss the match if you aren’t quick.”

“How many seconds do you think this duel is gonna last?”

“Pay careful attention. We’ll only get a brief moment to see the action this time.”

The result was inevitable as far as they were concerned. The little magician from Ardenfeld was certainly an impressive fighter, but she was still no match for her opponent. Of that, everybody in the arena was certain. They knew nothing of the fire burning within her heart at that very moment.



My semifinal duel was about to begin.

“Do you have any idea how much I’ve wanted to meet you?” the Fairy Queen asked. “This is the moment I have been waiting for all along. I wanted to fight you. The nobles organizing the tournament quite rudely placed many obstacles in your way. Thank you ever so much for brushing them all aside.”

I was facing Evangeline Runeforest, one of the Three Mystic Rulers and known as the strongest magician on the western continent.

She smiled at me. “I think very highly of you. And as the great and powerful queen of this world, I have certain expectations. Please understand the significance of this.” She then shot me an icy look. “I will not tolerate disappointment.”

Her magical aura was oppressive; I could barely breathe in its wake.

As soon as the duel started, Evangeline launched an unimaginably powerful spell. The air around us distorted, as did gravity, due to the intense volume and concentration of magical energy. Splintered pieces of the paving stones beneath us flew up and swirled around the ring.

She was using Wind Blast, my go-to spell, but its destructive power was far beyond anything I’d ever achieved. I had the ability to cast Magic Barrier against wind magic, given that it was the type of magic I was most familiar with myself,

and thanks to my experiences fighting the Undefeated Master of the Blade and the King of the Dead, I could deploy it instantly.

However, my barrier wasn't enough to stop the attack. My magic sequence fell apart, to my complete and utter shock.

My field of vision shook violently, and I suddenly felt an intense blow to my back, knocking the air out of me. It had taken mere moments for the Fairy Queen's attack to slam me against the hard wall at the edge of the ring.

She's even better now than she was against Luke, I thought.

It made me fully appreciate the effort Luke had put into studying his opponent and learning how to cancel out her strengths. She was on a whole other level; her attacks were so powerful and precise. Her magic was unlike anything I knew.

I need to play to my own strengths and use time acceleration magic.

"Spell Boost!"

No matter how powerful her wind attacks are, I should still be able to fight if I can avoid them.

That plan was quickly dashed too.

"Air Grace," she murmured.

By the time I knew what was going on, it was already too late. A cannonball of wind tore up the floor and flew past, just brushing against me. I could hear the harsh creaking of my bones as I tumbled across the ground like a pebble, finally slumping pathetically against the wall.

With her teleportation magic, Evangeline was fast enough that she matched even Chronos's Spell Boost. I already knew my magic capacity was nothing compared to hers. Her magic sequences were more meticulous than mine too. But my biggest problem was that even in terms of speed—my greatest strength—I still lagged behind.

That means I have to use the anti-magic sequence strategy Luke taught me!

I knew her weaknesses. I'd read about the ways she tended to teleport and the spells she would use in a pinch. My brain was full of all the data Luke had

gathered. Even if I couldn't rely on my speed, I still stood a fighting chance if I could anticipate her movements. I predicted her next move and established my magic sequence.

"At least you're trying," Evangeline spat coldly. "However, you must know you need a spell with more substance than that."

I felt the pain of many tiny rocks jabbing at my skin. I tasted dirt as I raised my head from the ground.

Whatever I did, it wasn't enough. The difference between us was immense. Even with the help of Luke and all the others, I couldn't put up a fight. In terms of my skills, my talents, my magical power, the time I had spent—none of it was enough.

I guess I'm gonna lose. I haven't got what it takes.

I didn't want to accept it. This hurdle was too high to surmount.

I thought about the concept of despair.

"You're talentless. Quit magic and find a different job."

When I'd heard those words, that wasn't "despair" for me.

"We don't need a good-for-nothing like you."

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

"Sorry, the mayor's son won't like us hiring you."

That wasn't it either.

To me, "despair" was having to give up on my greatest love.

I'd fought with everything I had, and it wasn't enough.

But that didn't faze me. I was getting to use my beloved magic. There were wonderful people on my side, expecting me to do great things.

What could be better than that?

I stood up and established a new magic sequence that built on everything I'd experienced until now. With its simplified construction, I worked faster than ever before.

"I was waiting for this," Evangeline said, immediately vanishing from view. Her teleportation magic countered my speed by making my haste irrelevant.

But I can see where she's going.

I anticipated her movement and unleashed a great blade of wind. A few of her uniquely lustrous hairs fluttered in the air.

"Splendid. So you do have the power to respond," Evangeline said. "Now, show me more. I wish to see the beast that lies within."



Lyra lived in the Guardian City of Grambern. Her magic-obsessed father had brought her along to watch the World Magic Championships.

Why does Daddy love magic more than me? she used to think. *There's no way I'll ever care about magic!*

However, the apple didn't fall far from the tree, and sure enough, his attitude had an influence on her own. Inevitably, she was captivated by the magic duel playing out before her eyes, the beautiful magic sequences the magicians deployed, and the unbelievable spells they cast.

She was particularly fascinated by the little magician representing the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, with her carefree, confident wind spells and unconventional use of punches and headbutts.

"Hey, your headbutts rock!" Lyra had bravely called out one day as the magician passed by.

"Cool, right?" the magician had replied, cheerfully patting Lyra on the head.

“Watch me win the next match too.”

Lyra was smaller than the other children she knew, and she saw herself in the magician from Ardenfeld. Deep down inside, a dream began to grow: one day she wanted to be just as strong and friendly as that magician.

For Lyra, this semifinal was essential viewing. Nobody else seemed to expect much from the Ardenfeld representative, though.

“Ah, it’s that little girl from Ardenfeld, huh?”

“She’s fun to watch, but she just isn’t on the same level as the Fairy Queen.”

“I’ll be impressed if she lasts one minute.”

Nuh-uh, no way! Lyra thought stubbornly. *She’s super strong!*

But as soon as the match started, she almost wanted to cover her eyes. The magician from Ardenfeld was being hopelessly outpaced. Nothing she did was working.

No...

Lyra couldn’t bear to watch. It wasn’t that the little magician was performing badly. Her opponent was just far too powerful.

Please...

She was about to look away when suddenly, a counterattack came. A hush fell across the stands.

“What...?”

“Did the girl just match the Fairy Queen’s speed?”

A confused murmur swept through the audience. They couldn’t believe their own eyes. Amid the excitement, one little girl was staring fixedly at the ring, calling out in her mind as if praying.

Please! Try your best!

Royal Court Magicians’ Division Secretary-General Chronos Casablancas was watching the match from a corner of the stands, hidden by camouflaging magic. Nobody knew he was there.

She's predicting where Evangeline will teleport and using Luke's data to respond, Chronos thought. *Mastering it to this degree in only a day is quite something.*

By accelerating time, she'd been able to undergo extremely intensive study. Presumably, her time at the Mages' Guild had given her the extraordinary power of concentration and endurance necessary to pull it off. Meanwhile, growing up as a wild child in the sticks must have affected the speed and timing of her reactions.

Just based on this fleeting moment, any quick-witted magician would surely have realized that this girl had something that no ordinary magician had.

But this is merely the tip of the iceberg, Chronos thought. *Is now the time for her true power to be revealed?*



I was facing an uphill struggle just to hold on. I couldn't afford to budge an inch. Evangeline's ability as a magician was absolutely staggering compared to my own, but that knowledge propelled me forward.

Even if I was only hanging on by the skin of my teeth, I was putting up a fight. I was catching up. My magic was potent enough to work against the western continent's most powerful magician, and I couldn't help feeling pleased with myself. It allowed me to toss aside any feelings of stress.

I can do this. I know I can!

I was in an all-out defensive mode. Every clash of our attacks reminded me of the stark difference between us.

Even so, any fear I felt was easily outweighed by excitement. I wanted to step out, take risks, and look to the future. That was the way for me to improve, even slightly, and become a greater version of myself.

I had no time to think. I relied entirely on my instincts. Without realizing it, I'd begun evading attacks I should've been unable to dodge. It was like my body was being led by something other than my own mind. I'd never been so fast before. I'd never thought I could move like this.

What is this feeling?

I didn't understand. I didn't feel like myself.

It isn't stopping. I can't stop it.

No, I don't think I would ever want to stop.

I wanted to set my sights further and further forward—and keep on moving.

What is this?

What was happening?



The magicians watching the duel were amazed by what they were seeing.

“Hey, this can't be real, can it...?” somebody blurted out.

One of the most shocking parts was that Evangeline Runeforest seemed even more capable than she had at the start of the match. Moreover, she seemed like a totally different individual from the one Luke Waldstein had managed to frustrate the day before. Her power far exceeded what they had witnessed so far. The audience could plainly see that this was the true ability of the Fairy Queen, someone who had devoted millennia to the study of magic.

It was a constant display of spectacular magic sequences and incredible destructive power. The entire place was shaking. Even the seven-layer outer walls, constructed using supreme relics, groaned under the pressure of this mind-boggling magic. Without those protective walls, the city would clearly have been razed to the ground.

Nevertheless—even more remarkably—the battle showed no signs of coming to an end. The little magician wasn't yielding, even as her monstrous opponent got stronger and stronger.

This can't be happening... one of the spectators thought, watching their attacks crisscross faster than the eye could see. *How can she keep up?*

It was all happening at such a speed that even the most preeminent magicians would have had a hard time following it. Nonetheless, the girl was going toe-to-toe with the elf, not missing a beat. She had blown past the limits

of most humans.

Wh-What the heck is that girl...?

Everyone in the crowd was speechless. All they could do was stare in awe at this truly abnormal sight.

With each collision of spells, another flew out just a fraction of a second later. In the midst of this furious battle, Evangeline Runeforest's mind was perfectly unclouded. She had the composure expected of somebody with a wealth of experience.

Spectacular. Even now, she can contend with me, she thought. But can she handle this?

The Fairy Queen deployed eleven magic sequences. Most opponents would've had no solution for such a complex attack, but Noelle Springfield reacted perfectly. She backed up to give herself time to work out what effect the spells would have, and she evaded the attack using a combination of time acceleration magic and a localized magical barrier.

Yes, wonderful! She is still keeping up with me.

Seeing the little magician's determined pursuit, Evangeline's heart raced with anticipation. She thought back to her childhood and the great destiny that had been placed on her shoulders.

Talent was a blessing from the heavens. There was no fairness in who would be chosen to receive it.

Since birth, Evangeline had been treated as somebody special: the kind of remarkable individual who appeared once in five thousand years. For a baby to possess such vast magic power could only be described as extraordinary. As soon as the child entered the world screaming, all who saw her knew that she was utterly unlike themselves.

The elves of the Great Forest raised the young Evangeline like she was a precious gift from the heavens. They bestowed her with a name meaning "good tidings" and provided her with the greatest education available. Reverence and

expectation followed her at all times.

“Everyone is counting on me!” she would tell herself. “I must do all that I can!”

Evangeline was a serious, hardworking child. The harder she worked, the happier people were, and the more they praised her. She enjoyed learning about magic, so she didn’t mind at all that she needed to study for fifteen hours a day.

There was one thing that troubled her, though. Evangeline had read about children playing with their friends, but she had never experienced this herself. She had no friends, and she had a weak grasp of the very idea of play. At that time, she’d believed that friends must be a rare thing to find, but one day she plucked up the courage to ask her teacher about it.

“You wish to play with your friends?” the teacher responded. “Yes, that sounds like a wonderful idea. However, you are different from other children, Lady Evangeline. You are special. The most important thing when learning spirit magic is to train from an early age. Once you grow up to become a magician with mastery of spirit magic, perhaps then you can try finding friends to play with.”

If I grow up, I can play! Evangeline thought. The prospect made her delve into her studies with even greater vigor.

Ten years went by.

“Can I play with my friends now?”

“No. You still have more growing up to do.”

Evangeline studied harder.

One hundred years went by.

“Can I play with my friends now?”

“No. You need to be able to use spirit magic like the Fairy King.”

Evangeline studied harder still.

One thousand years went by.

“I would like to offer my congratulations on this auspicious day. Lady Evangeline, you are now the queen of the Great Forest.”

“Can I play with my friends now?”

“No. As the Fairy Queen, you have work to do.”

Evangeline busied herself with her royal duties.

Three thousand years went by.

“I wish I could play with my friends...”

“No. As the Fairy Queen, you still have work to do.”

“But I always wanted—”

“Lady Evangeline, you are very important to us. Peace prevails in the Great Forest thanks to your efforts in repelling the imperial forces. There are certain duties that powerful individuals must fulfill. Do you not agree that that is what is expected of our queen?”

That was when Evangeline realized that nobody saw her for who she was. To them, she was merely someone with the qualifications to be their queen, and that was all she had ever been. They wanted her to behave according to their own expectations. They didn’t care about her beyond her role as Fairy Queen, and they weren’t interested in her happiness.

I alone will do what makes me happy, she thought that day. Whatever anybody else says, it is of no concern to me. I will live as I please.

From that day onward, Evangeline acted according to her own intentions, rather than the expectations of others. It was like she had belatedly become a sulky adolescent after three millennia of holding herself back. She felt she deserved to be a little selfish after all that time. She began throwing her weight around, causing problems, and reveling in the pleasure and freedom of misbehaving.

Recently, she had started to proclaim with a straight face that the world was hers. She felt like she was probably going a little too far, but she wasn’t concerned enough to lose sleep over it. After all, she was having far too much fun.

Now I just need to find a friend, and I can finally be truly happy.

She wanted to play with her friends. It was a simple wish, but it had continually proved to be an impossible challenge for her. Her grand status as the Fairy Queen of the Great Forest thwarted any attempt to relate to somebody on a level playing field. Moreover, she had longed for friendship for millennia. Her list of requirements for the ideal friend no longer bore any resemblance to anybody living in the real world.

First, she should be a girl. I also want her to be as talented as me, but she must not be as clever as me. She should have a strong personality, and she should be a little unusual. But why oh why can I not find such a girl?

She had trouble finding anybody who even had the potential to meet those criteria. Therefore, when she caught wind of the girl everybody was talking about, her interest was piqued.

The little magician from the Kingdom of Ardenfeld had joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division and wasted no time in rising through the ranks at an almost record-breaking rate. Not only that, but there was the possibility that an even greater power was hiding within her. Perhaps the girl would even reach Evangeline's level.

Evangeline was desperate to meet her. When she saw the girl's name on the list of competitors at the World Magic Championships, she could barely contain herself.

What an interesting character. She has great potential and she acts freely, refusing to be bound by tradition. I appreciate that she even seems a little stupid. She is so obsessed with magic that the rest of the world washes over her.

This girl hit a lot of the targets for the perfect friend, but that made Evangeline all the more disappointed. She had tried to deny one particularity about her, but Evangeline had to face the facts.

She is talented and perceptive. To have become such an accomplished magician at that age, I cannot help but be impressed by the amount of time she must have spent studying magic. However, it cannot possibly come close to the three thousand years it has taken me. It would take more than pure chance—more than a miracle—to bridge that gap. She cannot yet achieve the sort of

power I possess.

That was what Evangeline had thought until she witnessed the girl's exceptional reaction times and seemingly supernatural predictive power. Evangeline had expected to look down on her from on high, but the little magician was hot on her heels.

What is she capable of...?

The Fairy Queen couldn't help but smile. There was no need for her to go easy on the girl. She could afford to focus on demonstrating her full power.

"Air Flügel!"

She materialized the Great Forest that existed in her mind. Over a thousand high-level spirits emerged to protect her. This was that same spirit magic that had crushed Luke Waldstein.

Let us settle this, Noelle Springfield.

Evangeline RuneForest established a jade-green magic sequence, casting Air Flügel. It took just eight-hundredths of a second for Noelle to activate her anti-magic sequence. Thanks to the knowledge she'd gained from Luke and her own spatial awareness, Noelle could spot the subtle changes signaling that the Fairy Queen was about to cast a powerful spell. Her anti-magic sequence then enabled her to obstruct Evangeline's spellcasting.

As her magic sequence malfunctioned and began to crumble, Evangeline reacted with the kind of miraculous technique that surpassed any modern magic: she severed the broken part of the sequence and replaced it with simplified support magic to redeploy the spell. The result would only be around seventy percent as strong as it should have been, but with Evangeline's command of magic, even an imperfect spell would be enough to end the duel.

In response, Noelle had already begun racing toward Evangeline, accelerating time as far as she possibly could.

Thank you, Luke, Noelle thought.

The anti-magic sequence had only ever been a ploy to buy time. She didn't

even know the limits of the Fairy Queen's power; there was only so much damage she could really do. More importantly, after doing her best to keep up with Evangeline's superhuman ability, her own magical energy was severely depleted. She didn't stand a chance in a battle of attrition. Narrowing the skill gap for just a second had required her to put everything at stake.

"I expected this," Evangeline said, smirking. She had predicted everything, right down to Noelle's choice to get in close and risk it all. "Can you evade my attacks at such a close distance?"

The high-level spirits unleashed their magic, bathing everything in the glow of seven hundred beams of light. That indiscriminate force was so great that there was no point in trying to dodge it or cast Magic Barrier.

However, nobody in the arena could have foreseen Noelle's next move.

"Chronostasis!"

For 1.8 seconds, time stopped. The spectators were breathless.

What a time to successfully cast this spell! Evangeline thought, a smile forming on her lips as Noelle escaped from her unavoidable attack and ran toward her. *But this is where it ends. Victory is mine.*

Noelle hadn't cast the time-stopping spell perfectly, and her chances of success were minuscule. Furthermore, her flawed magic sequence came at an enormous price: she had drained all of her magical energy in an instant.

She cannot cast any more spells to break through my defenses. This battle is already as good as over.

Noelle staggered. Using up her magic reserves so quickly had plunged her into a state of hypomagia. It was just a matter of time before she lost consciousness.

However, she hadn't given up yet. She used her very last dregs of power to clumsily cast an elementary spell.

"Breeze..."

The slightest puff of wind emerged and pushed Noelle from behind,

momentarily providing a little more speed. Suddenly, Evangeline was struck by something she'd never experienced—not just in her mind, but right on the head.

A h-headbutt?!

This was the final ace up Noelle Springfield's sleeve: a nonsensical attack that wasn't in any typical magician's arsenal.

As she fell backward, Evangeline's head was filled with an unfamiliar sensation.

What is this? I don't understand...

Having been raised in the delicate manner befitting a queen, Evangeline had barely ever even felt another person's touch. Her head felt hot, like she was being showered in sparks. It hurt, but it was a strangely comforting pain.

Somebody was close enough to clash heads with her. She pictured the youth she had never had and the kind of person who had never been in her life: somebody to chat idly with, somebody to laugh with. A friend.

Is this feeling what I have been searching for all along?!

She was confused and dizzy. She and Noelle—who had already succumbed to hypomagia—collapsed in a heap. Neither made a move.

“So...what happens now?” somebody whispered in the audience.

“No idea,” another spectator replied. “I'm pretty sure there's nothing in the tournament rules about double knockouts.”

They stared agog at the undisputed champion slumped on the arena floor before letting their cheers erupt.

“What a massive upset... This is unreal!”

In a VIP box in the stands, a nobleman was trembling with shock.

“R-Ridiculous...” he stammered. “How could this have happened?! Though it resulted in a tie, that girl still knocked out the Fairy Queen! We were supposed to keep the girl in check, but now her actions could shatter our traditions, our

history—the very social order our ancestors strove to build. We must destroy her, whatever it takes!”

Meanwhile, next to the nobleman sat the man with the black signet ring, as calm and collected as ever.

“I see no problem,” the man said. “If anything, it’s useful to have the Fairy Queen out of the picture. I can’t achieve my ultimate goal if she lives.”

“Your ultimate goal, you say?”

“First, to eliminate the Fairy Queen and gain total control over the Great Forest; then, to take out all the other national representatives and damage the relationships between the empire and its neighbors.”

“Wh-What...?” The nobleman gulped. “But how will you...?”

“It’s quite simple.” The man interlaced his soft fingers in his lap. “This is the Guardian City of Grambern. The city owes its strange development to the magical energy emitted by the wyrm sealed here a thousand years ago as well as the magic gems that energy produced. Driven by greed, overzealous mining has caused the seal to weaken without anyone so much as noticing. We didn’t even need to make an effort.”

“But what about the countless other monsters that rampaged alongside the wyrm? They, too, are sealed here, and each one has a threat level of at least 6. They brought about the downfall of many of the Central Nations in the past. Think of the devastation that would be caused if they were set loose!”

“Sounds good to me. We stand to profit from selling weapons and medicine, and if the empire goes to war with its neighbors, it’ll only get better for us. The masses are easy to control if you keep offering up enemies and fanning the flames of discontent. Fear and anger are contagious, you know.” The man paused. “We’ll awaken the wyrm, and this city will be obliterated. The Holy Empire of Vellmar has never seen anything like what’s coming.”

Without any warning or obvious cause, an eerie sensation suddenly beset all the magicians. They could feel their hairs standing on end as if they’d just plunged into an icy lake.

Everyone felt a magic aura more outrageous than any they’d ever

experienced. The worst affected were those without magical ability of their own: later records found that 1,796 of the audience members fell unconscious, while another 24,682 suffered from intense headaches and nausea. Making a tremendous noise, the earth shook so hard that it was impossible to stay standing. Screams split the air as people lost all sense of direction.

Amid the panic, Letitia Lisette-Stone was the first to begin working out what had happened. Most likely, it had started around the eighth tunnel entrance situated on the north side of the arena. That entrance led down to the western continent's greatest tunnel system, which spread out beneath the arena.

All of a sudden, the northern part of the dueling ring collapsed. With an almighty rumble and a cloud of smoke, incredible magic energy spewed forth.

Out of the gaping chasm came huge numbers of monsters. Just at a glance, it was clear that each one warranted a threat level of 6—maybe worse. These were the same monsters that had swallowed up the people of the Central Nations all those years ago, and even one of them was strong enough to wreak havoc on the average city.

The arena had descended into chaos. People were frantically looking for an escape. Even the burliest of men in the stands were useless against these enemies. The voracious monsters began lurching mindlessly toward the spectators, but the next second, they stopped in their tracks. They were surrounded by ice too cold for them to even move their eyeballs.

"Let's get to work," Letitia Lisette-Stone commanded, standing in a bright blue magic sequence. "Show the true power of the Royal Court Magicians' Division of Ardenfeld!"

The man with the black signet ring looked on with a cold, emotionless stare as the magicians bravely fought to protect the audience members.

"You're wasting your time," he muttered. "You people clearly don't have the numbers to quell this many monsters. You could get somewhere by using the spectators as decoys and launching a counterattack, but you'd never make such a rational decision. This is where you will meet your end."

The situation developing before his eyes was horrific. The magical barrier to

protect the audience kept casualties at bay, but the magicians were hopelessly outnumbered. They couldn't continue like that for long. The constant stream of monsters pounded the barrier like a great wave.

It was obvious that they would need at least one hundred magicians to protect just one section of the audience. If they were to keep everybody safe, they'd need closer to two thousand. In just a few minutes, the magical barrier would surely break, and the deluge of monsters would engulf the city in the blink of an eye.

The nobleman next to the man was agitated. "W-We should get out of here too!" he spluttered.

"No need to panic. I came prepared." The man with the black signet ring produced a faintly glowing stone. "This is a Star Pearl, a supreme relic found on the seventy-sixth level of the Dresden Dungeon. The magic in this wonderful gem enables teleportation. We can escape the city in an instant."

"I should never have doubted you." The aristocrat breathed a sigh of relief.

Unblinkingly, the man began to try and charge the stone.

"I take it you two are at the heart of this mess," somebody said suddenly.

Something feels odd... It all happened so quickly that the man with the black signet ring didn't even have time to register that somebody had appeared.

Instinctively, he knew he could no longer afford to take any chances. Even if it meant losing everything, he had no choice but to focus all his energy on escaping immediately. As quickly as he could, he attempted to activate the Star Pearl—but only to teleport himself. It was the best option he had.

However, it quickly became apparent that nothing would give him what he wanted.

The Star Pearl isn't working!

That wasn't quite true—the relic simply wasn't in his hand any longer.

"Isn't it a bit much to think you could cause all the problems you want and then ride off in a lifeboat built for one?" the voice from before said. This time, it was accompanied by a gently smiling figure the man knew all about.

“The Split-Second Magician?!”

“Oh, I see my reputation precedes me.”

“Of course I know who *you* are. You’re the Kingdom of Ardenfeld’s secret weapon. Do you have any idea how hard we’ve worked to get rid of you?”

“You really have. I’m honored.”

“But you know what? This plays right into our hands,” the man added. “You may be the one they call the Split-Second Magician, but even you can’t keep fighting back against this many monsters. You’re doomed.”

At that moment, the magical barrier broke. A flood of monsters burst in from behind the magus, catching the Split-Second Magician off guard. As soon as they breached the barrier, it took only a second for over seventy of them to rush forth. No human had anywhere near the power to stop their rampage. It might be possible to save oneself, but any attempt to limit the damage caused by the monsters meant dealing with a ridiculously complex situation.

If you wanted to defeat every single one of these monsters, you’d need a thousand top-level magicians, the man thought. But you refuse to sacrifice the weak. That sentimentality will be your downfall.

The monsters swarmed around the Split-Second Magician. In response, the lavender-haired magus quietly established a magic sequence.

“Chronostasis.”

Splintered pieces of handrails froze where they were flying midair. In one moment—expanded to the utmost limits—the magus deployed one sequence after another.

Even if an opponent could break free from the time-stopping effect, they’d have to contend with Chronos’s unthinkable casting speed. The individual attacks were nothing special, but the sheer number and power of those golden magic sequences was far beyond what most magicians could muster. The onslaught tore through the monsters’ tough hides like paper.

This legendary magician had obliterated something like three hundred monsters in an instant. They were gone before they even knew they were in danger.

The man with the black signet ring was dumbfounded. *H-How could this happen...?*

The Split-Second Magician flashed an amiable smile. “As Ardenfeld’s strongest magician, I can’t go letting any of my subordinates die, can I?”

Upon seeing the horde of monsters gush forth from the great chasm in the arena floor, the Fairy Queen’s attendants Esther and Cynthia reacted swiftly.

They had the same thought: *We must concentrate on suppressing the monsters coming this way.*

They launched a volley of water attacks and erected an enormous wall made with plant-type magic to hold back the monsters closest to the hole. With the combined strength of two of the western continent’s leading magicians, they felled over four hundred monsters in a matter of seconds.

The problem, though, was that the monsters coming from the pit were unexpectedly powerful. Because they’d been sealed alongside the wyrm all those years ago, they had been exposed to extremely concentrated magic energy. As a result, they possessed power that monsters on the surface lacked.

As more monsters came, their momentum grew. They chipped away at the plant barrier, and though the water attacks hurt them plenty, they didn’t stop. Their numbers were simply absurd.

Of course monsters such as these would be quite the challenge, but this is ridiculous!

The elves’ measures were falling short under the intense pressure. The monsters were getting close enough for their ferocious teeth to come into view right before their eyes.

There are too many to hold back...

Just as they were running out of breath, a blinding light filled their vision.

“Air Flügel!”

The light instantaneously obliterated the army of monsters as the Great Forest materialized, together with a battalion of over one hundred high-level spirits.

“The circumstances are certainly not ideal,” Evangeline Runeforest panted. “I am exhausted after that battle, but that does not matter one bit. I finally have a precious friend to fight for. This happiness makes me feel stronger than ever!” She turned to the continuing swarm of monsters. “To protect my dear friend, I will not waver for a second!”

What on earth is she talking about? Cynthia thought. No matter how she looked at it, she couldn’t understand what Evangeline meant.

“When you say ‘friend,’” Cynthia ventured, “do you mean...that girl?”

“Indeed.”

“Are you two already that familiar?”

“Well, I never! What do you *think*?” Evangeline responded with a haughty sigh. “Did you not see our battle? We both gave everything we had. We recognized one another—we *understood* one another. It was exactly like two old friends having a tussle on a riverbed. Is that not the time-honored way of friendship?”

No. No, that is not the time-honored way of friendship. Cynthia was at her wits’ end. *Oh dear. I still cannot understand her. What on earth should I do...?*

She quietly struggled to come up with a solution. “Excuse me, Lady Evangeline...” she eventually said, still hesitant.

“Yes?”

“I suspect the friendship you speak of may be an unrequited feeling.”

The pair was plunged into a silence so deep it felt like it lasted for thousands of years.

“B-But...” Evangeline murmured finally, her shoulders dropping. “No, Cynthia. You cannot tell me such cruel truths at a time like this. I shall surely fall into a deep melancholy and never be able to make it out of here alive.”

“My conscience will not allow me to remain silent!”

As they bickered, they suddenly heard another voice:

“Huh...? Um, where am I?”

Cynthia and Esther gasped when they noticed who had just woken up: it was Noelle Springfield, the very person their queen had randomly decided was her best friend in the world. Their survival would depend on how well they handled this tricky moment.

If I get in first, Cynthia thought, maybe I can encourage the girl to call Lady Evangeline her friend—

But just as Cynthia was about to make her move, Evangeline used teleportation magic to go directly to the little magician from Ardenfeld.

“Excuse me, but you and I...” Evangeline began. “Are we not true friends?”

Damn. Not only is she difficult, but she’s quick too! Cynthia lamented.

For a few quiet seconds, Noelle Springfield merely looked blankly back at Evangeline. “True friends? I guess not. I don’t really know you,” she said at last.

“And there it is,” Cynthia whispered to Esther as the two continued fighting back the horde. “We had better prepare to shuffle off this mortal coil.”

Esther was incensed. “What?! Am I to die for such a ludicrous reason?”

The person they relied on most to get them out of this mess gave a dejected sigh. “I see...”

However, Noelle wasn’t finished. “But I’d like to get to know you,” she went on. “I hope we become friends, so you can teach me lots of great stuff about magic.”

Yes! Cynthia thought, feeling relief like never before. *Good girl!*

“Yes, I see,” Evangeline replied. “It is exactly as I foresaw in all my wisdom and greatness, unmatched throughout this world. Our friendship was destined from

the very beginning.”

Does she really need to be so pompous about it?

Evangeline paid no attention to Cynthia’s exasperated glare. “As your friend, I shall hold the fort here. Do not come back until you have taken a healing potion!”



After waking up, I hurried toward the lounge. I didn’t understand what had happened, but it was clearly a serious situation. Even the elves, with their mastery of magic, were on high alert.

The various national representatives were all battling to protect the audience members in the now unprotected stands. I was pleased to see my own coworkers leading the charge, but I could tell that they were struggling too. They were maintaining a magical barrier using their combined power, but it was likely to crumble at any moment.

They could focus only on defense. They were so overwhelmed that I could barely watch. Just holding the front line in the face of so many monsters seemed practically impossible. There was no way the total strength of the magicians was enough to repel the horde.

However, as I surveyed the battlefield, I noticed something.

What is that...?

I felt an astounding magical presence, totally unlike the others, and saw a series of shining golden magic sequences. Even though the original barrier had broken, the person responsible for that incredible aura was breezily rescuing spectators from the monsters.

H-How could anybody single-handedly keep all those monsters at bay? That’s s-superhuman!

I couldn’t help but stare in awe as it became clear that only one person had the power to maintain a level playing field under such pressure.

W-Well, anyway, I’m a subordinate here! I’d better go and ask for some orders!

“Your Excellency!” I called, running toward the stands. “Is there anything I can do to help right now?”

“You sure?” Chronos responded. “You look pretty worn out.”

“I’m okay! You should’ve seen me back when I worked over four hundred overtime hours in a month!”

The secretary-general chuckled. “I apprehended the culprit who was pulling the strings, but I can’t really claim that things are going swimmingly. I’m doing everything I can here, but behind all of these monsters is the wyrm at the heart of it all. We don’t stand a chance if this gets drawn out too long.”

“Is the wyrm really that powerful?”

“The seal isn’t fully broken yet, but even right now, I doubt we can defeat it. If the wyrm is released, you can assume that every human in this area will perish.”

“O-Oh no...”

“The wyrm is more than just a dragon. It’s more like a god of destruction. It took thousands of the great magicians of old to lay a trap and finally seal it away.”

“That many *just* to seal it?”

We obviously didn’t have enough magicians here. Just as Chronos had said, a drawn-out battle would be extremely dangerous.

“We’re lucky to have the wonderful elven magicians here,” the magus continued. “The greatest strength of spirit magic is its ability to apply a magical seal. Our best shot of quelling this rampage is by repairing the magic sequence and reapplying the seal, but then again...”

“Is there a problem?”

“We can only seal the wyrm away again if we break through the monster horde and descend all the way to the deepest part of that chasm. That alone is within my power, but as long as I’m down there, I can’t hold back the monsters up here. I can’t imagine how many people would suffer in that time.”

The only option was to quickly repair the seal and return here, but we didn’t

have the time to reach the depths of the chasm and return all the way to the surface. The Guardian City of Grambern boasted the western continent's deepest tunnel system. It wasn't like we could fly—no matter how quickly we tried to move, the ascent would take us hours.

What can we do...? There must be something... Is there a way for us to get from the bottom of the chasm to the surface faster?

Well, maybe if I ask somebody who does have the power of flight...

"Please wait here!" I exclaimed before immediately running indoors.

I wove my way through the throngs of panicked people and found the lounge for tournament participants. There, I took a magic potion to recover my physical and magical energy, then found something I'd hidden away. It was an item I was forbidden from taking into the dueling ring according to the tournament rules, one that I'd received as thanks for the time I rescued its owner. It was a tiny flute of silver crystal.

I flung open the doors leading outside and blew the flute.

Oh, Dragon, please. Give us your help!



The battle was growing more intense. The national representatives of each country were working as hard as they could to stop the monsters. Over the years, they'd developed a strong sense of duty and pride in their magic. With that driving them, they didn't even consider fleeing no matter how tough the fight was.

Having seen the world for themselves, they knew how small they were in the grand scheme of things. They knew the taste of failure. Even after giving their lives to the pursuit of becoming the very best, there were opponents they couldn't beat, but they would go on gritting their teeth and training to become better, one step at a time.

And what was the point of stubbornly continuing to work on themselves? Why did they want to become stronger? To them, the answer was clear. If they were to run away, they'd lose something much more precious than their lives.

They were exhausted. Innumerable rows of teeth approached.

Then, out of nowhere, something sent a great chill down the magicians' backs. They could sense something unimaginably powerful.

A shadow swept over them. A jet-black body appeared, flanked by wings so broad they blotted out the sky.

"What...?"

It was a wyvern: one of the most powerful creatures on the western continent.

Was it another of the monsters that had been sealed deep below the ground? As they stared slack-jawed at the enormous dragon, more monsters emerged while they were distracted.

It's no use! the magicians thought. *There are just too many to handle...*

Just as they were ready to accept defeat, a massive tail like a tree trunk sliced through the wave of monsters, crushing them.

Wait... Did the wyvern just help us? They gazed in shock at this unbelievable development. *But why? What the hell is going on...?*



"Wow! You're incredible!" I shouted excitedly from atop the wyvern's vast back. From up high, I could see everything clearly.

WELL, OF COURSE, the dragon replied, using the power of telepathy only available to certain monsters. *UNLIKE WHEN I WAS DRIVEN BERSERK, I AM IN PEAK CONDITION. MOREOVER, I HAVE TRAINED FOR THIS VERY DAY.*

I explained the situation.

I UNDERSTAND YOUR INTENTIONS. TODAY, I WILL REPAY THE KINDNESS YOU SHOWED ME. I WILL LEND YOU MY STRENGTH.

"Thank you!"

Having secured the dragon's support, I bowed deeply.

"You really summoned a wyvern?" The secretary-general grinned. "You sure know how to keep me on my toes!"

I was astonished to notice somebody had silently hopped onto the wyvern's back behind me, hiding their magical power, followed by that totally unexpected voice.

"Naturally. After all, as the strong and beautiful ruler of this world, I would not accept just anyone as my friend."

I could sense traces of teleportation magic. I turned around, surprise evident on my face, but Evangeline didn't seem to notice at all. She appeared perfectly calm.

"Wh-What are you doing here?" I blurted out.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed. And not only are you in trouble, but you're on your way to battle an evil dragon with your comrades! How could I simply watch from the sidelines during such an intriguing event?" Her eyes flashed with enthusiasm. "Everyone, follow me. The EvaNoelle Squadron will now take to the air for its first mission!"

"Uh..."

Wow. She's a real free spirit.

"Fair enough," Chronos said. "As a cool older brother type, I don't mind letting you two take command. In return, feel free to call me your big bro—"

"I understand you feel lonely after hiding yourself away to do research apart from your subordinates," Evangeline retorted, "but you cannot expect to solve the problem by asking them to call you their big brother. They must feel terribly uncomfortable." Her manners weren't great, but there was something charming about her anyway.

"Yeah, they probably do..." Chronos looked hurt.

A hasty chorus of "Absolutely not!" soon followed, but it took a little time to cheer up the magus again.

The wyvern's voice boomed happily. *BATTLING AN EVIL DRAGON WITH COMRADES? I CAN THINK OF WORSE THINGS TO DO.*

"Now, the time has come!" she announced. "To hasten our return, let us attack the monsters as we head for the bottom of the chasm!"

UNDERSTOOD.

The wyvern took off in a flash, moving quicker than the speed of sound. Dragons like the wyvern were born with a magical protection against wind, enabling incredible speeds. Simply charging through the horde was enough to send monsters flying like scraps of paper.

We headed for the depths of the great pit in the arena floor, beyond where the light of the sun could reach. I could feel the magical concentration around us gradually intensifying as we plunged through an increasingly dense wall of monsters.

“There are so many...” I gasped.

“That is no problem for us!” I heard Evangeline call out.

“Quite right!” Chronos chimed in from the other side.

A series of magic sequences rapidly appeared. A vivid light filled my vision and the monsters were immediately blown to smithereens. Even more impressively, the spells had been carefully cast to avoid affecting the wyvern in flight. It might’ve looked like a display of pure force, but it wasn’t; it was reined in just enough to prevent its remarkable destructive power from inadvertently harming us.

One magic sequence after another flashed within the pitch darkness of the chasm. The farther down we went, the gloomier it became, until it was so absolute that even a pinhole would have provided more light.

The air became humid and clammy as the pungent smell of magical energy threatened to choke me. It was too dark for me to see my hand in front of my face, and even the constant flickering of magic sequences became hazy.

Once we started to approach the bottom of the chasm, an ominous feeling took hold of me. Cold sweat dripped down the back of my neck, and I struggled to breathe.

Something isn’t right, I thought. Why is the magical concentration so strong?

THIS IS BAD. THE SEAL IS WEAKENING FASTER THAN EXPECTED.

I couldn’t even muster a response. I could tell that what lurked beneath us

was unlike any other living thing. A series of sensations automatically swept over me: cold, anxiety, horror. I knew that the thing that existed down here must not be set free.

“That suits me,” Evangeline exclaimed, clenching her fist. “The wyrm is surely a worthy opponent.”

“There’s a problem, though,” Chronos replied. “We need to link up our attacks to reduce its power enough to reapply the seal, but you and I are too strong. If we cast our spells at the same time, there’s a good chance they’ll clash and cancel each other out or malfunction. Limiting our output should help prevent that, but in this situation, we need greater firepower.”

“How tedious. We should strike first and ask questions later.”

“We can’t. That won’t work.” Chronos pursed his lips.

Their attacks are too powerful to use together, but if they could, we’d be able to seal the wyrm away again.

There was no time to give this any further thought. The same way all the others were determinedly fighting on, I had to fulfill my duty too. I needed to be confident and decisive.

I can do this.

I took a deep breath. “Let me handle it. I’ll make your spells work together.”

Noelle Springfield’s plan was beyond reckless—it was almost baffling.

She was with the western continent’s two greatest magicians: Chronos Casablancas, the secretary-general of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division of Ardenfeld, and Evangeline Runeforest, the Fairy Queen, were both on an entirely different level from regular magicians. They possessed such vast power that merely releasing it could cause anyone in the vicinity to faint. Combining their abilities would require a nigh-impossible degree of control. Chronos and Evangeline themselves couldn’t pull off such a difficult move.

However, Chronos took her plan seriously. From everything the secretary-general had seen thus far, it was clear that her ability to adapt was something

special. Chronos had spent centuries developing Chronostasis, and Noelle had managed to cast it within a matter of days. Even though her attempt hadn't been perfect, that was proof that she had the ability to make the impossible possible.

No other magician could do it, but if it was Noelle...

"Sure thing," the secretary-general said. "We'll leave it to you."

"Yes, a combined attack from Noelle and me," Evangeline remarked with a smile. "The power of friendship will cut through the darkness!"

Noelle prepared her magic sequence.

"Dragon, I want to ask for your help," she said. "I need you to try and cancel out the recoil."

UNDERSTOOD. I WILL DO WHAT I CAN. I WILL DIRECT ALL THE MAGIC ENERGY AROUND ME TOWARD YOU.

"Thank you."

Noelle focused her mind. She was entirely isolated from the sounds of the world. Her magic sequence was the only thing reflected in her eyes.

"Let's start at a level she can handle," Chronos said to Evangeline. "Then we can increase our firepower, one step at a time."

"Very well," Evangeline agreed. "I suppose we will count on Noelle's adaptability."

They each established a magic sequence. Once they were sure that Noelle was unharmed, they started to raise their firepower.

Of course, the tremendous power of their magic combined was clearly beyond the limits of what a mere magician could endure. As the air began to warp, Noelle's magic sequence groaned, and her white gloves became stained with blood.

This really is too much... Chronos thought.

Just as the Split-Second Magician was about to ease up a little, a shimmering green magic sequence appeared, emanating a scorching heat.

She's increased her capacity!

Noelle had established the new magic sequence in a flash. One sequence wasn't enough to handle the combined might of Chronos and Evangeline, but deploying multiple sequences gave her the necessary magic capacity. Had it not been for her prodigious skill in time acceleration magic and extraordinary power of concentration, such a difficult task would have been impossible. If she got distracted by the blood dripping from her hands for even an instant, her magic sequences would come undone and the entire plan would collapse.

Furthermore, she needed to control and combine the immense power of the two magicians. That required her to work out the distinctive features of each of their magic sequences and find where they would interact best. Her sense of balance had to be perfect; the slightest of errors would spell disaster.

Astonished by her efforts, Chronos added another magic sequence. Glowing with golden light, it was larger even than the wyvern's huge body.

The air was distorted, like a mirage. Merely approaching such ferocious magic power would have knocked most people senseless. A spell like that, which brought together magic from different timelines, was beyond the average human's comprehension entirely.

"Light Cutter!"

"Air Flügel!"

The impact produced by the deadly light of a thousand high-level spirits caused such a violent recoil that even the wyvern could have been blown away if it made the wrong move. A light brighter than the sun filled the chasm, raining down over the wyvern. Countless rays of heat lashed through the air, each one powerful enough to vaporize steel armor.

Hot air scorched the magicians' skin. Light glowed through their eyelids. Noise assaulted their eardrums.

That preposterous barrage blew open a gaping hole, revealing dark red cell tissue oozing like magma. The thing before them had lost much of its body

mass.

“Incredible! Wonderful!” Evangeline cried out, rocking Noelle in her arms after the little magician had passed out from overexertion. “I knew you could do it! You’re my friend, after all!”

It might not have been perfect, but she managed to control high-intensity magic from two different sources and get them to link up without clashing. And she was already worn out from so many battles. Chronos quietly stared at the sleeping girl. I was in my late thirties by the time I reached the level she’s at now.

She might become the greatest magician that ever lived.

Epilogue: The Words That Must Be Said

To be honest, I couldn't really remember how it all happened. I was definitely frantic. The situation gave me no chance to think properly. If you'd told me afterward that it hadn't worked, I would've been totally prepared to believe it.

When Chronos told me, "You did a fantastic job," I was utterly relieved. I woke up to learn that Evangeline had managed to reseal the wyrm. The dragon had then quickly returned us to the surface, where Chronos had helped the other magicians fight until they'd all finished off the weakened monsters.

In the end, the Guardian City of Grambern was safe, as was everyone present.

"Thank you so much for your help!" I said to the concealed wyvern at the edge of the demolished arena. Other people around wouldn't be able to see it because of its concealment magic, but all the same, I didn't want to drag this out too much longer, for fear of gossip.

"W-Wait a minute! Didn't I see a wyvern?" I heard somebody say.

"Right," someone else replied. "And somebody was riding it too!"

I couldn't allow this to get out of hand. If a dragon of any kind was spotted in one of the empire's biggest cities, that alone would elicit panic. And what if they discovered that I was responsible for it?

"I shall now present my verdict! Noelle Springfield, you are hereby sentenced to death!"

"Aiiieeeeeee!"

I felt like there was no limit to what could happen. All I could do was try my very best to eliminate all evidence so that people would think they'd just been imagining things. Even so, I wanted to express my genuine gratitude after the wyvern had come to my aid from so far away.

NO NEED TO THANK ME, it said kindly as I bowed in thanks. AFTER ALL, YOU RESCUED ME TOO. BESIDES, I RARELY HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO

DEMONSTRATE MY POWER. THANKS TO YOU, I CAN BOAST TO MY FRIEND.

“That’s good to hear. You should brag to your heart’s content!”

I SHALL. IN ANY CASE, PLEASE CALL ME AGAIN ANY TIME YOU ARE IN TROUBLE.

“Sure. And if you have any problems, you can rely on me too! I’m happy to help.”

The wyvern blinked in surprise for a moment before giving what seemed to be a smile. *YES. I WILL BE COUNTING ON YOU.*

I waved farewell as the dragon soared off into the sky.

“I see you are the kind of naughty child to keep a wyvern as a pet,” somebody said from behind me.

I turned around to see Evangeline standing there.

“Nah, it isn’t my pet,” I replied. “It’s more like a friend, I guess.”

“Worry not. I appreciate bad behavior. Indeed, that is why I consider you my friend.” She smiled, sipped her tea, and continued. “Now, how about we go and fight the Holy Vellmar Emperor and the Grand Bishop next? They need to be taught a lesson after failing to take appropriate measures to protect the people from disaster.”

“I’d rather not... That would be a disaster of its own.”

“And then we will take on the world! With our combined strength, we will certainly win.”

“Um, right...”

She has way too much confidence in herself! She’s incredible—in more ways than one.

As I stared at her in amazement, it suddenly occurred to me that I’d wanted to ask her for a favor.

“Oh, by the way!” I said. “I was hoping that you could teach me about magic.”

“Are you sure?” Evangeline responded, surprised. “You wish to learn from me? But you defeated me.”

“I just got lucky. I put in extra research for our duel too. But anyway, spirit magic is the elves’ special power, right? I was thinking that if you gave me some secret training in spirit magic, I could overtake *him* before he even realizes.”

“Who?”

“Luke, the guy you fought before me. See, we’re old friends, and ever since we were young, he’s been my archrival.”

“Old friends? Archrival?! What a special relationship!” Evangeline’s eyes sparkled. “Yes, I shall teach you. Put your faith in your strong, beautiful friend.”

Later, a minister from the Imperial Foreign Affairs Bureau invited us to a banquet. The minister was acting on behalf of the Holy Empire of Vellmar to thank the various national representatives for saving them from the rampaging monsters.

We were treated to an impressive, sumptuous feast of wonderful food. I happily stuffed my face with tender steak.

Mmm, so soft and juicy...

“Have you heard anything from him yet?” I overheard one of the other guests asking somebody.

“Well, there wasn’t much damage in that section of the stands,” another person replied, “so I think he must’ve escaped at the beginning.”

In the aftermath of everything that had happened, there was still uncertainty in Grambern.

On the day of the incident, the minister from the Imperial Foreign Affairs Bureau had made an announcement about the World Magic Championships. As the arena had been affected so severely, the remaining duels were called off. In the wake of all the chaos, my semifinal with Evangeline had been declared unfinished—a first in the tournament’s history. As a result, the three contestants not yet eliminated were declared joint winners. The WMC titleholders were Evangeline and her attendant Cynthia—representing the Holy Empire of Vellmar—and myself from the Kingdom of Ardenfeld.

Even though it wasn't a solo victory, this was the first time a winner had come from outside Vellmar. As the person who'd made it happen, I had lots of people coming to congratulate me, including a number of officials from the Holy Empire of Vellmar.

"Who knew a girl from the lower classes would get this far?" they would say to me. "We ought to think about providing more opportunities to commoners. We've been underestimating people like you."

At the banquet, I ate enough meat to feed ten people. Feeling extremely satisfied afterward, I jauntily headed for Luke's hospital room. I knew my good friend was sound asleep, under the influence of powerful healing magic, but I felt like I needed to go and brag about my exploits. But perhaps more importantly, I thought he might be disappointed he'd missed the banquet.

Good grief. What a needy boy you are, Luke. You should thank your lucky stars that you have a friend as thoughtful as me!

"Excuse me," I said when I arrived at the receptionist's desk. "I'm here to visit someone."

A nurse showed me to Luke's room and explained, "He has a slight fever at the moment."

The fever was a result of overexertion. It sounded like he was paying the price for all of his stress at once.

You've been pushing yourself pretty hard, huh? You worked for this tournament for so long. And when you lost, you put aside your frustration to teach me everything you knew. I was amazed that a regular human had done all that work.

But still, I can't understand what's so important that you'd run yourself ragged like this.

I was genuinely interested, but a little unhappy too. Luke was my dear friend, so it made me sad that he wouldn't tell me what this was all about.

I quietly opened the door to Luke's room and took a seat next to his bed.

"Good," I said. "You're sleeping soundly. Thank goodness."

The room was so silent that night that even my quiet voice echoed. As I looked closely at Luke's face, I was reminded of how pretty his features were. I continued watching for a few seconds.

Hmm? Wait a second. Is he breathing?

Is he dead?!

Panicking, I placed a hand over his mouth. I felt air softly blow against my fingertips.

Yikes. Don't freak me out like that!

Relieved, I put my hand on my chest. Suddenly, I felt something at the base of my neck, pulling me forward.

"Huh?!"

Everything flipped around. I was totally confused. I had no idea what was going on.

The scent of vanilla tickled my nostrils. Beneath me I felt soft sheets, and on top, a warm body. I realized, belatedly, that Luke was holding me in his arms.

D-Does he think I'm a pillow or something? What is he doing? This is embarrassing!

As I tried to break free, I heard a soft voice in my ear.



“I love you.”

Huh?

I felt like I’d just heard something outrageous.

Ah, he must mean the pillow. He really does think I’m a pillow. That was a close call! If I wasn’t such a smart, sexy grown-up, I might’ve seriously misunderstood his intentions.

Feeling my face turning red-hot, I tried again to shake him off. Luke made an indistinct noise right by my ear. I felt his breath brush gently against my cheek. And then...

“Noelle, I love you.”

This time, I heard him loud and clear.

To be continued in volume 4

Extra Chapter: Twelve Years as Mother and Daughter

I wasn't a sentimental child. I knew that real life wasn't so easy, and that my dreams were unlikely to come true. Of course, I realized that some people could fulfill their own wishes, but not many could. The majority of people were doomed to struggle in the space between dreams and reality. I believed that only a fool would devote their life to mere chance.

I was cool and collected, with a pragmatic outlook on the world. My preferred pastime was beating up local bullies. I was known and feared as the Deadliest Hands in the West.

One day, I heard that people from a famous academy of magic would be conducting a training exercise in the forest to the west.

"You mustn't go to the western forest. Got that?" my mother warned me.

But once I was forbidden from something, I couldn't ignore the human urge that made me even more eager for a taste. After all, I was bored. I lived in the stuffy, limiting world of a little frontier town. It was a tedious existence, where each day was as dull as the last.

My house was smaller than the homes of everyone else I knew. Nobody bought me the toys all my friends had.

People would gossip—"Oh yeah, Noelle doesn't have a dad, right?"—and I would ignore them, but honestly, it did sting a little bit. My mother was always too busy at work to spend time with me, which made me want to go against her wishes.

With that in mind, I quietly slipped out of the town and made my way to the forest, making sure nobody would spot me. My heart was racing—the excitement of misbehaving.

I hoped this would be a fun diversion, even though I didn't really know what to expect from a prestigious magic academy. I entered the forest without any

preconceptions, but what I found there was so amazing that it didn't seem real.

“Wh-What...?”

There were magic sequences shining vibrantly, and wondrous displays of fire and ice magic. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I was frozen to the spot as if under a spell myself.

I saw the magicians' lips part. I watched their fingers elegantly trace the lines of magic sequences. After years of boredom in this backwater town, every aspect of what I saw was beyond my wildest dreams.

I was enthralled, but that moment was cut short.

“Stop!” someone shouted. “There's a child here!”

My heart was about to leap out of my chest. I told myself I needed to run away, but my legs wouldn't move.

Before I knew it, I was surrounded by robed magicians who looked like teachers. I was so scared I could barely breathe.

“I'm sorry!” I blurted out tearfully.

“No, we should apologize,” one of the magicians replied. “We didn't know this was where children came to play.”

Even though I'd been at fault, the magicians treated me well. They showed me more magic and walked me back to the edge of town.

On the way back, I thought about how incredible it would be to have such impressive magic skills myself. Naturally, being so mature and composed, I knew that magic was a subject for upper-class children blessed with a high social standing. It wasn't something a poor country girl could learn.

Nonetheless, I couldn't suppress these newfound feelings. I waited for my mother to come home from work.

“Mom!” I exclaimed when she returned. “I'm gonna be a magician!”



“Mom! I'm gonna be a magician!”

As soon as those words left my nine-year-old daughter's mouth, I assumed

she had just come up with some new pipe dream. A good mother would surely have responded with kindness—telling her something nice, like “What a great idea!” or “You can do it!” But I, Riel Springfield, was too exhausted to deal with this.

We lived in a small town in the countryside. Our family had always been poor, and ever since the epidemic that took my parents, I was the only one to look after my child.

The burden of responsibility weighed heavily on me. I had a vague feeling of unease about the future, but I was too busy to spend time worrying about it. I was driven solely by one goal: no matter what I had to sacrifice, I would make sure my daughter was happy.

Every day was a struggle. I didn’t even have a spare moment to complain. In my run-down state, I couldn’t be the good mother I wanted to be.

“Don’t be silly,” I snapped.

I hated myself for saying it. Because of my work schedule, there was only so much time that I could spend with my daughter. As long as we were together, I wanted to be a kind parent, but I had probably ended up hurting her. I cautiously looked down to see the same green eyes I had, looking back at me.

“When you have a dream nobody else believes in, it just makes you more fired up, right?” she said.

I couldn’t help but smile at her optimism. Everyone said that I supported my daughter, but in reality, it was the other way around. She gave me the strength to keep going. I wouldn’t have been able to stick through my hard work without her.

Even if I was tired and frantic every day, I could count myself lucky as long as Noelle was here.

My daughter had found herself a typical childish dream, but surprisingly, I began to realize that she was serious about it. Nearly every day, she would bring back another grimoire she’d borrowed from the Lawrence family library and immerse herself in it. No matter the weather, I would spot her devotedly

practicing magic.

Of course I was happy that she'd found something to be passionate about, but that made me feel even more apprehensive. The Kingdom of Ardenfeld was one of the western continent's leading magical nations. I knew that the world of magic was one of fierce competition, even for the sons of celebrated noble families. Disappointment could lead to lasting trauma. The more somebody cared about magic, the more it would hurt when their goal turned out to be out of reach.

My biggest concern was that Noelle lacked a suitable environment for studying. There was nobody to train her. Self-study was her only option. I'd heard that the students at magic academies studied with private tutors from early childhood in preparation for their entrance exams. I didn't see how my daughter could possibly compete. I wondered whether it might be in her best interests if I encouraged her to give up before she got in too deep.

Still unsure of how to handle the situation, I approached Mr. Hawkins, an old man I knew who worked at the Potion Brewers' Guild. He had studied at Reynes Academy, the academy with the toughest entrance exam in the western region. He didn't seem happy about it, but after I asked many times over, he eventually agreed.

"Fine," the bearded old man grumbled. "If you insist, I'll take a look."

His grouchy expression didn't fill me with confidence, but there was nothing else I could do.

"It's no use," Mr. Hawkins said later. "I have nothing to teach that girl."

It was just as I'd expected. Obviously, magic couldn't be something so easy that a little girl could master it all by herself in the middle of nowhere.

I decided that if I was going to talk her out of it, I'd have to do it quickly, but how could I after I'd seen the way her eyes lit up as she buried herself in those old grimoires? If I were to tell her to quit, I felt like she might lose something much more important than magic.

"I'm so sorry," I said to Mr. Hawkins. "Whatever I do, I just can't bring myself to tell her to give up."

“It seems you’ve misunderstood me,” he replied calmly. “Your daughter is so passionate that she can pick up an ancient grimoire that grown men would struggle to read and be totally lost in it for days at a time. A wise magician once said that the training one chooses for oneself will always be superior to any a teacher might assign. She is a strong girl, undaunted by the inadequacy of her surroundings.” He furrowed his brow and lowered his voice. “It would be a great waste if she were to give up. That girl is a natural.”

I was full of butterflies on my way home after that conversation. I felt as light as a feather. I just couldn’t believe that I was the mother of such a talented girl. The most pleasing part, though, was knowing that somebody had seen something in her worthy of praise.

“Wow,” I said to myself. “I guess she really is special.”

Of course, I knew that talent didn’t guarantee a successful future for her. The vast majority of children hailed as child prodigies never lived up to those expectations.

Even so, if it was possible—and if she wanted to stick with it—I would give anything to help her.

“I’d better work extra hours!”

Raising the funds for tuition at a magic academy was no easy task. The money I’d carefully saved up for a rainy day was nowhere near enough. I took on many jobs at once, not hesitating to accept unpopular work in sewage treatment or high-risk night guard shifts.

I got fewer than three hours of sleep each night, but I never let it get to me, because I was lucky enough to be healthy and strong. And whenever Noelle visited me at home, bursting to tell me about her exciting life at the academy, any feelings of exhaustion melted away instantly. After I hadn’t had the chance to attend school myself, I wanted her to be able to study and live a happy, comfortable life.

However, she was at the academy for six years, and that was too long for me to keep overworking myself. In the end, my body couldn’t take it anymore, and my daughter returned home after graduating to look after me.

When I saw what became of her after that, I realized my mistake. For a lower-class girl without support, this town was no place to find a magic-related job. She ended up in a brutal work environment that left her worn out constantly. My heart ached whenever she left the house for the daily grind.

Perhaps I had doomed her. Should I have talked her out of pursuing magic after all? It was an unanswerable question.

Regretting my past choices more and more, I came up with an idea: marriage could make her happy. I didn't want to see her working her socks off the way I always had. She would be better off with somebody who could take care of her and provide her with a life of peace and abundance.

"Noelle, let me help you find a husband," I'd say.

I knew she hated hearing it—I'd had that same independent streak when I was younger too—but as her parent, I couldn't stay quiet. I was concerned for her. I was nervous. I just wanted her to be happy.

Noelle fell into a slump after she got fired from the Mages' Guild and struggled to find a new job. It hurt so much to see her like that. Clearly, magic wasn't the right thing for her. As much as it pained me, I had to persuade her to give up on that path and pursue a happy, stress-free life.

On the day I resolved to tell her to leave magic behind, something happened that I'd never forget.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am. My name is Luke Waldstein. I would like to invite Noelle to come and work as a royal court magician."

I couldn't wrap my head around this. Everything about the young man's manners and behavior revealed his good upbringing. He was the heir to the Waldsteins, one of the kingdom's most distinguished noble families.

This was a rare opportunity. Who could be a better marriage candidate than him? I chose to ignore the annoying voice in my head that pointed out that my tiny, bookish, eccentric daughter was a poor match for him.

"Do whatever it takes to win him over!" I advised Noelle with enthusiasm. "Seal the deal and make him yours! Love is war, you know?"

“It isn’t like that,” she responded flatly.

I could see it wasn’t going to be easy to convince her. She had the mentality of a little boy, interested in nothing but magic and food. I was prepared for an uphill battle, but as time went on, I saw that romance was another area where my daughter turned out to have hidden talents.

Oh? I thought on one occasion. Does Luke have a thing for her? Actually, he looks like he’s head over heels!

I kept telling myself that couldn’t be right, but on the day Noelle saved the town from a wyvern, there was no denying the look on the young man’s face when he carried her to the infirmary in his arms.

What’s going on? Is this that thing where the boy thinks the girl’s weird personality is “quirky”? I never would’ve guessed she would be such an irresistible expert in the ways of love. She’s like the heroine in a romance novel!

Even though she was my own daughter, there was so much I didn’t know about her. At least one thing was clear, though: becoming a royal court magician had brought her happiness and fulfillment.

“Mom, guess what? Letitia complimented me today! Oh, right, I never said. Letitia is the supercool lieutenant of the Third Unit! She’s the best!”

“They said I’m doing so well that they’re promoting me by two ranks at once! And I get a pay raise! Everyone was so full of praise. Not *him*, though. He had this look like he was thinking, ‘Nah-nah, I did it faster!’ I just wanna punch him right in his stupid face!”

“I got picked to be a national representative for the World Magic Championships! I get to fight on behalf of the kingdom, against all kinds of magicians from other countries! See, they wrote about it in the Royal News and stuff! Isn’t that awesome? I can’t believe this! Me, a national representative!”

It warmed my heart so much every time she came home with exciting news.

I'm so glad. You did such a great job.

I was too pleased for words.

My only wish is that nothing bad happens to you. I want you to live happily—like everyone else.

You're my pride and joy. There's nothing else in the whole wide world I love more than you, my precious daughter. I've cherished you since the day you were born, and I always will.

Afterword

“Do what you love for a living.”

With the rising popularity of YouTubers, this sentiment has become more widespread, but realistically, it isn't so easy to make a living out of what you love.

I know this all too well. I casually quit my job, thinking, *Life's too short for this! I'll die here at this rate! I have dreams to follow!* I then pursued a career as an author, and spent the next three years earning a grand total of zero yen.

Doing what you love doesn't pay the bills. For twenty-five thousand yen per month, I rented an apartment that shuddered every time a train went by. Every day at 7:30 p.m., I went to the supermarket and bought two half-price bento from the clearance section to eat for dinner and the next day's lunch (I'm used to it, so I don't mind eating food the day after its expiry date—as long as it isn't summer).

I was totally broke. There was even a time when all I ate for Christmas dinner was rice and a raw egg. It was a tough time for me.

Thanks to everyone's support, I've managed to earn a little more money, so now I get to try out nice food in my area. (I'm so grateful! I love to eat! Yay!)

Speaking of which, I went to a nice sushi restaurant for the first time the other day—no conveyor belt style this time. I'd been thinking about what I would regret the most if an earthquake were to suddenly come and kill me, and I thought, *Just once, I wanna eat at a fancy sushi restaurant! I wanna see what it's like!*

I should point out that in my opinion, conveyor belt sushi is the most wonderful food in the world, so to be honest, I have *quite* discerning tastes.

I don't see how fancy sushi could be that much tastier, I'd thought. It's a really tough business environment for hundred-yen sushi chains—their effort deserves

respect!

But then I tasted the sushi from this restaurant.

What?! This can't be right. This tastes way too good!

I'd entered a wonderful new world. It was so delicious.

Still, conveyor belt sushi offers more bang for your buck. People are always talking about Sustainable Development Goals nowadays, so I want to keep my eating habits sustainable too.

Anyway, the fact that I had this lovely experience—and the fact I get to do what I love for a living—is all thanks to the readers who found me and my work. I want to thank you all so much. Hard times may come, but please look after yourselves. Live a happy and healthy life.

I hope all my readers can enjoy a little more happiness—and I hope that this book contributes to that, at least a little bit.

Shusui Hazuki

The Writer Who Ate Expired Natto One Time in Early Summer and Ended Up
with a Stomachache

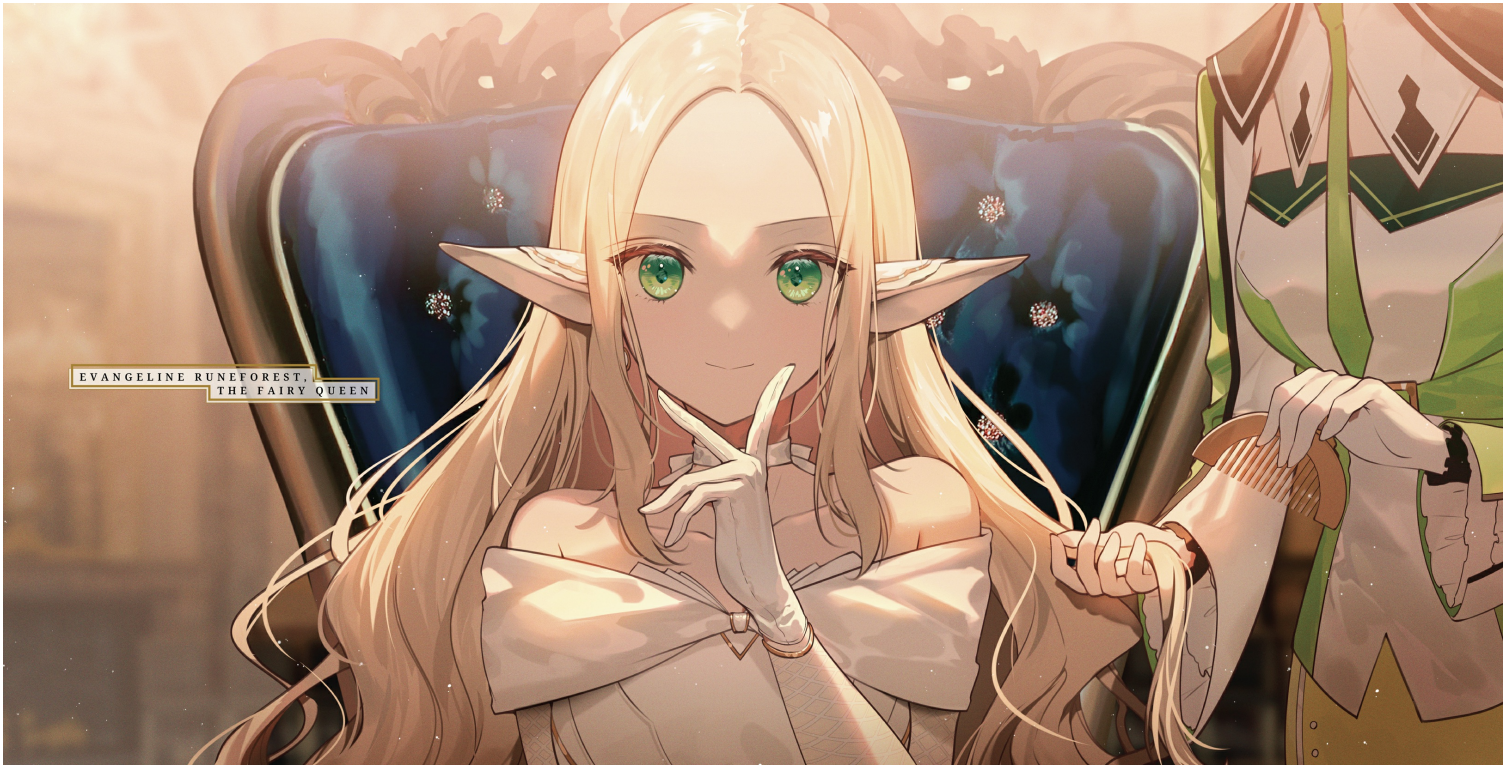




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My Magical Career at
Court* Living the Dream After My Nightmare
Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild!



III

Shusui
Hazuki

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My Magical Career at Court: Living the Dream After My Nightmare Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild! Volume 3

by Shusui Hazuki

Translated by Mari Koch Edited by Carly Smith

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