

IV

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Illustration: **ne**cōmi



My **Magical Career** at
Court ✧

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

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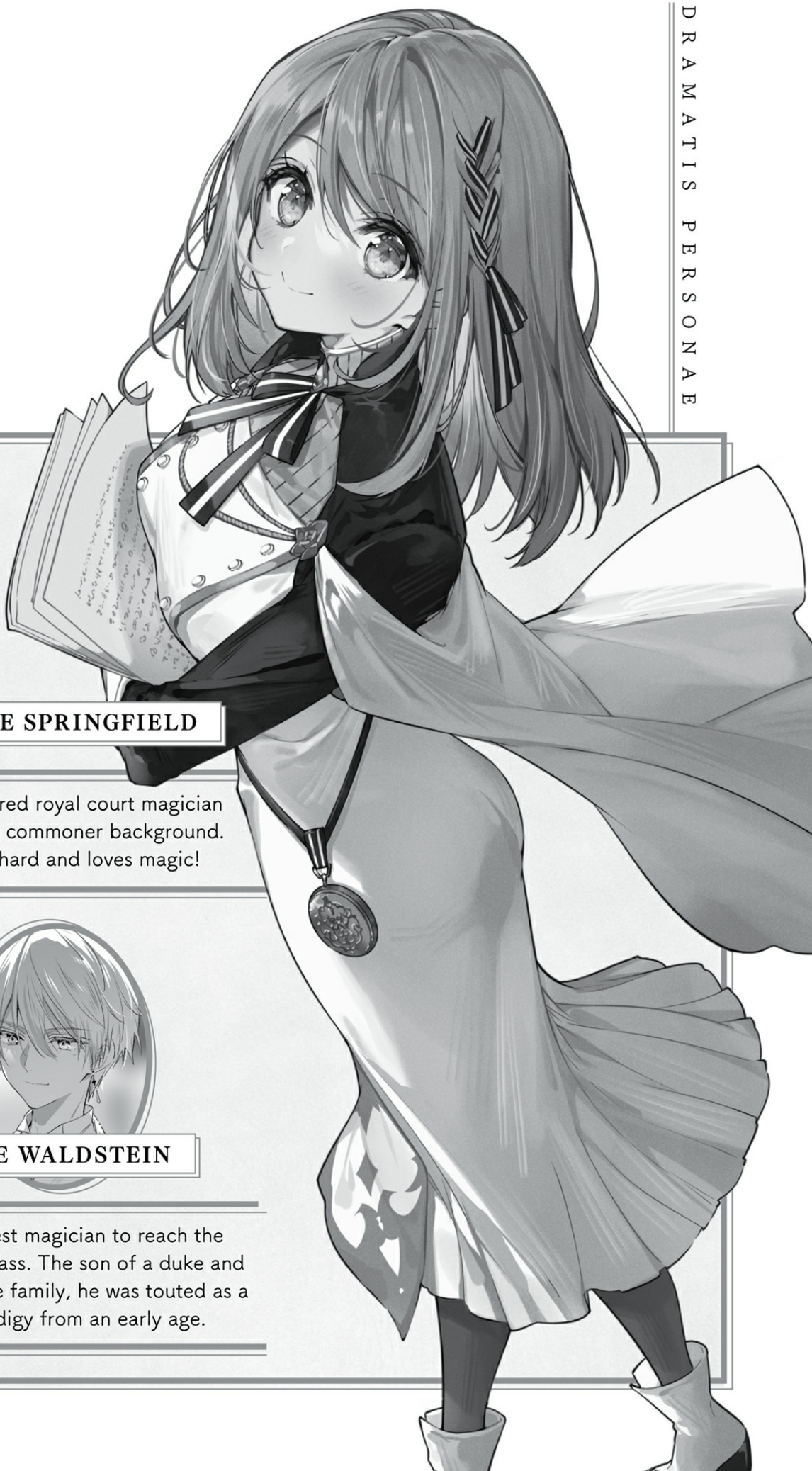
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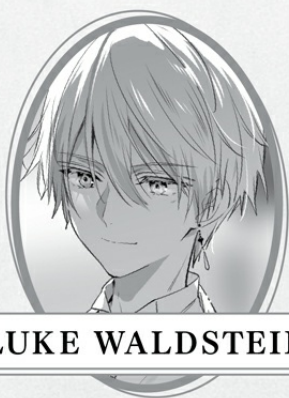
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NOELLE SPRINGFIELD

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 won three World Magic Championships in a row.



MICHAEL ARDENFELD

Crown prince of the kingdom, known for his incredible intellect.



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 3 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 had recovered, but Noelle still needed to put up with the mean, prejudiced guild chief, who finally fired her.

Just when Noelle was devastated after being cut off from a career in magic, 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 the wall designed to test new recruits’ magical abilities, passed the so-called Sixty Seconds of Blood, saved a visiting queen, and fought a wyvern. She then went on to stamp out a sinister crime syndicate’s illegal weapons operation, and even held her own against a master swordsman at the Royal Invitational Tournament.

She made it through every hardship with 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!

At the World Magic Championships, Noelle and her friends put on yet another spectacular performance! And did Luke finally tell her about his feelings...?

Being right doesn't matter to me. I just want to be with you.

Prologue: The Secret

I've studied magic longer than I can remember. That path always seemed so obvious to me; my entire life revolved around it. I wasn't allowed to attend elementary school because it was more efficient to learn from a special private tutor instead. I was forced to devote all my time to magic. There was no room for compromise or relief.

I was my father's heir, and he raised me to be as perfect as possible. For the most part, he succeeded.

I became known as a child prodigy. Some even said I was the most talented youth the kingdom had ever seen. I was the Waldstein family's greatest son.

But despite all the praise, I wasn't satisfied.

I'd poured everything into studying magic. Since early childhood, I'd had barely any time to myself. I'd sacrificed everything else. I couldn't allow myself to be second-best to anyone who hadn't lived the way I had. I was so sure of myself that "confidence" was no longer the right word for it—this was pure conviction. For me, defeat wasn't even *possible*.

At least, I didn't believe it was possible. That was why she had sent such a shock to my system. For the first time in my life on that otherwise ordinary day, I lost control.

"What on earth have you done?" I spat. My words were so boorish and inelegant, it was like I was another person entirely. "To think that a commoner like you could best me!"

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

She appeared out of nowhere and turned my lonely, humorless world upside

down. My life had been devoid of color until that day, but little by little, that began to change.

Although I didn't want to admit it at the time, she changed me for the better in a number of ways. For the first time, I had a real rival who could compete with me on equal footing. I also now had a friend my own age with whom I could interact as a classmate instead of putting up the usual facade of a model student.

High society didn't allow for any displays of weakness. Until that day, I'd never met anybody with whom I could speak in an honest, uninhibited manner. But around her, I didn't have to worry about nonsense like parentage or social position. That was new and special for me. I had never had a relationship like that before.

Before I realized it, I was in love. I knew it was forbidden. If anybody understood that, it was me. I'd had the values and practices of the upper class drummed into me for as long as I could remember.

I knew that she would get hurt if I made a move. It would give rise to nothing but criticism and groundless gossip. It would be the perfect opportunity for the sorts of people who loved nothing more than to tear others down. It's said that there is no smoke without fire, but that isn't true: it's quite easy to brew up a scandal from absolutely nothing—at least for the Ardenfeld aristocracy.

It was precisely because I cared about her so much that telling her my feelings wasn't an option. I felt that she deserved to choose the future that would make her the happiest. We'd been born under different stars, and that meant we couldn't walk the same path in life.

I continued to hide my feelings to make sure she wouldn't find out. Everything went just as I had intended. We graduated from the academy of magic and went our separate ways, but that was when I finally realized my foolishness.

Why...? I thought. What have I done...?

My life was painfully inadequate without her in it. It made me feel like nothing else mattered. My existence as the heir to a noble family seemed unbearably trivial. I needed to find her again. Even if it meant losing everything

and living out the rest of my days as the target of ridicule, it would be worth it to be with her.

I finally understand.

I'd realized that even if I had everything else in the world, it meant nothing without her in my life. That meant that there was only one option available to me: I had to risk everything to seize the opportunity for a future with her.

Pursuing a goal by any means necessary was the Waldstein way. I would sacrifice everything: my daily life, my relationships, my time for fun and leisure, my rest, my sleep, my health—I would throw it all away to make her mine.

And in the end, I had failed. After letting that wonderful future slip from my grasp, I now found myself in a hospital bed, staring at the ceiling.

Nevertheless, I didn't have the sense to quit, even after all that. Just like her, I hated giving up. Any time things went wrong, I would always just move over to Plan B.

After I lost to the Fairy Queen, the powerful healing magic used to treat my wounds sent me into a deep sleep. Within minutes of regaining consciousness afterward, I got started on my next moves.

"I wish to be discharged," I demanded. "Please write out a medical report and provide the relevant records demonstrating that I've made a full recovery."

Thinking differently, the amiable witch doctor before me said with a shake of the head, "I'm afraid you're in no state to leave. Your condition was much worse than I'd expected. In fact, it was a surprise to me that you were able to fight so well under the circumstances. For you to be well enough to safely move around, I think you'd need at least two more months—"

"Don't worry; I'll pay you whatever you want. Whatever might happen, your professional responsibility will not be in question. I can explain that I was the one who insisted. I can even write an affidavit to that effect. Do we have a deal?"

After a moment of silence, the doctor sighed heavily. "I'm under orders from your superior, Letitia Lisette-Stone, not to let you go outside until you've fully

recovered.”

“And indeed, I *have* recovered. What’s the problem?”

“One more thing: I have a message from the Ardenfeld Royal Court Magicians’ Division Third Unit Captain Gawain Stark. He asked me to tell you, ‘Shut up and sleep until you’re all better. If you don’t, I’ll tell that little newbie all about your secret.’”

“That man is on thin ice right now...”

“I’d also like to add that I don’t do this work for money but for a greater good that I’ve devoted my life to. As a matter of principle, I don’t accept bribes. I have an obligation to help you recover, and that is what I will do.”

I had no response to that. Evidently, I couldn’t sneak out of here that easily.

The worst part was Gawain’s devastating threat. I couldn’t risk letting *her* find out. I didn’t want to do anything that would make her worry or get between her and her passion for magic. Then again, she was a bit of an airhead, so I figured it would take a serious slipup to cause much of a problem.

Ah, but Noelle really is dense. Then again, I like that about her, so what does that say about me?

Anyway, I need to become the kind of person who can make her happy. I will secure a future for us together. No doubt about it.

For the first time, I felt like I wanted to share these feelings. It was as if the option of telling her the truth had only just occurred to me.

I finally wanted to reveal the secret I’d kept for so long.

Chapter 1: A Trip to Ardenfeld

Two weeks had passed since the end of the World Magic Championships.

After making the most of my weeklong special vacation, I'd returned to work where I was showered with praise for my efforts at the WMC. In recognition of my success, I'd even earned a promotion to the mithril class. The promotion came with a higher salary—in addition to the one-off bonus—and tasks carrying greater responsibility.

But despite how pleased I was with all this acclaim, I had found myself in a bit of a slump over the past few days. I would randomly start daydreaming in the middle of work, and I'd even forgotten all about the chores I used to do in secret for fear of being fired. I even accidentally blew up some magical items that someone else had recently repaired. I was causing Letitia needless concern.

Whenever I went to my usual cafeteria, I bewildered the other customers when I couldn't finish the meal for big eaters. "You've barely touched your fourth bowl of rice!" they would say. "You're not dying, are you...?"

I knew I needed to pull myself together, but the tricky part of all this was that I couldn't figure out how.

"You always work too hard, Noelle," my superiors would tell me. "Even now, you're doing a better job than most other people. You don't need to worry about it."

I appreciated their kindness, but I was the one with the problem. My wildest dreams had come true. I had a job where I could use magic to my heart's content, just like I'd always wanted—so why wasn't I able to focus on it?

My problem was unrelated to work. Thanks to my simple, straightforward nature, I'd always been able to think about magic and nothing else, but now a strange concern had come along to throw me off my rhythm.

"Noelle, I love you."

In the hospital room that night, I'd smelled the sweet aroma of vanilla and felt

the warmth of bedsheets. While locked in his tight embrace, I'd heard a soft whisper in my ear.

I hadn't expected him to be so strong. He'd seemed so much bigger than me then. In those few seconds, he had been like a different person.

What the hell was that about?

Naturally, I was a mature lady with plenty of (vicarious) experience in love through all the romance novels I'd read. I wasn't so childish that I could misinterpret what had happened.

He "loves" me, like, as a really good friend...right?

Of course, the two of us were as close as two peas in a pod. It wasn't so strange to describe such an intimate friendship as "love." And even if his way of expressing it was intense, I was just grateful that he cared about me that deeply.

Wow, who would've known he loved me so much?! Ha ha ha... I thought, rolling my eyes to disguise my own embarrassment. And I mean, like, yeah, sure, I love him too. 'Cause we're best buds, right?

I told myself not to see it as a bad thing, but there was still another possibility that had me losing my mind.

Unless...? Could he really have meant it in a...r-romantic sense?

I could probably count that out as a possibility. We'd always just been friends. I would've been ashamed of myself if I'd gotten the wrong idea.

But I can't help feeling like it came across as romantic...

And if that was true, then it opened the door to all kinds of other questions.

H-How long has this been going on? Was I the only one who thought we were just friends? Has he felt that way about me all along?

I was totally confused. He'd never done anything to suggest that he saw me in that way. There hadn't even been the slightest indication that he had romantic feelings for me.

Then again, I'm not as perceptive as others are...

I couldn't deny the possibility that I'd always been too invested in magic to notice the signs of his affection.

Ultimately, I was stuck in a quantum magic paradox. In the same way you couldn't confirm whether the cat inside a box had eaten its food or not until you opened the box, I had no way of knowing the true nature of Luke's feelings for me without peering inside his head.

If he was talking about the love between two friends, then we can continue like before. But what if he really was talking about romantic love? What should I do?

I gazed out of the window, thinking about how the average person would see this as a positive development. He was the eldest son of a famous aristocratic family. I knew my mother would jump for joy if the two of us got together.

"You did it! Great work, Noelle! Your future is secured!"

I could see her being billions of times more excited than she was when I told her about my success in the Royal Court Magicians' Division.

I knew Luke was a good guy. It wasn't like there was anything about him that was a deal-breaker. I could imagine that a lot of people would advise me to go out with him and see how things worked out.

But he is the heir to a noble household. If he got together with a commoner, I bet he'd be in big trouble with his family...

Love between people of different social classes came with considerable risk. I'd heard about people who lost all their privileges and ended up going through life facing contempt and ridicule from all sides. Speaking as Luke's friend, would it really be right for me to lead him down such a dangerous path?

But more importantly, do I like him in that way?

For the past two weeks, I'd racked my brains for answers to no avail. If we were in a relationship, we'd have to do stuff like go out on dates together every week and send each other love letters.

Sounds like a pain in the butt if you ask me.

I wasn't much use when it came to household chores like cooking and

cleaning, and to be honest, I was no better at anything else that wasn't related to work. Whenever I had time to myself, my true preference was to spend as much of it as I could on my passion—magic.

Maybe romance just isn't for me.

It was a shocking realization. Sure enough, I'd had no romantic experiences worth writing home about, and I'd been alive for a little over twenty years without feeling like I was missing out.

Personally, I'd be much happier reading grimoires than going on dates.

For a girl my age, was it really normal to be so much more interested in magic than romance? Was there something wrong with me?

Lately, I'd been hanging out with my coworker Misha a lot, so I went to her for advice about this.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with you," she said. "I prefer cats to men. Men are stupid babies—they can't stop contacting their exes behind your back, and they start cheating on you the *second* you look the other way! It's perfectly natural for you to like magic more than scum like them."

It sure sounded like Misha had a chip on her shoulder. Her tirade about men being a lower form of life continued for some time.

She was whimpering by the end, tears in her eyes. "Why...? Why am I so unlucky in love...?" She calmed down once I'd spent a while comforting her. "Thank you. I guess all I *really* need is my cat and a good friend at work."

I'd managed to cheer her up, but the relief that gave me didn't last long. When I returned from lunch, having listened to Misha boasting about her cat again along the way, I noticed something unusual.

The atmosphere in the Royal Court Magicians' Division headquarters was tense and noisy. It was a sign that something unexpected was going on.

"What happened?" Misha's tone was uncharacteristically serious.

"His Royal Highness the Crown Prince is here," somebody from the Fourth Unit replied. "It seems there's somebody he wants to speak to."

"One of the royals is here in person? That's new." Misha gulped nervously. "If

the crown prince wants to speak to somebody, wouldn't he normally summon them to the palace? He must know coming in person would cause a commotion, so why is he here?"

"I suspect that causing a commotion is part of the plan. He wants people on the outside to know who he's speaking to."

"Does that mean he's here to see one of the magi?"

"Yeah. His Highness has called for Captains Vicente Cera and Maurice Heidenstam."

"The Savior Magician and the Logic Magician? Why them?"

"Apparently, a dangerous biological weapon was used in the recent assassination attempt in the Southern Nations. My guess is that he wants to hear their opinions about the rumor."

"Right, it would make sense to consult experts in healing magic and magical potions."

"I think it's also a bit of a show of force, to prove to other countries that Ardenfeld is on guard. It seems like the kind of clever ploy His Royal Highness is known for."

I listened attentively to the exchange between my colleagues. It sounded like they knew all kinds of things about politics.

They sound so smart and cool! I want to join in too!

I figured I could slide right on into the conversation if I used some sophisticated jargon, like "evidence," or "consensus," or "darkness fire blizzard." But just as I was trying to find a good moment to jump in, they suddenly looked at somebody behind me.

What's going on?

I turned around and locked eyes with the lieutenant of the Third Unit: my idol, Letitia.

"Noelle, don't say a word." Letitia pressed a finger to her lips. "Just come with me."

I followed her into a quiet emergency stairwell. Once we'd ascended and reached the landing, she glanced around to confirm that nobody else was there.

"Did something happen?" I whispered.

"Stay calm and listen to me." Letitia's lilac hair fluttered as she stopped and turned to face me. She put her hands on my shoulders. "His Royal Highness the Crown Prince wishes to speak with you in private."

It took a while for the meaning of those words to sink in. I was a newcomer to the Royal Court Magicians' Division, and I had a lower-class family background too. It was obviously out of the ordinary for somebody like me to be invited to a private audience with the crown prince.

He's one of the most powerful people in the kingdom... Why would he want to speak to me?

I couldn't help but question what this was all about. The biggest problem was that I had nowhere near the necessary knowledge of etiquette to deal with a high-pressure situation like this. I'd managed to come to grips with the basics in time for the Red Rose Ball, but even that was only enough to avoid standing out too much in that specific setting. I was still traumatized from the time I lost my composure during a meeting with Captain Ernest, fell over, and ended up hitting him on the head with my shoe.

Oh no... I can't see this ending in anything but failure...

As I waited before the grand door to the prince's chamber, I felt like a death row convict stepping up to the guillotine.

"Mithril-class royal court magician Noelle Springfield," a knight from the King's Guard addressed me, opening the door. "You may enter."

A dark red rug stretched out across the floor of the large room. I saw luxurious couches and a marble table. The walls were covered in paintings, and the entire room was bathed in the soft orange glow of magic chandeliers.

"Apologies for making you take time out of your busy schedule," the crown prince said, sitting on a couch at the far end of the room. His carefully manicured appearance and general aura barely seemed real. His golden eyes narrowed as he smiled. "Please do take a seat."

Being as careful as I could, I gingerly lowered myself onto the seat opposite the prince. I noticed an amused smile on his face, presumably in response to my nervous demeanor.

“No need to be so formal,” he said. “You can relax.”

“Th-Thank you very much, Your Highness.”

“Don’t worry about your manners or posture. I won’t be offended. I would prefer to speak with you as you normally are.”

Something about the resonance of his voice was different from ordinary people. It was as if it slid smoothly into my ears and echoed gently throughout my head. It was somehow comforting. I found myself wanting to hear him speak more. It was the sort of voice that made the listener naturally want to obey.

Before I knew it, I felt that my body had become more relaxed. It was like I’d never been anxious at all.

“Yes, perfect. Thank you.” The prince flashed another gentle smile. “Now, I’ll get straight to the point. I rate you very highly indeed. I’ve been thinking about you a lot.”

Huh?!

I gulped.



Okay, calm down. Don't mess this up.

I knew I needed to show His Royal Highness that I had correctly understood his intentions.

"So, you mean to say..." I replied carefully, "that I'm so smart and attractive and mature that Your Highness has developed romantic feelings for me?"

"No."

"Oh, I see. That's good."

I breathed a sigh of relief. According to all the romance novels that had taught me everything I knew about life, princes often fell in love with girls of different social standing.

I mean, there was a pretty strong chance that I'd unknowingly captured the crown prince's heart with my sexy feminine wiles.

It was good to know that there was no great crisis, at least for now.

The prince covered his mouth for a moment and laughed softly. "I am attracted to your ability as a magician. Ever since you joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division, I've found you endlessly fascinating. Your strength in the face of adversity and the way you adapt to your circumstances are both truly remarkable. I wasn't surprised in the slightest that you performed so well at the World Magic Championships. Then again, even I didn't expect that you would manage to go toe-to-toe with the Fairy Queen."

"That was thanks to Luke's help."

"True though that may be, there are very few magicians who can fight the way you did. Considering your age and how quickly you've grown so far, I cannot help but wonder how great you may become. And because I think so highly of you, I wish to provide you with the right environment to increase your potential even further." He paused. "I am sure you know of the King's Guard, the special task force that answers directly to the royal family. I would like to hire you as the deputy to its chief magician."

"Um, I, uh..."

I was speechless. The King's Guard was an elite unit open only to court

magicians of the adamantite class. It would certainly be a surprising decision to appoint me as deputy chief when I'd only been promoted to the mithril class a few days earlier.

If I accepted, I would get a pay raise and even more responsibilities. A chance like this might never come again as long as I lived.

My heart was pounding. I'd never expected anything like this. However, I couldn't let myself get carried away. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and listened carefully to my innermost feelings.

After a pause, I gave my response: "Am I allowed to turn down the offer?"

The crown prince looked at me with surprise. "Can I ask why?"

"I already feel so happy with my current work environment. Everyone is so good to me, and I'm really grateful. Also, I still haven't been able to repay the kindness of the person who invited me."

"You mean Luke Waldstein?" The prince fixed his eyes on me. "You two won't be together forever, you know. I expect that you're destined to follow separate paths."

"That may be true, but as his friend, I want to really make the most of the time we have together."

The prince said nothing for a moment. The room felt unnaturally quiet.

"Very well. I understand how you feel," he said finally. "But please keep this in mind: you're much more special than you realize. If you ever change your mind, the door is always open. I've made all the necessary preparations. I'll be waiting."



"His Royal Highness the Crown Prince has made his move," First Unit Captain Ernest Maeterlinck said. "And several other factions have also approached to express their interest in that girl."

Eighteen magical barriers surrounded the captain's office in the Royal Court Magicians' Division headquarters. As the kingdom's leading expert in such barriers, the so-called Glimmering Magician had a unique office that was harder

to infiltrate than just about any other space on the western continent. As long as the secretary-general, Chronos Casablancas, was still immersed in research, Ernest Maeterlinck was the division's *de facto* leader. Very few court magicians were granted access to his office.

Among that exclusive number was the tall man there now. The intense magical aura in the room, strong enough to warp the air, belonged to none other than the Hellfire Magician—Third Unit Captain Gawain Stark. He was the kingdom's greatest fire-type magic specialist, unrivaled in his ability to quickly cast spells.

"It looks like they've started to recognize her potential," Gawain remarked.

"After her most recent exploits, it's hardly a surprise. First impressions matter a great deal in our world, and the World Magic Championships are hugely influential." Ernest's tone was calm and solemn. "Unfortunately, there are many who wish to eliminate her as well. The fact that a female commoner has performed so well as a magician has inevitably provided ammunition to elitist nobles in Ardenfeld and beyond. Moreover, the attempted revival of the wyrm beneath Grambern revealed how much has been going on among those in the criminal underworld."

"On top of Ardenfeld's important recent advancements in magic, the kingdom also has major geopolitical significance because of the uninhabited territory on the western border. I expect we'll see further maneuvers from people who seek power in this country."

"We must strengthen our organization without delay. Perhaps it is time to accelerate the process of selecting a historic eighth magus and establishing the Seventh Unit."

"Is Second Unit Lieutenant Seamus Glass the leading magus candidate right now?" Gawain asked.

"Correct. Letitia Lisette-Stone is currently in second place. I'd say Ryan Archbret and Bashir Pullman are under consideration too."

"I take it Luke Waldstein is no longer an option?"

Ernest pursed his lips and shot Gawain a serious glance. "We are not so

desperate that we need to contemplate promoting an injured man. There are many outstanding magicians in our ranks besides Waldstein.”

His rejection disguised an unspoken question: was there a chance his wounds would heal soon? Understanding this intent, Gawain began to mull over the situation.

“In addition, something happened today that will affect the entire world,” Ernest added quietly. “During her visit to the western region of the Holy Empire of Vellmar, there was an attack on Evangeline Runeforest, the Fairy Queen. The perpetrators are still at large, and Evangeline Runeforest’s whereabouts remain unknown. I’ve heard there is a strong possibility that she is no more.”

Gawain blinked in astonishment. “Don’t joke about something like that.”

“It’s no joke. Several of our sources have corroborated this intelligence already.”

“But this is Evangeline Runeforest we’re talking about. Even death wouldn’t stop her.”

“There’s evidence that the attackers used a type of supreme relic that suppresses magic use within a fixed area—a so-called Magician Slayer.”

“But Magician Slayers are totally impractical when it comes to actual combat,” Gawain objected. “They’re extremely rare for one thing, but they’re also sensitive and require too much effort to maintain and control. It would take seventy years to charge up the magical energy necessary to activate a Magician Slayer, and then you’d only be able to use it for six hours at most. And even *then*, there are too many limitations to deal with. If somebody were to use one of them—”

“And that’s why the Fairy Queen was caught by surprise.”

Gawain fell silent. “Yes, I suppose that’s possible,” he murmured eventually.

“The royal capital is now on high alert, and there’s a crackdown on dungeon relics, but there’s a limit on how much that can achieve.” Ernest paused. “It is time for us to prove our worth. We must carry out our duty as royal court magicians.”

The news that Evangeline Runeforest, the Fairy Queen, had been attacked and gone missing swept through the western continent in the blink of an eye, sending national defense ministries into turmoil. Efforts were underway in many countries to block local news agencies from reporting on the incident, but in some areas, rumors and false information had already begun to spread.

I'd heard misinformed claims that it was actually suicide and that the Holy Empire of Vellmar had covered it up, or that the whole affair was some kind of conspiracy masterminded by Evangeline herself. It hurt me to hear such cruel things.

I hope she's okay, I thought.

That day, I was escorted home by members of the Order of Royal Knights. Higher-ups had decided that after what I'd done at the WMC, there was a risk that I would be targeted in the same way as Evangeline. Therefore, they had dispatched two of the most skilled knights to protect me in case I encountered a Magician Slayer, the kind of dungeon relic used in the previous attack. In a way, it was reassuring to have them there, but it also made me a bit tense. Was it really necessary to have bodyguards?

"Please don't worry, Miss Noelle," one of the burly knights said. "We are here to ensure your safety."

I couldn't help but admire the knights' vigilant posture and mannerisms as they walked beside me along the dusky street.

"It must be scary for a lady to walk this way alone at night," the knight added.

"Nah, you'd be surprised," I replied. "I can take most people in a fistfight."

"A f-fistfight? You?" The knight's eyes widened in shock.

Oops! That probably wasn't the right answer for an elegant court lady!

"Oh, no, um, you're totally right," I blabbered, desperately trying to undo the last few seconds. "It's real spooky! If a man showed up, I wouldn't have the strength to protect myself!"

"That's true. I always think it must be difficult for a lady."

The knight seemed convinced. I was relieved to see that I'd passed the test.

Aha! See what I can do when I make the effort? If my mom could see this perfect performance, she'd stop complaining about how I'm not feminine enough! I knew I was cool and mature all along. Acting like a real lady is a piece of cake if I put my mind to it!

Wrapped up in my own head, I continued to bask in the glory of my expertly composed response. I was still reminiscing smugly when I suddenly felt something that made me stop in my tracks.

Huh?!

I'd honed my animal instincts through years of cavorting around nature in a little rural town. Now, in the dark city streets under a moonless sky, those instincts were trying to tell me something.

There's something here...

"Miss Noelle...?" one of the knights said quizzically.

"Get down!" I cried, seizing the knight by the collar and pulling him to the ground.

All of a sudden, a rain of bullets came crashing through the walls of the alleyway. I had no time for second thoughts. I immediately activated Spell Boost, then hauled the knight aside and moved him out of the enemies' range. I cast Harden to strengthen the walls, and once I'd made sure we were safe, I assessed the surroundings.

There are between twenty and thirty enemies. It looks like they're using the latest contraband magical weapons from the Eastern Bloc.

I used a hand mirror to catch a glimpse of the situation behind me. It turned out the other knight had managed to get out of harm's way without my help.

Well, they are the best of the best!

Relieved, I shifted focus to begin working out my counterattack. I selected my target and was about to charge my magic when I noticed something strange: I couldn't establish a magic sequence. Moments earlier, I'd used support and enchantment magic, but now I couldn't.

It must be a Magician Slayer like the one that was used against Evangeline!

I wasn't sure of its range, but I was certain that this was the work of a dungeon relic.

This isn't looking good. I have to at least get out of the range of the relic.

I made a break for the most promising escape route, but I froze as I realized what the enemies were doing.

They know where I'm going!

That was when I fully grasped how carefully they had planned out this attack. Just when I needed to consider all the possible options in response to their actions, they were already two steps ahead. No matter how quick my reactions were, it wasn't enough to break free of their trap. Every time I attempted to launch a sudden attack, it fell apart without conjuring up as much as a light breeze.

Damn it!

The crowd of enemies raised their magic staffs and launched an innumerable flurry of bullets. I was in dire straits.

But just as I took a breath and prepared to accept defeat, a great gust of wind suddenly swept away everything in sight. In the next moment, something sliced repeatedly through the air so quickly I could see nothing but flashes of light. I couldn't see who was there, but intuitively, I knew.

It was the crown prince's right-hand man, the leader of the Order of Royal Knights: the master swordsman I'd battled in the Royal Invitational Tournament, Eric Rashford.

Following right behind him were many other knights, who all turned toward the attackers and launched their counteroffensive.

But where did they come from...?

I couldn't understand. There had been no sign of them anywhere near me. But then the answer became clear as day.

"Air Blaze."

It was a teleportation spell that used spirit magic. As soon as I heard the incantation, I saw a beautiful female figure standing atop a chimney, the moon

peeking out from between the clouds behind her.

“If I cannot use magic within the relic’s range, then I will simply activate my magic sequence outside its range. I am much too wise and brilliant for the same method to work twice.” As the mysterious individual spotted me looking up at her, her voice suddenly filled with excitement. “Noelle, your dear friend has come to your rescue!”

It was that free spirit I knew so well: the Fairy Queen herself, Evangeline Runeforest.

Once the commotion had settled down, Evangeline explained the situation to me. “Even I believed I was dead back there. In three thousand years, I had encountered a Magician Slayer only once before, so I was caught off guard. But since Esther and Cynthia have served me for so long, I felt that as their queen, I must protect them. Besides, I could not bear to die without having had the chance to spend time with you, Noelle. With that determination and energy, I played dead and succeeded in surviving alongside Esther and Cynthia. However, I was left exhausted and powerless. It was at that very moment that somebody from the Kingdom of Ardenfeld appeared.”

“Wow, what a lucky coincidence!” I exclaimed.

“It was no coincidence. After getting wind of the attack plot ahead of time, this person had come looking for me, apparently under orders from the crown prince. Initially, I thought it all sounded quite suspicious and was about to reject the request, but then I remembered that Ardenfeld is where you live. My knowledge and wisdom led me to the conclusion that this was an opportunity to go and play under the guise of official business.”

“Is that really why you came here?”

“It would not be beyond reason to say that is the *only* reason I came,” she declared. “Incidentally, it seems that this is the first time one of the Three Mystic Rulers has ever paid a visit to Ardenfeld. One of the local diplomats appeared quite overcome with emotion, so I made sure to say that they should be thanking you. You can probably expect an official letter of thanks before long.”

I felt like this was a much bigger deal than her disinterested tone suggested, but I decided not to think about it too hard for the sake of my own mental stability. I was living in a stressful world, so looking after myself was of utmost importance. I wanted to live my life without overthinking and grab the chance to take it easy once in a while.

“But once I arrived here,” Evangeline went on, “I heard that attackers might infiltrate this country too. When I learned that people were planning to lure them out by giving them a chance to attack you, I was quick to offer my assistance. The diplomat told me they would not need help as they had a master swordsman and others under the crown prince’s command, but I was sure it would be dangerous.”

“Ohhh. Now that you mention it, this all makes a lot of sense.”

Looking back on how it had all unfolded, the route we’d taken from the court did seem like a means of inviting an attack.

“I’m terribly sorry we deceived you,” one of the knights said, bowing his head.

“It’s okay,” I replied. “Actually, I’m honored that I was able to help.”

“You were extremely helpful. The attackers made their move quicker than we’d expected, so I didn’t have time to react. It’s thanks to you that I made it out alive,” he said.

“Oh, I g-guess so...” I laughed bashfully and beamed as the knight praised my efforts.

“Our team will sort everything out here, so you should head home, Miss Noelle.”

The two knights were going to continue walking with me the rest of the way, just to be on the safe side. We were about to set off when somebody called out to me.

“Um, e-excuse me, Noelle! If...if you don’t mind...” Evangeline spluttered, her eyes darting around. She paused before finally blurting out, “N-Never mind! Bye-bye!”

I could tell that this was more important than she was making it out to be, but

I couldn't bring myself to say anything once she'd turned her back. Evangeline was the Fairy Queen of the Great Forest, and I was sure she had issues of her own that I could never begin to fathom.

Respecting her wishes was the right thing to do. It wouldn't be appropriate to call out with some wishy-washy explanation like "You looked like you wanted to hang out longer." After all, we were too different: I was a commoner and she was a queen.

I thought I'd made the right call, but as I walked home, I couldn't shake off the lingering sense that I'd slipped up.

"Miss Noelle, may I have a word?" somebody said suddenly from behind me.

I turned around to see a beautiful elf with leaf-shaped ears standing there. It was Evangeline's attendant, Cynthia.

"Thank you for your time, Miss Noelle," Cynthia said. "My apologies, but I would like to ask you a favor."

I'd heard that as Evangeline's attendant, Cynthia handled much of the true official work in the Great Forest, but she was surprisingly unassuming. For someone of a much higher social position than me, she was remarkably polite in her language and overall manner.

She looked at me with a serious expression. I had a feeling I knew exactly what she wanted to ask me.

"You want me to stay away from Evangeline," I said. "That's what this is about, right?"

I was met with a wave of silence.

Cynthia pursed her lips. "Why do you say that?"

"As her attendant, I suppose you're not very happy about the idea of your queen getting close to a human."

I'd experienced something similar before. I recalled one person having said, "My mom says I can't play with commoners."

The magic academy I'd attended was full of aristocrats' children. It always disappointed me when they rejected me like that.

I figured that if that kind of thing happened between humans, then being different species would present an even bigger hurdle. But that made me even more sure of the answer I'd decided on right from the start.

"Well, I'll have to disappoint you," I continued, "but I want to keep on getting to know Evangeline better."

As Evangeline was a queen, there would probably be some things that wouldn't be easy to deal with, but I didn't like the idea that we should avoid each other just to satisfy other people.

"I understand," Cynthia replied, as stern as ever. "And now for my request."

"Seriously? You already know my answer."

"I would like to ask you to host Lady Evangeline in your home."

"Yeah, like I said—" I broke off, confused. Had I misheard? Had she really said something that ridiculous? "Um...I beg your pardon?"

"Miss Noelle, I am asking you to let Lady Evangeline stay at your house," Cynthia said quietly. "Ever since it was decided that we would visit the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, Lady Evangeline has been adamant about wanting to play with you. She has spoken endlessly of her dreams of staying at your home, shopping together, sharing snacks, and all manner of other activities. It has been so constant that we have been unable to sleep. Esther has even started to curl up in a corner of the carriage with her ears covered."

"F-For real...?"

"And yet, when she had the perfect opportunity to ask you, she was too indecisive to say anything. I think that because you are her first-ever friend, she values you so much that she has begun to worry that she might be annoying or that you might reject her. And yes, that is all very sweet, but for Esther and me, it is intolerable. Why? Because I am certain that Lady Evangeline will complain all night long about how she wanted to stay at your home. By now, Esther has the empty eyes of one who has already accepted her fate, but I am not yet ready to give up. Now, Miss Noelle, what do you say? Will you help us?"

I hadn't expected this at all. It was the total opposite of what I'd thought Cynthia would tell me.

“What did you think just now when I said, ‘I’ll have to disappoint you’?” I asked.

“I thought you had misunderstood and wanted to impress me with a dramatic riposte.”

I had no response. I had expressed my earnest feelings, but it was all because I’d jumped to conclusions. My embarrassment was all-encompassing.

“I wanna cry...” I whimpered.

“No, I want to cry! So, will you help me?! Please allow Lady Evangeline to stay with you!”

The two knights with me had heard our conversation. They smiled kindly, and soon we were walking back the way we’d come. I felt my face burning bright as we returned to where Evangeline was.

“Esther, are you listening? I want to go to her house ever so much, but I lack the courage to say it!” Evangeline was babbling wildly. “All kinds of things occurred to me: I thought it might be burdensome to ask her out of the blue, and you see, I know nothing about how to make friends, so perhaps I would get in the way, and—”

“What a pretty view...” Esther droned, staring lifelessly into the distance.

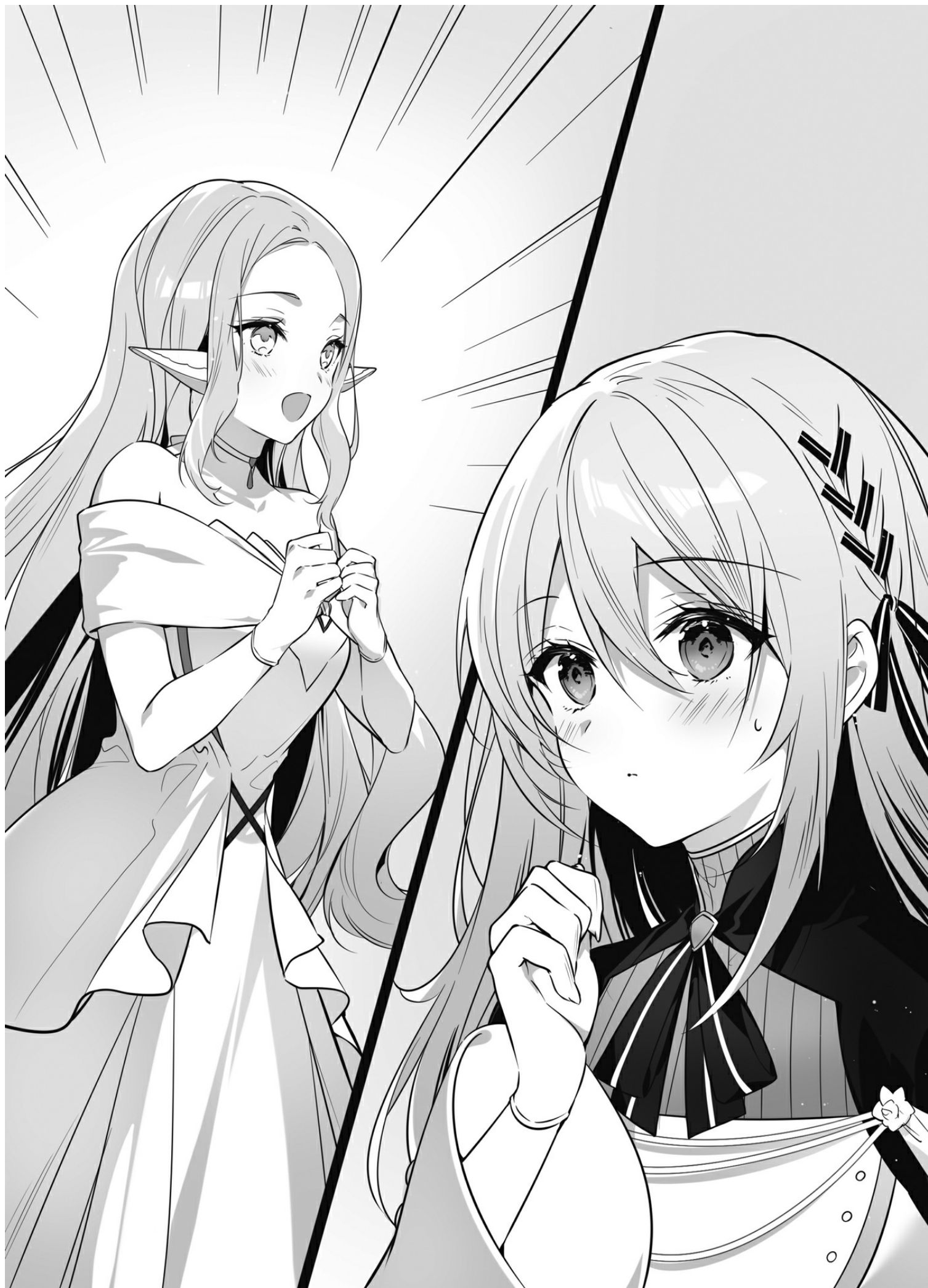
Then, Evangeline’s jade green eyes opened wide as she spotted me. “N-Noelle?!”

“Um, so, if you want...” I muttered bashfully, unable to look her directly in the eye. “Do you...wanna come and stay at my house?”

I was breathing quickly. For a moment, it was like time had stopped entirely. I saw Evangeline trembling.

“Ah...” She paused and breathed in deeply. “Are you sure?! Can I really, truly stay with you?”

Evangeline’s cheeks were bright red. Next to her, Esther looked like she’d just been rescued from a burning building. The looks on their faces in that moment would stay with me for a long time.





“This is unacceptable,” Gawain Stark said. “Noelle Springfield is one of my subordinates in the Third Unit. I recognize your position as the crown prince, but regardless, it was unreasonable of Your Highness to put her in harm’s way by using her as a decoy without my authorization.”

Glistening crystal chandeliers reflected light onto the walls of this room on the highest floor of the Crimson Palace. Only a select few were ever permitted to enter here. Opposite the Hellfire Magician was one of the most powerful men in the kingdom’s upper strata: Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld.

“She carried out her role without being harmed in the slightest,” the prince replied. “She had support from two high-ranking knights from the King’s Guard, and besides, the master swordsman Eric Rashford and the Fairy Queen Evangeline Runeforest were lying in wait. Looking at it objectively, don’t you think the girl’s safety was more than guaranteed?”

“The ends do not justify the means. The Fairy Queen and her attendants had barely survived when the attackers used their Magician Slayer. The assailants might’ve benefited from the element of surprise the first time, but even so, can you really say that the girl was safe being thrown to the attackers with nothing more than a couple of knights to protect her? The more I think about it, the more I question Your Highness’s judgment.”

“We must take risks to achieve the desired outcomes. It wouldn’t have been possible to lure in the enemies if there were more people with the girl. They would’ve smelled a rat. Ensuring her safety was of course important, but it was even more vital that the plan succeeded. As the captain of your unit, you also send your subordinates into dangerous situations. Is this any different?”

“I’m trying to tell you, it’s a problem of consent. There’s a world of difference between sending somebody out for a dangerous mission that they’re ready for and putting them into a high-risk situation without their knowledge. Supposing this had all resulted in a worst-case scenario, would you have been prepared to put your hand on your heart and tell her mother you used her as bait?”

“Well, in reality, we didn’t witness a worst-case scenario. There is no point in speculating about something that didn’t happen. In any case, I wouldn’t exactly

say that your hands are clean either as the captain of the Third Unit.”

Gawain frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about the investigations into the seedy underbelly of the nobility—for example, the culture of bribery within the High Court and their links with the Saint Church. Private investigations are all well and good, but if one employs illegal methods, it may end badly.”

Prince Michael sounded confident, and his claims were persuasive. Gawain wasn’t aware of any such illegal investigations, but he did know of some Third Unit magicians who liked to conduct their own investigations and wouldn’t hesitate to run headlong into danger.

Was it Luke...? Gawain thought. There’s a case to be made for Letitia too. When she was in the First Unit, she was particularly zealous about uncovering shady business in the High Court.

But even as he racked his brains, he maintained the illusion of composure. “I imagine it must suit you well that His Majesty the King opposes the High Court’s stance on tax exemption for nobility.”

“And that’s just why I’m concerned. It would be a shame to lose such fine magicians. The splendid results at the World Magic Championships increased interest in the kingdom’s advancements in magic, but not everyone is happy about it,” the prince explained. “Justice is a noble aim that always falls to the wayside eventually. You must take care not to end up tarred with the same darkness at the heart of the aristocracy.”

“I deeply appreciate your advice. However, I ask that you consult me in advance if you wish to use my subordinates in your future plans. If one of my officers gets harmed because you’ve roped them in again, it won’t matter to me that you are the crown prince. I *will* make you pay.”

“It pleases me to hear that your subordinates are so important to you. Please continue to be yourself,” the prince said in parting.

Walking away down the long corridor after their meeting, Gawain pondered the crown prince’s motives. He felt like their discussion had ended inconclusively. He didn’t think the prince had been dishonest in telling him to be

himself, but he also got the impression that there was an implied addendum: *Please let me do things my way too.* That seemed to match the philosophy of a prince who was always seeking the most advantageous course of action.

I'd better remain vigilant when it comes to His Highness's actions, Gawain thought.

He was still reflecting on the meeting when he left the palace.

"Captain Gawain!" Harribel, a Third Unit magician, called out. "I've been waiting for you. I have news."

"What kind of news?"

"Luke attempted to escape his rest home in the Guardian City of Grambern. It seems that he heard about the attack on the Fairy Queen and became worried about his mentee, Noelle."

Gawain sighed heavily. "Didn't I say this would happen?"

"Yes, sir. He took the exact route you described, so he was successfully apprehended. He is now behaving himself in his room."

"Well, don't drop your guard. Mark my words, he'll try again tonight."

As Gawain looked at the plan of Luke's rest home and pointed out the locations that required extra attention, he noticed something unusual about Luke's attempted escape route.

He's much easier to read than normal. He really must be worried if he's being this careless.

It was no great surprise. Nothing was scarier to a magician than being unable to use magic. The Magician Slayer was a type of relic that took advantage of that fear.

Even for somebody as gutsy as Noelle, this is a formidable opponent. It might be hard to shake off these concerns for a while.

Picturing the little magician who had faced the attack, Gawain sighed. He doubted he would sleep that night. It would probably continue to affect him for some time afterward too.

I could do without more trauma...



Meanwhile, a magical lamp glowed in the window of a little house in the capital. The strong walls of the house were enchanted with soundproofing magic, so barely any noise escaped.

Inside, Noelle Springfield was experiencing a sleepless night.

“It’s time...for a magic quiz!” she exclaimed, raising a glass of wine that was close to overflowing.

“Yay!” Evangeline lifted her own brimming glass.

From outside the window, two other elves were watching.

“Good for you, Lady Evangeline!” Cynthia whispered, gazing tearily at her queen like a doting mother.

“No more whining!” Esther chimed in joyfully. “I can finally sleep! Tonight, I am free!”

Noelle and Evangeline’s lively chatter continued long into the night while the lamp in the window cast its flickering light into the dark street corners outside.



“Please let me go,” Luke Waldstein demanded. “I need to leave.”

His second attempted prison break had flopped, and now a guard was carrying him back to his room.

They anticipated my movements! he thought. *They were on high alert, like they already knew I was going to try and escape. This must be Captain Gawain’s doing.*

“Please calm down,” said the magician tasked with guarding and monitoring him. “Your job right now is to rest.”

Luke scowled.

But Noelle might be in trouble! What if something terrible happened to her? What if...I lost her forever?

The light faded from his eyes at the very thought of it. Moreover, he had another cause for anxiety: the people he had sway over at court had informed him that the crown prince was up to something.

He's definitely trying to get close to her. His goal must be to hire her to strengthen the King's Guard.

It was by no means a bad thing that the crown prince admired Noelle, but if she joined the King's Guard, that would mean leaving the Third Unit and severing her mentor-mentee relationship with Luke. And in that case, she would no longer be with him.

I'm just being selfish again, aren't I?

He always told himself his greatest wish was for her to be happy, but he also harbored ugly feelings that stuck to him like glue. He heaved a great sigh.

I wonder what she's thinking about right now. She's so strong, even mentally, but after the attack, she must still be feeling scared and uneasy. I bet she was awake all night after that incident.

He looked out of the window, thinking of how she must be seeing the same night sky, miles and miles away.

I just hope she gets some relief from her worries...



Uh-oh. I ended up sleeping like a baby.

It was morning, and despite my best intentions, I'd overslept. I rubbed my eyes while pangs of guilt gnawed at me. I'd wanted to get up early and be "the hostess with the mostest" for my visitor.

I suppose we did party the night away in our excitement.

Any kind of sleepover was a new experience for Evangeline, so we'd spent the evening chatting and boozing—plenty of eating too. We'd snacked on beans, cheese, nuts, and sausages the whole time. Finally, we'd had lots of fun playing my magic quiz—which might as well be the national sport as far as I was concerned.

But the best bit was sharing our stories about magic. Evangeline seemed to

really relate to my tale of studying concealment magic so I could eat lunch during class without getting caught. I'd smiled a lot recounting my school days to her.

Back in the present, I noticed that the bed I normally slept in was all neat and tidy. Evangeline must have woken up before me. It also occurred to me how unclean my room was. I always used work as an excuse to avoid household chores, and the sad result was that my bedroom was a total mess. At the back of my mind, I had the feeling a graceful, intellectually minded adult like me ought to do better, but my ethos was to treat myself as I liked to treat others.

It's cool. I'll get around to tidying up one of these days.

I walked into the living room and found it empty. I checked the other rooms too, but there was no sign of life. Wondering if my mother and Evangeline had gone out somewhere, I opened the front door to an astounding sight.

"Is this right?" Evangeline was asking, bending over in the garden and pulling up weeds.

"Yep, just like that!" my mother replied jovially as she watched over Evangeline. "Thanks, my dear Eva. You're a lifesaver!"

"Mom, what are you *doing*?!" I blurted out, aghast.

"Eva offered to help me with the weeds." She didn't seem to think she'd done anything out of the ordinary. "She said she was never allowed to do gardening because of her posh upbringing or something, so she wanted to help out in exchange for letting her stay over. She really is a good kid. You could learn a thing or two from her!"

"W-Wait, I think you're missing something important." My mother obviously didn't understand that Evangeline was an official state guest. This was like handing the king himself a trowel and a pair of gloves. "D-Don't you understand the situation? You must know we could never afford clothes like hers. And I mean, look at her *ears*!"

"I know she's from some fancy, far-off place. I'm a pretty good judge of character, you know. Let me show you." My mother smirked confidently. "I'd say she comes from some middling noble family. She must be in her...late

twenties or so. And pointy ears are the latest fashion among the aristocracy, right?”

I was at a loss for words.

There's no saving her. She's got everything wrong... I knew she was a bit ignorant considering she was born and raised out in the sticks, but this is ridiculous!

“Mom, she’s—” I started, before I spotted Evangeline behind my mother, pressing her finger to her lips. I was confused, but I stayed quiet.

Shortly afterward, I managed to pull Evangeline away from my mother. “Are you sure about this?” I whispered. “She has no idea who you are.”

“I am very sure,” Evangeline replied. “I wanted to help in the garden. In over three thousand years, I have never had such an opportunity. In my normal life, it is not allowed. I have always been queen, so I wanted to take this brief chance to experience life as a normal girl.”

Her story reminded me of a romance novel I’d read many years before. It involved a princess who ran away from her castle, took a trip to another country, and spent the day wandering the streets as an ordinary young girl.

I was sure that in thousands of years living life as the Fairy Queen, Evangeline had endured all kinds of things, even if she’d accepted that she had no other choice. Knowing her background, I wanted to do whatever I could to help her realize her simple dream of living like a normal girl.

“Evangeline, are you busy today?” I asked quietly, beginning to hatch a plan. “Why don’t we head into the town together? You can be like a normal girl. It’ll just be our little secret.”

After we returned to my room, I gave Evangeline a once-over. “My mom is too naive to understand what’s going on, but a lot of people in the city will know who you are. Our only hope is to make you look like an ordinary girl. We’ll dress you in normal clothes, we can tuck your hair into a hat, and we can use concealment magic to disguise your ears. And if you put on glasses, it’ll make your face look different too.”

I'd once bought a pair of fake glasses to make me look like a stylish intellectual, but I'd always been too embarrassed to wear them in public. When Evangeline put them on, she gave off a different impression from before; she now seemed mature and composed.

"Looks great," I remarked. "Now, try on my clothes."

But this was where we ran into trouble.

"These seem a little small for me..." Evangeline said.

I fell silent. For a number of reasons, there was no way my clothes would fit her. I'd tried to ignore that fact, but now that it was staring me in the face, I couldn't hide my disappointment.

I ended up going to my mother for help, knowing that she was a little bigger than me. "Mom, can we borrow some of your clothes?"

"Come on, what did you expect? Take one look at Eva and it's obvious that your tiny little clothes aren't going to fit her. Now, Eva, just try mine."

"I think these are also too small," Evangeline said.

And so, my mother was visibly unhappy as well. Now that mother and daughter alike had faced this humiliation, I had to come up with a new strategy.

"Aha! I could borrow clothes from somebody at the Royal Court Magicians' Division. I know someone who helps me out a lot at work, and I'm pretty sure she lives nearby."

Soon, I was standing outside my coworker's front door. The person who lived here was a devout believer in the superiority of cats over men.

"Oh, it's you, Noelle." Misha rubbed her eyes as she answered the door. "What's up? Did something happen?"

Beyond her shoe rack, there was a gate set up to prevent any escape attempts by her fluffy, longhaired cat, which was eyeing me with suspicion.

"I was hoping you could lend me some clothes..."

"For what?"

"Oh, they're for her." I gestured toward Evangeline.

Misha stared quietly at the elf for some time. “I must still be dreaming. She looks just like Evangeline RuneForest the Fairy Queen in disguise.”

“Yep, you’re dreaming, all right. How could Evangeline possibly be here?”

“Good point. She couldn’t be.”

Misha brought out some nice clothes for us to borrow, complete with shoes.

“Just make sure you get this all back to me by next week,” she said.

“Do you have plans?”

“I ran into an old classmate at a school reunion the other day, and he asked me out on a date.”

“Wow, that’s great!”

“Right? He’s an art dealer, and he says he’s selling these rare vases right now that bring good luck to their owners. He offered to get me a special deal on one! People have said that wonderful things happened after they got one of those vases, like winning the lottery or getting married to their rich boyfriends!”

“Hmm...”

She really is unlucky in love, huh? I guess I can’t say for sure that it’s a scam, but she should really take more care to avoid getting sweet-talked.

Once Evangeline had changed into Misha’s clothes, I cast Perception Block on her to disguise her magical aura and prevent her from standing out too much.

“Okay, all done!” I exclaimed. “Now, let’s head out!”

Under the dazzling sunlight of late morning, I walked out into the city streets with the Fairy Queen.



“Are you sure this is all right? No Fairy Queen has ever done this before. Dressing as a human woman, walking around town...”

Hidden by their own Perception Block, two figures were following Noelle and Evangeline as they explored the streets of the capital. They were Evangeline’s attendants, Esther and Cynthia.

“Do you think you could stop her?” Cynthia responded. “Lady Evangeline would have no trouble giving us the slip if she wanted to. Besides, think of how much she would complain. Never mind one night—it would be nonstop for the next week.”

“True. I cannot bear the thought of that.”

“To maintain our standard of wholesome and cultured living, our best option is to watch over her and pretend we know nothing.”

The two elves nodded fervently.

“But I do have to wonder why this suddenly became such an obsession for Lady Evangeline,” Esther said. “She’s never acted quite like this before.”

“I suspect she is struggling with the fact that she has made a friend for the first time. After all, she has been saying for the past thousand years that she wanted a friend.”

“That sounds like quite the burden.”

“Indeed. It has been hard for her. Now that her dream has come true, I imagine she is having difficulty in deciding how to interact with her new friend. Moreover, after a lifetime of never having to worry about the feelings of those around her, she lacks experience in establishing boundaries.”

“I see what you mean,” Esther agreed.

“For now, we should keep an eye on her to make sure nothing bad happens. Apart from that, this might be a good opportunity for us to experience a little bit of human culture too.”

“But what value is there in experiencing such crude, vulgar ‘culture’ as this?”

“Yes, that is the view we are most familiar with in the Great Forest. However, just between you and me,” Cynthia murmured, closing in on Esther’s ear, “human food is really something special.”



“Is there anywhere you’d like to go?” I asked Evangeline.

“What do you mean?”

“I figured there might be special places or shops or something that you wanted to check out while you’re here as an ordinary girl.”

Evangeline paused in thought, saying eventually, “In all honesty, I know very little about the human world. Since long before I became queen, the typical preference has been to avoid engaging with humans altogether. Most elves regard human culture as shallow and uncouth.”

“I mean, I guess I wouldn’t say they’re wrong...”

“However, I am here now, so perhaps I should experience it firsthand.” Evangeline smiled broadly. “Show me what you think I should see.”

“Wh-What I think you should see, huh...?” That felt like a big responsibility. I had to come up with the best examples of human culture for Evangeline to appreciate.

Well, where do I have the most fun? What’s my favorite place? Oh, I know!

I clapped my hands together. “Let me take you to my usual midday haunt.”

“What could that be?”

“It’s super popular. It’s full of people every day.”

We set off down the red cobblestone streets of the royal capital. We passed flowers in full bloom and rows of chic shops with lines of women waiting at each door. We walked by them all to reach my absolute favorite place at this time of day.

“Here it is!” I exclaimed. “The myth, the legend, the greatest eatery in the capital—the original Big Belly Cafeteria!”

The flagship Big Belly Cafeteria was a must-visit for big eaters in Ardenfeld. All the most confident gourmands came here, and as it was lunchtime, it was already bustling with challengers.

“So busy! I can see why this is your usual haunt,” Evangeline said, impressed.

“Oh, Miss Noelle! Good afternoon!” a man bellowed as he noticed me. He was as big as a bear. “Hey, Miss Noelle is here! Make some space!”

“There’s no need to make a fuss,” I replied, but it didn’t stop me from

grinning from ear to ear while the man cheerfully ushered us inside. It felt good to be treated like a loyal customer when I was here with a friend. Once we were in our seats, I placed my order. “I’ll have the Big Belly Meal with cream croquettes.”

We waited for about ten minutes for the food to come. When my set meal arrived, Evangeline stared at it in awe.

“Wh-What is this...?” she croaked.

“This is my beloved Big Belly Meal. I barely feel like I’ve eaten if I have anything smaller.”

“Is this really how much humans eat...?”

I had a feeling she was getting the wrong idea, but I decided not to worry about it too much. The most important thing was to witness her reaction to fried food straight out of the kitchen.

“So *this* is human food,” she whispered, prodding at a piece of food, turning it over, and generally inspecting it with great care. Finally, she cautiously raised it to her mouth and bit into the crispy coating with a satisfying crunch. She suddenly broke into a huge smile. “Incredible! The inside is so moist!”

“Yep, the cream croquettes here are the best! Quite a lot of people come here just to try them.”

“I never knew such cuisine existed. This is fascinating!”

As she happily closed her eyes to savor the taste of the croquette, I almost felt like I was experiencing that joy for the first time myself.



Under the cover of Perception Block, two elves were watching the flagship Big Belly Cafeteria from behind a bush in the nearby park.

“Having lunch with a friend...” Cynthia murmured, her eyes glistening. “How wonderful for you, Lady Evangeline!”

“Is it really worth crying over?” Esther shot Cynthia a dubious look.

“You youngsters are so aloof. I’m sure you’ll understand when you grow up.”

“I am not a child. I am over a thousand years old.”

“But among elves, you *are* still a child.” Cynthia shook her head in disbelief. She elegantly reached into a paper bag and placed a single strip of fried potato into her mouth. She chewed it slowly, closing her eyes in contentment. “These are good. Try one, Esther.”

“I was meaning to ask about this before,” Esther said suspiciously, “but why are you so familiar with human food?”

“I have had many opportunities to leave the Great Forest on diplomatic business.”

“But it is inappropriate to come into contact with the vulgar culture of humans. Is that not common sense among us elves?”

“Yes, you could call it common sense. However, when you work beyond the boundaries of the Great Forest, you may find yourself in unexpected situations. If your provisions ran out, you would have no choice but to acquire food locally. In such times of need, I also became more familiar with other cultures.”

“You talk about ‘times of need,’ but you had quite the gleam in your eye when you picked out a place to eat just now.”

“I did nothing unusual. Perhaps that was your own perception?”

“You seemed to know exactly how you wanted your potatoes seasoned.”

“Food is a provider of life. It is polite to appreciate it to the fullest. Besides, it is important to make the flavor closer to that of elven food. I requested only the ‘forest green’ seasoning, a blend of natural spices that support the growth of forests—”

“The person at the stall called it ‘garlic cheese pepper.’”

An awkward silence washed over the two elves for what felt like millennia until Cynthia responded, “Garlic cheese pepper is a variety of ‘forest green’ seasoning, a blend of natural spices that—”

“You are being ridiculous. Please stop embarrassing yourself.” Esther’s voice was icy and her eyes were impassive. “Cynthia, I take it...you have been enjoying human food in secret all this time!”

“And what of it?! If you taste human cuisine, you will understand how dreadfully dull elven food is! All we eat is unseasoned food made with foraged woodland ingredients. I would much rather eat some cheese or some salty fried food now and again!”

“I am disappointed in you, Cynthia. I will have to report this to the council.”

“Wait! Let us discuss this rationally. In our modern age, human technology is advancing so much that it poses a serious threat to the Great Forest. It is vital that we learn about the outside world and adopt valuable ideas. We must of course protect our history and our traditions, but even we elves believe all things in the world must pass. Nothing can remain unchanged forever. I would argue that we cannot allow ourselves to be bound by old ways of thinking.”

“I see nothing worth adopting from this crude, messy culture.”

“But do you not see? That is only an outside perspective! If you experience it for yourself, you may find it to be contrary to your expectations. To understand other cultures, it is essential that you find a middle ground and make an effort to respect people and appreciate their points of view.”

“You cannot fool me with such arguments.”

“Come now. Eat a fry. I will even let you have this one with plenty of cheese.” Cynthia pulled out a fry from the bag and offered it to Esther.

“Very well. I will try *one*,” Esther responded with a sigh. “But I can see even at a glance that there is nothing to enjoy about such unsophisticated food.”



“What a surprise! This is better than I expected,” Esther said twenty minutes later. By now, she and Cynthia each had both their hands full of food.

“You see?” Cynthia replied. “I’d never believed it could be so good either, but when I tried it, it confounded my expectations.”

“All the food we normally eat is so delicate in taste, so I suppose these bold flavors are unusual and exciting to our palates.”

“I agree. There is something wonderful about how different it is from elven cuisine.”

“I can hardly believe I rejected this without even tasting it. Prejudice is a terrible thing.”

“I understand. I used to feel precisely the same way.”

“Shall we try something from here next?”

Esther was having a great time exploring the world of human food. As a result, newfound esteem for Cynthia blossomed within her.

She is open-minded enough to understand and appreciate other cultures, Esther thought. *It is not an easy thing to do.*

As somebody who had lived only within a limited group, Esther instinctively tried to protect the values of elven society. Simultaneously, it made her want to shun alternative values. Anything she didn’t understand caused her discomfort. For her own peace of mind, she would reject anything outside her worldview.

By making an effort to respect and embrace other cultures, she has learned to see things that I do not. She wanted to teach me about what she has found.

But while Esther watched Cynthia with admiration, she didn’t realize that she had played directly into her colleague’s hands.

Though there were some missteps, everything went according to plan in the end, Cynthia thought. *I’ve successfully won Esther over. Failing to adopt into our home cuisine such delicious food would truly be a missed opportunity. If I can gradually persuade other elves in positions of authority, I will succeed in bringing cheesy fries to the Great Forest!*

She thought about how her elaborate plan was coming to fruition. The look on her face revealed how much consideration she had put into this, but sadly, all that clever, complex planning was purely for the sake of getting more of what *she* wanted to eat. Maybe it was for the best that Esther didn’t know what was going on in her head.

Neither fully understanding the other’s intentions, the two elves went on chatting jovially as they explored the unknown world of human food to their hearts’ content.



“I had no idea there were such wonderful flavors in the world!” Evangeline’s voice rang with surprise.

I smiled, pleased by her reaction. “Wanna go shopping next? Looking around the shops is a lot of fun.”

We spent some time visiting clothing shops, trying things on, and buying a few items here and there. Evangeline was so pretty and glamorous that she was a knockout no matter what she put on, which made it a lot of fun for me as her wardrobe stylist for the day. At one shop, I even picked out the item that suited her best and bought it for her as a present.

“Are you sure?” Evangeline gasped. “Can I really have this?”

“Of course! You deserve it after everything you taught me about magic yesterday.”

“I have never before received a present from a friend!” she said excitedly.

I’m glad I gave it to her, I thought. Now, let’s check out some sightseeing spots and grab a few more snacks.

“Ta-dah! The Ultra Super Big Pudding Parfait!” I announced inside the café we visited next. “This is their signature dessert!”

“Wh-What am I looking at...?” Evangeline stared in astonishment at the gargantuan parfait towering over us.

As we slowly worked our way through the parfait together, we returned to discussing magic.

“I am sure you will go down in history as a great magician, Noelle. I think you might have more talent and potential than anybody I have met in three millennia on this earth.”

“S-Stop! You’re flattering me way too much!”

“It is the truth. I say this because of the evidence you showed me.” She gave me a penetrating stare. “But as of now, your abilities are unpolished. You are still lacking in many areas. Your task is to improve.”

“What do you think I lack?”

“First, you need to spend more time studying the fundamentals: the likes of healing magic and potions. You have hardly studied phase space magic or complex analysis. Then there is magic sequence formation and magic mechanics within the context of locally symmetric spaces. You have some blind spots regarding enchantments too. Moreover, you may need to work a little harder on herbology and astronomy. And you know next to nothing about spirit magic or classical magic, so I would recommend improving your knowledge of ancient runic literature.”

“O-Oh...” I couldn’t handle the mountainous weight of my own failings. “Y-You might be surprised to learn that I used to be a star student.”

“Naturally, nobody at a human school would be a match for you. However, if you seek to be the very best, you must understand how limited your knowledge is.”

Evangeline’s observations were horrifyingly accurate. She’d just listed all the weak areas I’d tried to ignore and the fields I simply didn’t have the time to study. We’d stayed up all night talking, but I would never have imagined that was enough for her to analyze my educational background so thoroughly.

“I’ll buckle down and study,” I responded.

“Good. I will be cheering you on.” Evangeline grinned. “Incidentally, is there anything troubling you? As your elder, I am more than happy to offer advice.”

“Troubling me...?” It wasn’t as if I couldn’t think of anything, but I still wavered a little. After a pause, I asked, “Can it be something unrelated to magic?”

“Certainly. It is important for you to fulfill your potential as a magician, but you also must live a happy life.”

“I feel like you might find it frivolous, though...”

“What is it about?”

“Well, I guess you could say it’s about, um...*relationships*.”

“You mean *love*?!” A great grin suddenly took over Evangeline’s face. “Ask away! I would *adore* to give you advice!!!”



Meanwhile, in a corner of the café out of sight of Noelle and Evangeline, two figures were watching carefully.

“Lady Evangeline is extremely forward,” Esther whispered.

“Yes, she has always dreamed of enjoying girl talk with a friend,” Cynthia pointed out.

“But I cannot imagine she has experience with love. Can she really give good advice?”

“It should be all right. After all, she has been alive for over three thousand years.”

Working their way through a cheesecake, apple pie, and orange jelly, the two elves pricked up their pointed ears to listen in on Noelle and Evangeline’s conversation.

“I don’t think he was fully awake at the time, but he pulled me in real close,” Noelle was saying. “And I could’ve sworn he said, ‘Noelle, I love you.’ But I guess I don’t really know what he meant by that.”

Is it not obvious? Cynthia thought, sighing. *That could only mean romantic love. Well, this is for the best. This is so straightforward that even Lady Evangeline should have no trouble giving decent advice.*

“Yes, I understand the situation.” Evangeline nodded sagely. “It is certainly difficult. As the two of you are so close, it seems highly likely that he was speaking of the love between friends.”

I never thought she was this clueless! Cynthia was trembling all over. *This is no good... Lady Evangeline knows nothing about love. This is what happens when somebody goes for three thousand years without ever having a boyfriend!*

Such ridiculous advice could cause serious problems for Noelle and Luke. Cynthia was totally at a loss, but then Evangeline went on to say something surprising.

“I think the most important thing is to ask what *you* want, Noelle.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you know what you want, then you can begin to decide how to respond.”

Hmm? Cynthia thought. That sounded surprisingly sensible.

Despite her ignorance about the ways of love, it looked like Evangeline’s long and plentiful life experience might just make up for it.

Ah, this should be fine after all. Noelle and the boy can have a healthy relationship.

Relieved, Cynthia continued to watch and listen.

“What I want...is to beat him. I want my magic to be so impressive that it leaves him speechless,” Noelle said. “I’m determined not to lose ground to a rival like him. And beyond that, I want us to both keep improving so we can push past our limits and become the best magicians we can be.”

M-Magic is all she cares about! Cynthia thought, stunned. She’s crazy for magic. Her thought process is so simple, it’s like there’s no actual brain in her head. I knew she loved magic, but this is far beyond what I expected...

Nevertheless, as baffled as she was, Cynthia understood in some way. If the girl was this hyperfocused on magic and had loved it for so long, then it stood to reason that she would become a truly outstanding magician.

It’s a shame for the boy who has feelings for her, though.

As Cynthia gazed thoughtfully into the distance, she heard Evangeline’s reply.

“Well, I would like to see you keep being yourself. Do what your heart tells you, if for no other reason than because I imagine that is what he would want too.” She flashed a cheeky smile. “There is no need to worry. When the time is right, I am sure he will tell you what he truly meant.”

The day went by in a flash. We had so much fun that it was as if we were living in a totally different timeline, just like Chronos Casablanco, the kingdom’s leading time manipulation magic specialist, wrote about in the preface to *The Illusion We Call Time*.

“Thank you for taking me out today,” Evangeline effused. “It was ever so fun. I never thought I would have such a splendid time experiencing the life of an

ordinary girl.”

“To me, a queen’s lifestyle seems nicer.”

“It may look nice from the outside, but in reality, it is not so easy. There is so much responsibility, and I feel as if somebody is watching my every move.” She smiled at the irony of the situation. “Then again, had I been born as an ordinary girl, I imagine I would have detested the thought of being ‘ordinary.’ Our dreams are always so much more alluring than the reality in which we live.”

“Ah, I see what you mean.”

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, I thought. It’s easy to romanticize something when all you can see are its good points.

I’m always jealous of other people for being tall and shapely, but I bet it causes them problems too. If you’re tall, you can’t wear high heels, you can hit your head or have neck pain...

But if that’s as bad as it gets, I’d happily be reborn with the body of a supermodel!

When my thoughts reached their avaricious conclusion, they must have shown on my face. Evangeline looked at me and stifled a laugh.

“I have one more thing of note I wish to tell you,” she said.

“What?”

“Come in a little closer.” She approached my ear and quietly continued. “It looks as if some kind of crisis will afflict the royal family in the near future.”

“How do you know?”

“Something seems wrong. Whatever it is, I suspect that whoever solves the crisis will receive a reward of unprecedented value.”

“Unprecedented value, huh?” I opened my eyes wide. “Y-You mean like, ten years’ worth of all-you-can-eat meals at Big Belly Cafeteria?!”

“Something even greater than that, I think.”

“So I could eat *more* than that? I gotta do whatever it takes to earn that reward!”

I was burning with excitement. At the same time, though, I couldn't help but think of my hospitalized friend. I knew that he was working to become the kingdom's greatest magician to win something that he wanted above all else.

If I succeed, then that should improve his reputation as my mentor too!

I'd still done nothing to repay him for bringing me to the Royal Court Magicians' Division. I decided I wanted to really knock his socks off when he came back and heard the news.

Heh. He should be grateful for having such a good friend.

Still smiling at the thought of Luke's surprised reaction, I asked, "But what do you think is the matter?"

"I cannot be sure. I think the royal family may face some kind of threat."

"What could it be...?" I pondered.

Evangeline smiled. "Show everyone what you are capable of."

The next day, every news outlet in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld was covering the same story: "Evangeline Runeforest Found Alive"; "Crown Prince Saves Fairy Queen"; "Fairy Queen Makes Historic First Visit to Ardenfeld."

Surrounded by a crowd of reporters, Evangeline looked just like the queen of a faraway land.

Of course, she *was* the queen of a faraway land. Really, it was quite strange that she'd stayed over at my house and we'd gone out shopping together like friends. Now that I was here working as her bodyguard instead, it made me a little sad. Just as I was thinking that, I noticed Evangeline looking around.

Who could she be trying to find?

I followed her green eyes until they met mine and stopped. I saw her shoot me a sneaky wink, and, feeling strangely proud, I winked back.

It lasted only briefly, but to me, it was a special moment that I would never forget. Because of the difference in our positions, I doubted we'd be able to see each other for a long time, but if we did get to meet again, I hoped we could chat happily like old friends.

Once she was done with her official duties, Evangeline went back to the Great Forest, and my peaceful days returned. It felt like this period of calm would go on endlessly, but I knew that something significant was lurking in the background, waiting to emerge. I had the chance to observe the King's Guard during my regular work at the palace, and I could see that something had changed subtly.

The royals are hiding something.

I expected it had something to do with the impending crisis Evangeline had mentioned. Little did I know that the situation had already begun to take a dramatic turn.

"Noelle!" Misha cried out as I arrived at work one morning. "Noelle, something has happened!"

"Morning," I replied, wondering what this was about. "How was your date?"

"He kept trying to sell me some sketchy vase, so I slapped him across the face."

"Nice. I knew you wouldn't stand for that."

"Cats really are better than guys. *Anyway*, that's not what I wanted to talk about! There's actually something serious going on!"

"What is it?"

Misha bit her lip and hesitated. "His Royal Highness the third prince...has been poisoned. He's in critical condition."

Chapter 2: An Attempt on Prince Raphael's Life

Raphael Ardenfeld was third in line to the throne. An eight-year-old boy born with a weak constitution, he was rarely seen in public. He was known for a cherubic appearance so delicate that it seemed he might crumble at the slightest touch.

As soon as the third prince was born, the royal doctor had spoken to the king.

"Your son may not be long for this world," he had explained. "If all goes well, he may live for five years. If not, even one year may be beyond him."

The child had proved to be wise beyond his years, and his quiet nature won him the adoration of the people at court. His wet nurses aided him diligently and raised him with care. The king and queen generally had little involvement in looking after their children, but rumor had it that even they paid special attention to the youngest prince. They had magical healing items made specially and provided him with the best environment any parent could offer.

The result of all this care and attention became apparent soon enough: the boy reached and surpassed the fifth birthday the doctor had suggested was his absolute limit. The king and queen were overjoyed that their brave little boy was still alive.

Consequently, the latest incident came as a tremendous shock to the king and queen. Some said that they could barely eat for a week.

"The royal family has been struggling with domestic opposition to the proposed abolition of the Tax Exemption Law," Gawain told me in his office. "They ordered a top secret mission to sniff out spies and traitors in their midst. We selected a small number of royal court magicians for this mission, and today was the day for me to give them their orders."

I gulped. "But then the circumstances changed."

"That's right. Our opponents did the worst thing they possibly could have. We can regard this as a warning to the king about his plans to abolish tax

exemptions. It has had an immediate impact too—the king is supposedly already suggesting a delay to the change in the law.”

“Does that mean the perpetrator is a noble who benefits from tax-exempt status?”

“Yes, probably an influential aristocrat outside the capital with a position in the High Court. Alternatively, it could be somebody from the Saint Church, which is also covered by the Tax Exemption Law.”

Even with my poor general knowledge, I was aware that abolition of the Tax Exemption Law was a contentious issue in Ardenfeld. The law had been established to make up for the losses the nobility and clergy faced when they were weaker and facing rampaging monster attacks in the western nations. However, once the stampede was resolved, those who had gained the privilege of tax exemption were not prepared to give it up. Ever since then, wealthy aristocrats and clergymen had paid no taxes, gradually inflicting financial strain on the kingdom. Things had become dire.

“The problem is that people think the economy is doing better than it really is,” Gawain continued. “They don’t know the true state of affairs. When aristocrats claim they’re victims of unfair restrictions, many people fall for it.”

“What if documents revealing the truth were revealed to the public?”

“Some government ministers have something like that in mind. But here, you can see those documents for yourself. What do you think of this?”

I took the papers Gawain handed to me and scanned them quickly.

“Huh? Wait a minute,” I said. “Does the royal family really spend this much money?”

“I thought the same thing. I’m sure an aristocrat would think it sounds like nothing, but if most people saw this, they’d see it as an absurd amount of money. I told the ministers that revealing this would backfire badly. People would riot in the streets.”

“Aristocrats really wouldn’t think this is a lot?”

“They probably have at least that much money hoarded away somewhere.”

I took a moment to read the documents in more detail, then looked up again. "It really does sound like the Tax Exemption Law needs to be abolished."

"Yes, but the nobles in the High Court are dead set against changing the law. The archbishop of the Saint Church too."

"And that's why Prince Raphael was targeted."

"It certainly seems like it." Gawain rubbed his temples and heaved a great sigh. "I knew something like this would happen. That's on me."

"But the King's Guard is in charge of protecting the royal family."

"It still happened within the palace, though. This was an inexcusable oversight."

Gawain wasn't the only one who felt responsible for what had happened. Everyone in the Third Unit was normally so lively, but now the atmosphere was quiet and gloomy. The fact that the victim was an innocent child probably played a part in that too. How could somebody poison the sickly little prince just to protect their own fortune?

They won't get away with this! I thought, clenching my fist in frustration.

"What do you need me to do?" I asked.

"The key thing right now is to make sure His Highness's condition is stable. Captain Vicente Cera of the Fourth Unit is in charge of that, so I'd like you to help him."

"Y-You want me to help a magus?"

I couldn't quite believe it. Vicente Cera was the kingdom's leading expert in healing magic. He was the youngest ever recipient of the Lardner Award, the most prestigious prize in magical medicine. He'd earned the nickname of the Savior Magician after saving the lives of tens of thousands of people during an epidemic in the Southern Nations. The Fourth Unit captain was a remarkable individual.

What can somebody like me do to help him...?

Not only was I scared of working with Vicente Cera, but the person I had to take care of was the king's beloved son. This was, without a doubt, a duty that

would affect the future of the kingdom.

As I reflected on the enormity of this task, a doubt crossed my mind.

“You see... I don’t know that much about magical medicine,” I mumbled. Back when I’d worked at the Mages’ Guild, I’d become pretty handy with healing magic since I used it so much, but there was a lot I didn’t know. “I never went to university. I don’t know enough to pass the witch doctors’ exam or anything.”

“This is an emergency. He wants anybody from any unit who might be of use. Don’t stress over your skills. Just go.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

I hastily gathered my things and made my way toward Prince Raphael’s private room. It was in a restricted area of the palace, which was only open to a select few. I arrived at a firmly closed door under the watchful eyes of knights from the King’s Guard.

“State your name,” one of the knights said.

“Noelle Springfield of the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division. I am here under the orders of Captain Gawain Stark.” I timidly showed the knight my gold-inlaid pocket watch.

“Understood,” the knight said. “Please enter.”

I was ushered into a room the royal family used for informal audiences. The room was full of other court magicians sitting on elegant chairs.

I’ll j-just go sit in the corner so I don’t stand out...

I took a seat and waited anxiously for whoever was in charge. Soon, a stern-looking man with silver-rimmed spectacles appeared. His uniform was without a single crease, and his exquisitely polished boots sparkled.

“I am Klose Anderlecht, lieutenant of the Fourth Unit. Captain Vicente cannot leave His Royal Highness’s side, so as his mentee, I am here in his stead. I will be providing you with instructions.”

In the tense silence that followed, a First Unit magician sitting in the front row raised a hand.

“When you say he can’t leave the prince’s side, is that because His Highness is in such a serious condition?”

“Indeed. Well, as you have all come here to help, I should fill you in on the details. Please remember that this is top secret information. Merely divulging these details without authorization would be a criminal act, so please listen very carefully.” After a pause, letting us all soak in the gravity of the situation, Klose Anderlecht continued, “Right now, the Fourth Unit’s top experts are caring for the prince. However, the situation is more troubling than it appeared at the outset. Maurice Heidenstam, the Logic Magician, has worked with other specialists from the Fifth Unit to analyze the neurotoxin used. According to their analysis, it appears that some kind of unknown spell that blocks healing magic has been woven into the poison.”

“But aren’t neurotoxins made up of tiny molecules? How could somebody incorporate a complex magic sequence into that?”

“All I know is that Captain Maurice has identified it, and he is sure that that is what the perpetrator has done. Clearly, they used something that transcends modern magic technology as we know it: maybe an undiscovered supreme relic or lost technology from an ancient civilization.” Klose paused for a moment. “Even a man of Captain Vicente’s ability needs to give his utmost to prevent the prince’s condition from worsening. To be quite honest, we are in dire straits. What we want you all to do is identify the mysterious magic sequence in the poison, then either eliminate or nullify it.” His clenched fist began to shake. “Please, I beg of you, lend us your assistance.”

“It must be tough for Klose,” I heard somebody whisper after the end of his report.

“For somebody in the Fourth Unit, it’s like admitting that their best isn’t good enough,” somebody else agreed.

Once the meeting had concluded, I made my way to the Grand Library to hunt down any helpful resources. I needed to figure out the identity of the unknown spell that seemed to be preventing healing magic from working, and then I had to discover a means of neutralizing it. If none of us could do that, there would

be no way to save the young prince.

But magical medicine isn't really my forte, I thought. I don't see how somebody with my limited knowledge could come up with a solution to a problem that all the Fourth Unit magicians couldn't solve between them.

Worse still, answers had eluded even people like the Savior Magician—Ardenfeld's foremost healing magic user—and the Logic Magician, the top potions researcher in the kingdom.

Well, there's nothing I can do except work my way through every book that might be of some use. I have to at least try to find something helpful.

The greatest weapon in my arsenal was speed. I made use of it right away by casting Spell Boost, then set about systematically checking out every little thing that caught my eye.

Ugh. I can't make sense of any of this. It's like my eyes are gonna glaze over.

My brain was overheating. I was reading the words on the page, but I couldn't understand them at all.

Okay, calm down. I know how to deal with situations like this.

Not long after becoming a court magician, I'd been given the opportunity to take part in a special training program for magic. A professor from the Royal University of Magic had set such difficult questions for us that totally stumped me—until I remembered a valuable lesson I'd once learned from a dear friend.

“Try to break it into smaller pieces. Work methodically to work out each part one by one. Do that, and you can close in on the right answer, no matter how difficult the problem is.”

Back in the present moment, I took a breath. *I need to sort out the parts I do understand. No need to panic. I'll take this one step at a time.*

I carefully thought through each aspect of these complex ideas, like I was untying a tight knot. I kept telling myself not to get worked up or expect to understand everything in one go. I reminded myself to work bit by bit and take my time to get to grips with all the information. Finally, I saw why I'd been unable to understand it at the beginning.

I don't have enough of the fundamental knowledge this requires. Of course it's hard to understand something complicated when I have a poor grasp of the basics.

I'd figured out the problem, so now I could work on overcoming it.

I just need to take time to study the things I don't understand. I'll come at it from every angle and learn all there is to know!

It was a terribly inefficient approach, but as somebody who specialized in working at high speed, this allowed me to really flex my muscles.

Yeah, here we go! Brute force, just the way I like it.

I read on, word by word, studying as I went and building up my knowledge.

Little by little. Bit by bit.



This is ridiculous! Raul Nathorsti thought.

Having been dispatched from the Sixth Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division to help, he'd just realized the true difficulty of the task he had been given. Even the kingdom's greatest experts on healing magic and potions still didn't have a clue what had caused this situation. The main difficulty was that there were too many possibilities to take into account.

No precedent. No leads. The magic sequence in question is too small for the naked eye to even recognize. It's a miracle that they figured out there was a magic sequence in there at all.

Complicating matters further was the fact that the magic sequence was inside the third prince's body. Never mind analyzing it—they couldn't even get a proper look at it directly.

Realistically speaking, it's impossible for us to identify it when the information is so limited. But unless we make the impossible possible, there's no way to help His Highness.

The pressure was enormous. The future of the kingdom hung in the balance. As royal court magicians, they all had to do whatever they could to save the prince.

But the fact remains that we don't have enough information.

It was an extremely difficult task. Raul didn't even know where to begin. He was racking his brains and searching the Grand Library for any hint of a solution when he noticed something.

Hey, did somebody cast a spell?

In the depths of the library, there was hardly a soul to be seen, but Raul spotted the light of a magic sequence glowing in the gloom like a firefly.

Who on earth...?

Confused, he peered closer. What he saw shocked him; a little magician was poring through every reference book in the magical medicine section, one after another, faster than the eye could see.

Is she using Spell Boost to cram extra hard...?

In theory, it could be done, but accelerating one's perception of time consumed more energy than other support magic.

Is it even humanly possible to take in information while continuously casting such high-level magic?

Raul couldn't fathom this at all. Bewildered, he stepped away without thinking and bumped into a shelf. The noise echoed around the quiet library as books fell to the floor.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bother—" he blurted out, but as he lifted his head, he had another shocking realization.

She...didn't notice?

It didn't make any sense that she wouldn't have heard the noise, but she was still silently reading as if nothing had happened. Her power of concentration was incredible, and her passion for magic must have been something special too. Seeing her sent a chill down Raul's spine.

She must be Noelle Springfield...



"Letitia, you're hiding something from me, aren't you?" Gawain asked

knowingly.

Gawain's office in the Royal Court Magicians' Division headquarters was magically soundproofed. Inside, it was perfectly quiet.

"What do you mean?" Letitia responded, looking doubtful.

"Answer me. There's something you aren't telling me—something your superior officer should hear about. Don't hide it."

Letitia stared back. "You always do this. Pretending you already know everything to unsettle the other person and force them to reveal their secrets."

"Don't beat around the bush. Tell me."

"I'm doing nothing of the sort. I have nothing to hide anyway. My private business is, of course, my private business, but I always share any information of professional relevance."

Saying nothing, Gawain watched Letitia searchingly. Silence descended upon the office until he eventually let out a sigh. "How can you read me so well?"

"We've known each other for so long. We joined the division at the same time, and now we've been working together as captain and lieutenant for three years. You've given me plenty to do as your mentee too."

"I should've known you wouldn't let your prey escape. As always, you're as cold as ice. That's why they call you the Iron Lady."

"They certainly used to."

"Did something change?"

"Well, now my job revolves around taking on all the Third Unit duties that *someone* seems to forget about entirely."

"Yeah, that's my fault... You know I'm grateful for everything you do." Gawain scratched his head sheepishly. "To be totally honest, I've been worried about you. Remember when you were in the First Unit? Back when you were exposing nobles left, right, and center, it took you in some dangerous directions."

"I was doing my job."

"And I heard your superiors had to step in and stop you. Especially after the

time somebody slipped a lethal dose of poison into your food.”

“But even then, I was doing what I needed to do.”

“I know your work was important. It was admirable. At the same time, though, speaking as your colleague, I always hoped you’d take better care of yourself.”

“Well, I was young back then.” Letitia let out a chuckle. “You do this a lot too—talking openly about your feelings to convince the other person to reveal their true intentions.”

“Ugh, you aren’t making this easy.”

“Still, I’ll accept the compliments,” Letitia said, watching Gawain scratch his head again like he always did. “Please don’t worry. I really don’t have anything to hide.”

She didn’t seem unsettled. She was as calm and collected as ever.

Letitia doesn’t appear to be lying, Gawain thought to himself once she had left the room. In that case, could Luke be the one investigating the High Court?

It would be a remarkable accomplishment to expose the wrongdoings of influential nobles at the High Court. Whoever did it might even have a shot at becoming a magus, especially considering the bad blood between the High Court and the king regarding the Tax Exemption Law.

However, there was something about it that didn’t quite make sense to Gawain.

He can be astonishingly focused once he sets a goal for himself. It seems strange that he would try to take on a challenge of this magnitude at the same time as participating in the WMC. Still, looking at it objectively, Luke is the person most likely to be involved in this shady business. I’d better do a little probing of my own.

At that very moment, Gawain’s subordinate Harribel came hurtling into the office.

“Captain!” he cried out. “Luke has made his fifty-ninth escape attempt! He made it as far as the eighth security cordon, but then the guards discovered

that he'd dug a hole in the wall of a ditch with a spoon and caught him, just as you commanded."

"You've come at just the right time. I have a favor to ask of you."

Harribel left the office once Gawain had finished explaining everything.

Gawain sank into a chair, deep in thought.

There are still other possibilities. Noelle...probably isn't the one, but I can't write her off completely.

Once he'd begun suspecting people, nobody appeared innocent anymore.

Who could it be...? What kind of fool would take this on alone?



With Spell Boost, I was intensively studying all the medical knowledge I needed. At the same time, I was trying to find something that could help explain the magic sequence within the prince's body blocking the healing magic. Unfortunately, I was approaching the physical limit on how much I could process.

There were just far too many options to take into consideration. I clearly didn't have enough information to be able to identify the magic sequence, but uncovering a solution with such limited information was exactly what we were being asked to do. If we couldn't scale the enormous wall facing us, we couldn't save Prince Raphael.

I'll just have to look through everything as carefully as I can.

I explored and reviewed every theory I could come up with. Soon, my notebook was black with scribbled notes and magic sequences.

What the hell? I'm so confused. Did I get this right?

My train of thought was completely muddled. I couldn't even tell whether I actually understood or not.

Okay, let's slow down. I have to stay calm and take it bit by bit.

I took a deep breath and tried to collect myself.

Remember, this is so tough that even the magi couldn't figure it out. It's no

wonder I find it hard. I should let that motivate me.

The time passed in a flash; I felt a day, three days, a week go by. Once I was done fully investigating one option, I felt something close to confidence.

I know how to solve this. I think I can do it.

I knew how hard it would be. There were still gaps in my basic knowledge, but I figured I had what it took to plug those gaps.

But how long is this gonna take me? A hundred years? Maybe a thousand if things don't go according to plan.

I could see why the Savior Magician hadn't been able to solve this problem; it would just take far too long. You would need a staggering amount of time to properly consider all the different possibilities.

But then, the prince will...

I remembered the frail little boy I'd spotted through a gap in the door. There was no way I had enough time to complete the task if I kept going about it the same way. Even if I did come up with an answer in the end, it would be much too late.

I don't have the power to save him, I concluded.

It was hard to accept, but I didn't have time to waste on lamenting my own helplessness.

Is there another way that would work with my abilities?

I allowed myself to become lost in thought.



There was a heavy atmosphere in the meeting room that had now been turned into a makeshift laboratory. Even with all the people who had come here as assistants, they'd still come up with nothing. The pressure was intense. With every passing moment, the little prince seemed closer to death. They knew from bitter experience that as the child's life force gradually ebbed, he was in danger of slipping away entirely.

Distressed voices could be heard even from outside the boy's room. There

was a strange feeling in the air, something only felt in the vicinity of somebody at death's door.

"Please!" the prince's maids would whimper. "Please do something to help His Royal Highness."

The magicians couldn't look them in the eye. It was all too cruel. The feeling of powerlessness chilled the magicians to the bone. They were all struck by the same thought: *There may not be anything we can do for the child.*

Everything was going the perpetrator's way. The king knew he might lose his beloved child, but he didn't know when. Bound by fear, he'd lost his will to fight, and his grip on power was loosening.

How could the king bend to the will of such fiends? they thought. However, there was nothing they could do. Justice only prevailed in fairy tales. The truth was that the most unscrupulous people were often the ones who enjoyed the greatest prosperity. No matter how much one prayed to the heavens, those prayers might never be answered. The world was full of pain and injustice.

As the court magicians gritted their teeth in anguish, one little magician came and said something that rocked them to the core.

"I have a plan."

It was Noelle Springfield, the rookie magician who had been advancing through the ranks at an astounding rate.

"What kind of plan?" somebody asked.

"I want to ask for your cooperation. I need everyone's help," Noelle replied. "All the best magicians from each unit are here, so it makes sense that we've been working individually to come up with a solution. It seems obvious to make the best use of everybody's distinctive skills by working separately rather than together. But actually, that's why I want everybody to work together, and I want you all to let me help you."

"What do you mean?"

"See, I did the best I could to learn about everything, but cramming was all I could do. In most areas, my knowledge of magical medicine is nothing

compared to that of experienced magicians like you. That's why I want to help each of you instead. If we divide up the work according to everybody's specialized areas, then we can make it so that each person only deals with what they're good at. By coordinating our strengths, we can take on this challenge. Please let me help make that a reality."

"I see what you're saying," a Second Unit magician said quietly. "But as much as I appreciate it in principle, I personally don't think it's realistic. We have to deal with too many different possibilities. We don't even have a full picture of the scale of the problem yet. Considering all that, there's no way anyone could manage and lead this many people at once."

"I've tried breaking down all the different areas we should look at. It's still a work in progress, but I've narrowed it down to sixteen."

Noelle walked over to the huge board at the front of the room and began writing something. Moments in, though, she stopped suddenly.

"Um..." she said, "is there a stepladder or a stool or something I can use?"

It turned out Noelle was too short to reach the upper part of the board. A man who worked as a steward in the restricted area quickly came over with a little stepladder.

"Thank you. This should work." The little magician could now reach higher, but despite what she'd said, the very top of the board was still a little too far away for her. She managed to reach, but only by standing on tiptoe, her whole body trembling.

"Is everything all right?" the steward asked. "I can bring you a taller ladder if it's too hard for you."

"It's fine. I'm a grown woman."

The onlookers assumed this was a matter of pride for Noelle.

The more she insists that she isn't a child, the more childish it makes her seem... they thought. The atmosphere in the room turned awkward. *Does this kid really know what she's doing?*

The other magicians—puzzled though they were—watched as Noelle kept

nimbly writing notes on the board. With the satisfying sound of continued tapping from her writing implement, she added more and more letters and drew more and more magic sequences.

Wait a minute. What was that? the magicians thought. They couldn't help but stare with bated breath. The feeling in the room began to change as they realized, bit by bit, what she was doing. *How long could it have taken her to analyze it in such depth?*

It was clear that this little magician was out of the ordinary. They were amazed. What was unfolding before their eyes was unbelievable. The board filled up the entire wall, and it too was filling up with a veritable flood of information. But Noelle paid no heed to their stunned expressions.

The sound of her writing just kept going. And going. And going. And going.

The magicians were all lost for words. They couldn't tear their eyes away. The words and diagrams filling the wall were evidence of an incredible amount of work.

How is she capable of this?



The meeting room was packed with the very best court magicians. It would've been only natural for them to ignore my harebrained request, but they were willing to listen.

Everyone here is so nice and reasonable! I thought.

The truth was that there were plenty of workplaces in the kingdom where nobody would take the opinions of an inexperienced female magician seriously. My previous job at the Mages' Guild was an obvious example, but I could also remember how my classmates at the academy of magic used to treat that as the norm.

Working for one of the most nonexploitative employers in the kingdom sure is great!

Impressed as always by the work environment I'd found myself in, I began coordinating with my coworkers.

“Ellwood, I’ll ask you to analyze this part. You researched something similar at university, right?” I said. “And Nichols, can you investigate magic sequences under mechanical equilibrium? I think the way you look at things in the Fifth Unit would be the most effective approach.”

I delegated all the tasks based on each person’s area of expertise.

Heh. It was smart of me to do some snooping ahead of time to find out everybody’s specialties.

They were all elite magicians who had achieved all kinds of things, so it hadn’t taken me long to figure out how they operated and where their strengths lay. Besides, getting a handle on situations and responding accordingly was my own secret weapon. That was the upside of the chaos and suffering at my old job, where the guild had constantly been short-staffed.

“We need another seven hundred crystal balls! The order’s due this week!”

I’d been frantic trying to keep everything moving back then. Even though I’d been so pressed for time that I could barely even sleep, there was no doubt in my mind that that experience had prepared me for where I was now.

“Hey, Springfield. I hate to bother you, but could you prepare some documents on this—” one magician started.

“I figured you’d need it, so I did it already! Feel free to use this,” I chimed in.

Another came to me with: “I’m looking for papers about reactions to this kind of magic sequence.”

“Then I would suggest this one released last year by a research team in Liesvania. Take a look at the summary I put together.”

A different time, a coworker asked, “Is there anyone who knows about reactions in states of nonequilibrium?”

“I thought we might need somebody like that, so I called up a professor at the Royal University of Magic who specializes in it. He should be here in about ten minutes.”

I continued observing the situation around me to predict what everyone would do and work out how I could make their jobs easier. Now that everyone

was concentrating on their areas of expertise, we were zooming forward.

Wow, they're amazing! Just as you'd expect from a team of elite court magicians called up to help a prince!

I couldn't help feeling moved by their impressive work rate, but the thing I really couldn't get over was the fact that I was helping to facilitate their efforts.

It's like I'm standing on the shoulders of giants!

Even if an obstacle was too big to overcome alone, it was possible with everyone's powers combined. Feeling inspired, I completely lost track of time. A day passed, then another, then another. Even we were surprised by the speed of our progress.

At this rate, we might be able to save the prince!

I could really feel how far we'd come, but I'd forgotten that this tragic situation still had the potential to catch us by surprise.

"I have something I need to tell you." With his wrinkled shirt and bedraggled appearance, Fourth Unit Lieutenant Klose Anderlecht looked nothing like the impeccably dressed man I'd seen before. "His Royal Highness's health has taken a sudden turn for the worse." His voice was hoarse, as if every word required immense effort. "We may not have much time left."

A gloomy mood descended over the laboratory. With every passing moment, the time limit ticked ever closer.

We won't make it unless we change something.

I was sure I wasn't the only one thinking that way, but we had no other solution. The current rate was already just about the best we could manage. The only room for improvement was in tiny details. There was basically no way of achieving the dramatic increase in speed that we wanted.

Please... Isn't there something, anything, that could help us identify the magic sequence?

We couldn't so much as find a hint. The hands of the clock simply continued to turn.

That was when Klose came to me. “Miss Springfield, may I have a word?”

He wanted me to come with him. I didn’t quite understand, but regardless, I followed him down a red carpeted hallway.

“Please brace yourself,” he warned me. “Captain Vicente’s power may affect you.”

“I-I see.” Still unsure of what was going on, I nodded.

Klose took me deep into the restricted area of the palace.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To His Royal Highness the Third Prince’s private room.”

It took a little time for this to sink in.

“Why do you want *me* to come?” I eventually asked in a cautious tone, wondering what could possibly have led to me receiving such an honor.

“It was Captain Vicente’s request.”

“Wh-What?” My face must have looked utterly foolish.

“Captain Vicente Cera, the Savior Magician, has asked me to bring you here.”

Prince Raphael’s private room was like another world, isolated entirely from the outside through the power of innumerable magic sequences and magical items. The concentration of oxygen and ether in here was too high to even compare to the world beyond the room. The sevenfold barrier around the room caused any bacteria or other microbes to die and disappear. Everything was arranged perfectly so that nothing could destabilize the patient’s condition.

And the greatest expert on healing magic in the kingdom is here... I thought, overwhelmed, as I entered the room.

I first saw Prince Raphael himself, lying in bed on the far side of the room. He looked so small and fragile, even for a boy of eight years. He had androgynous features, appearing simultaneously boyish and girlish. He also looked emaciated, his sinewy limbs poking out from his silk pajamas like chicken legs. He was breathing in labored, inarticulate wheezes.

Though his situation was desperate and the room reeked of death, the little

boy was still valiantly fighting for his life. Seeing his refusal to give in brought tears to my eyes. Whoever had done this surely had their reasons—and maybe those reasons were justified—but there was no excuse for robbing this innocent child of his future.

I heard a gentle voice call out to me. “You must be Noelle Springfield.”

I turned around to see a magician with gorgeous long hair, a little tall for a woman yet a little short for a man. I knew who this was, and although he didn’t look like it at first glance, he really was a man.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Vicente Cera. I like to think I’m the best in the kingdom when it comes to healing magic.” The captain gave a quick bow. “Allow me to cut to the chase. Noelle Springfield, I called you here because I believe you give us the best shot at saving His Royal Highness Prince Raphael.” He continued calmly, “I understand that magical medicine isn’t your strong suit, but in the face of all kinds of obstacles, you have forged ahead to find solutions, and you brought together a team that hadn’t even considered how they might work together. And you achieved it at a speed I could never have anticipated. I’d heard so much about your situational awareness and ability to adapt on the fly, and now I’ve had the chance to see it in action.”

“Oh, well, I mean, that’s just a story that got out of hand since everyone’s so nice about me...” I rambled, unsure how best to respond.

“Things are looking bad for us right now. The spell woven into the poison is blocking around ninety-seven percent of our healing magic. To save His Highness, we must work out some way of neutralizing the magic sequence. You know all that, but there has been a new development.”

“Oh? In what way, sir?”

“The Second Unit’s Improper Magic Usage Bureau has found clues that might help us track down the perpetrator. If IMUB agents can catch that person, any evidence they unearth could enable us to identify the magic sequence...”

“And then we can neutralize it and save His Highness’s life!”

Captain Vicente nodded, his hair fluttering. “Noelle, I’ve been told that you were the first person to locate the Nightfall hideout at the theater. That’s why

I've decided that our best option is to count on you. I can buy you time. I can't give up on saving His Highness—my pride in my magic won't allow it. I'll do whatever it takes to keep him alive." He looked me straight in the eye. "Please. We need your help to save the prince."

As soon as my meeting with Captain Vicente concluded, I grabbed my belongings and left the palace. I ran through the garden full of red roses in bloom, thinking over the conversation I'd just had.

He was so serious about needing my help.

It seemed totally unreal, but this was no time to congratulate myself. Time was running out, and Captain Vicente had told me he was doing everything in his power to buy more time.

I need to do absolutely everything I can too.

Full of determination to help save the prince, I headed for the east wing of the Royal Court Magicians' Division headquarters. This was where the Second Unit was based. There was only so much I could do alone, especially when I lacked information about the suspect, but if the IMUB had leads, then my best bet was to cooperate with their agents.

"I'm Noelle Springfield from the Third Unit," I said to a Second Unit magician. "There's something I'd like to discuss with the bureau."

"The Third Unit?" the magician responded, watching me warily. "Go back there. We don't have time to work with any of you."

I hadn't expected this. It made me feel uneasy.

Don't they trust the Third Unit...?

I couldn't understand why not. Third Unit magicians had a reputation for being odd and boisterous, but I'd never heard anything to suggest that the other units didn't like us.

Has something happened that I don't know about?

Keeping that doubt to myself, I tried again. "Please let me help you with your investigation. I think I have something to offer."

"There are enough magicians here already. We have no need for extra

personnel.”

“But Captain Vicente asked me to come. Can’t we at least talk?”

“Vicente Cera?” The magician’s mouth hung open in surprise.

Aha! Now that I have an opening, time to go in for the kill!

“Captain Vicente won’t be happy if you refuse to speak with me,” I said.

“When he finds out, I imagine he’ll want to know who was responsible. It’s serious business when you’re dealing with a unit captain. I don’t want to see you get punished. So, is there any chance I can have a word with somebody in the bureau?”

“S-Sure...”

Nice! My bluff worked!

Feeling triumphant, I watched the magician disappear into the depths of the east wing. While I waited, I started planning out my next move.

They seem to be wary of the Third Unit, so I’ll keep name-dropping Captain Vicente to put pressure on them. And I’d better try to find out why they have a problem with the Third Unit if I get an opportunity.

The magician soon came back, looking even more flustered than before.

What happened in there? I began trying to imagine what conversation might have occurred behind closed doors.

“My apologies. I’m still not so sure what’s going on myself,” the magician said, staring at me restlessly. “Miss Noelle, the head of the bureau wants to talk to you.”

Seamus Glass was the head of the Improper Magic Usage Bureau, as well as being Captain Chris Sherlock’s right-hand man as lieutenant of the Second Unit. He was known as a consummate professional who had risen through the ranks by solving one magic-related crime after another. He was an adamantite-class magician and one of the most likely candidates to become the next magus.

A face-to-face meeting with the head of the IMUB? Captain Vicente’s name really counts for something!

As I smiled, picturing the Savior Magician's flowing hair and radiant visage and enjoying the special treatment I got for merely mentioning his name, Seamus welcomed me warmly.

"I've heard all about what's going on," he said, then turned to a junior magician. "Hey, somebody get this girl something to drink!"

Seamus's subordinate quickly brought over some iced tea. Quenching my thirst with the cold drink, I explained how I'd come to be here.

"Captain Vicente filled me in," he replied. "He said you're something special. He wants you to help us with our strategy."

"O-Oh, I'm much obliged, sir."

"We're in a difficult position at the moment. We have to look for enemies not just on the outside, but within our own ranks too. We know that somebody in the Royal Court Magicians' Division has been getting their hands on our intelligence. There are two culprits, and by looking at the tools they've used, we can see that they belong to the Third Unit."

"Someone in the Third Unit? There must be some mistake!" I couldn't believe this. I stared blankly at Seamus.

"Funny you should say that. After all, you're one of them."

At just that moment, my vision became hazy. My thoughts grew sluggish and I felt myself drifting off.

A sleep potion...

The energy gone from my body, I slumped onto a sofa. Everything was becoming dim.

"I want you to listen carefully, Noelle Springfield."

I woke up to find myself in a room I'd never seen before. I couldn't think straight and my senses were still hazy. I realized I was bound to a chair with handcuffs. Designed for restraining magic-using criminals, handcuffs like these were made of anti-magic material.

Seamus was watching me from behind a desk.

“Answer the question, Noelle Springfield,” he demanded. “You claimed you came here to work with us so that you could steal our intelligence, isn’t that right?”

“That’s not true...”

“And you’re collaborating with somebody on the outside.”

“No...”

“There’s no point in lying. We have the Balance of Judgment, a first-class dungeon relic that detects lies,” he said emotionlessly. “It’s in your best interests to be honest with us. What you say next could determine your punishment. If you’re unwilling to cooperate, we will have no choice but to respond in kind.” His dispassionate voice cut through the air like a knife.

“I’m not lying. It’s all true.”

“We’ll let the relic be the judge of that.”

He gave a command to a woman sitting next to him, who I assumed was another Second Unit magician. She began powering up the Balance of Judgment and fine-tuned it while the two of them spoke together too quietly for me to hear.

I figured that the relic measured physiological factors like heart rate, breathing, or perspiration to determine whether the target was telling the truth. It was taking a while. I thought maybe it took some time to calibrate or for the technician to verify its accuracy.

Well, I’d better just answer honestly, I decided. No lies. I’ll only tell it how it really is.

Seamus began the interrogation. “What did you do in the week after you returned from the WMC?”

“I did my favorite thing: reading books about magic. I don’t think I did much else besides that. I had a lot of books I wanted to read.”

“You had a whole week. I doubt you did nothing else that entire time. You must have gone out at some point.”

“No, I didn’t. When I’m off duty, I’m *seriously* off duty. I used to get out more,

but once I got a job at the Mages' Guild in my hometown, I needed to take it easy on my days off, or else my body couldn't handle it. I used to have about four hundred hours of overtime in a month."

"F-Four hundred...?"

"Then again, even when I did get a rare day off, my boss would sometimes contact me in the afternoon to pull me in to work. That's why it was so important to sleep whenever I got a chance. And I needed to bathe too, since there were a lot of days where I didn't get to go home from work at all."

"What? That sounds like hell."

"And ever since then, I've been in the habit of spending all my days off just lying in bed reading grimoires. I bet a lot of people would think that's lazy, but I doubt anyone values the importance of time more than I do. It's the ideal way for me to relax. By indulging in idleness, I get the best rest possible. Honestly, I think this is the right way to live life as an intellectual, and as a popular lady, I..." I went on and on.

"I see you've been through a lot."

While I spoke, Seamus repeatedly asked the other magician whether I was lying. I wasn't sure how accurate the Balance of Judgment was, but I thought the only parts that could've been interpreted as lies were my exaggerations about living responsibly and having been such a charmer as a student.

"According to the Balance, her testimony holds up." The magician looked down and away from Seamus. "Since she came here from the Third Unit *now*, supposedly to help us, I was so suspicious of the timing..."

"But if this is what the relic confirms, then we must trust her," Seamus replied.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to help."

"No, it isn't your fault. I decided this was the best course of action due to the time pressure." Seamus turned to me and bowed his head. "I was wrong. I apologize from the bottom of my heart for falsely accusing you. It was a terrible mistake."

Once the magician had released me from the handcuffs, I wagged my finger at the two of them. “Actions speak louder than words. I’d appreciate some kind of peace offering.”

“What do you want?”

“Buy me the nicest meal money can buy. All-you-can-eat at a high-end bar and grill should do the trick.”

“Fine. I’ll buy you dinner.”

Sweet!

My lifestyle revolved around doing whatever I could to convert my superiors’ moments of weakness into meat.

“Anyway, why did you suspect me?” I asked.

“We had good reason to believe that somebody close to you was carrying out the espionage.”

“Who?”

“We have suspicions about Letitia Lisette-Stone and Luke Waldstein.”

I gasped. “That can’t be right! There’s no way Letitia would do something like that! Absolutely not! I mean, I guess *Luke* might!”

“You think Waldstein could be responsible?”

“Yeah, Luke would do it. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s guilty. I know him too well.”

That boy is willing to use every trick in the book to get what he wants.

“Waldstein has beaten us to the punch in many of our investigations,” Seamus said. “People like him are our natural enemies.”

“Now that you mention it, that sounds familiar.”

“He made absolute fools of us in the Teatro Ardenfeld incident. And as you’re his mentee, we had no choice but to suspect you too.”

Now it was my turn to apologize. “Sorry for the trouble. I’ll give him a good telling off. Anyway, what made you think Letitia could be involved?”

“Ever since she was in the First Unit, there have been several instances where I’ve suspected her of using illegal methods to carry out investigations. There was a particular case where she was unusually intense about investigating a high-ranking noble. Even as her colleague, I thought her tenacity was scary. She was as cold as ice back then. That’s how she earned the nickname of the Iron Lady.”

“I never thought she seemed all that scary.”

“I guess she’s softened up lately—or maybe she’s become better at hiding her claws.”

This all came as a surprise to me, but it didn’t seem like Seamus was lying.

“Who was the high-ranking noble that one time?” I asked.

“Count Wilhelm, one of the leading figures of the High Court. He has a strong political faction in the northern region with a lot of supporters.”

“Sure, I’ve heard of that guy. He sounded like one of those ‘protector of justice’ types.”

I could remember seeing his name come up a lot in the newspapers at the school library. Only aristocrats were among the High Court, and he was one of the most influential of them all. As somebody who promoted the principle of equality under the law, he’d seemed pretty popular. I felt like I remembered some of my classmates voicing support for him too.

“Count Wilhelm controls the newspapers in his home region, so they only write articles in his favor. They gave him a public image as somebody who supports justice in the face of tyranny by opposing the king’s planned tax reforms.”

“So what’s he really like?”

“He’s irredeemably corrupt. He’s faced countless accusations, but he’s too sly for anybody to get real evidence against him. He colludes with all kinds of people within the church and in the business sector, and he uses the power of the High Court to protect the interests of the aristocracy.”

“Wow...”

I felt like my eyes had been opened to a dark truth. People in the countryside had a lot of trust in newspapers, but it turned out they'd been hoodwinked.

"We're planning to conduct a raid on Count Wilhelm's villa in the capital tonight," Seamus said. "Could you review our strategy?"

"Have you found some kind of evidence?"

"We have. There's a strong possibility that he has some involvement in the assassination attempt against His Royal Highness Prince Raphael."

"Then we'd better catch him as soon as possible!"

"This may well be our one and only chance."

There was hardly any time left. We needed to do whatever it might take to expose the count's evil deeds and find information that would help us identify the spell afflicting the young prince. I couldn't blame Seamus and the other magician for taking desperate measures. If the situation was so dire, then I wanted to do all I could to help too.

"Can you give me a little bit of time?" I asked.

"What do you have planned?"

"The more information we can get, the better. I can't check in with Luke because he hasn't come back to work yet, but Letitia works nearby." I looked up at Seamus. "I want to see what she has to say. If it's true that she's been using Second Unit intelligence to conduct her own investigation, she might know something that can help us."

Seamus hadn't seemed too happy with my suggestion at first, but he eventually acquiesced. As the head of the IMUB, he must have found it difficult to cooperate with somebody he suspected of stealing the bureau's intelligence. The fact that he had relented was a sign that he couldn't let this raid go wrong.

The IMUB agents are determined to save the prince, no matter how they might look in the end, I thought as I made my way to Letitia's office and prepared myself for a tough conversation. *Just like them, I need to do my best.*

Unfortunately, I didn't know whether Letitia was really the one who was

stealing intelligence from the Second Unit. Seamus's suspicion was based entirely on Letitia's crafty methods and the way she had behaved back when she was in the First Unit. It wasn't like there was any sign that she was up to something now.

"Are you sure you aren't overthinking this?" I'd asked Seamus.

"I understand where you're coming from, but I saw what Letitia Lisette-Stone was like in the First Unit. That's why I can't count her out as a suspect. She would do it, and she would leave absolutely no evidence of her involvement."

There had been something oddly persuasive about Seamus's claims. Over the years, he'd worked on so many tricky cases at the IMUB. Even if he lacked hard evidence, I had to take his opinion seriously.

First of all, I need to find out whether Letitia is really behind this.

Seamus had agreed to my idea on one condition: I wasn't allowed to reveal the bureau's plans for tonight's raid until I'd confirmed whether Letitia was the one they were looking for. The date and time of the raid was classified information that couldn't be leaked to outsiders. It was for the best that we made sure only a limited number of people knew what was going on.

I can't let anything slip. I need to choose every word carefully.

I passed through the Third Unit's facilities on my way to Letitia's office. It seemed like a strange place to me, even though I knew it so well. Perhaps secrets change a person.

Here I am. I don't really feel ready, though...

I took a few more steps—just to wonder if I should turn back. After moments of hesitation, I was just about to leave, when I heard a familiar voice from behind me.

"Is something wrong, Noelle?"

Standing there was my cool, collected superior—the person I looked up to the most. It was time to learn more about Letitia.

I couldn't exactly run away now that she'd seen me. A minute later, I was

sitting restlessly in a chair in Letitia's office.

"Lots of milk and sugar, is that right?" she asked me.

"You don't have to do that. I can get it myself."

"Don't worry. I enjoy making coffee."

She was as nice as ever as she handed me a cup. In contrast, I was a little on edge.

She could've put something in my drink...

It was a possibility—if Letitia was a bad person. I didn't think she was. I didn't want to believe that she was. Even so, I couldn't help but worry.

Come on, don't be stupid!

I shook my head. I'd always been watching Letitia, wanting to become just like her. I knew I could trust her. I raised the cup to my lips.

Letitia smiled softly. "Now, what brings you here? You don't quite seem like yourself today."

"Well, actually, I was just talking to somebody from the Second Unit, and they mentioned you."

"Me?"

"They said you might be hiding some kind of secret. I thought I could help you, if you need some support."

I didn't have anywhere near Letitia's level of experience or tactical acumen. That meant my only option was to be straightforward about my feelings. I was sure she would understand.

"Can you tell me your secret?" I asked. "I want to help you."

Letitia said nothing. We sat in silence for a moment, surrounded by the aroma of coffee mingling with an elegant scent of citrus.

"All right. I'll tell you," she said in the end. "The truth is, I've been under pressure from my father about finding a suitable marriage partner."

"Huh?"

“The person I *am* interested in is too focused on work to care about getting married. Unfortunately, my father is worried about what people might say if his daughter is single despite being of marriageable age.”

“Th-That sounds tough...”

“The person you spoke to probably heard about it from a cousin of mine in the Second Unit. Not so long ago, my father was saying, ‘Just pick some useless fool,’ but then he changed his tune and told me, ‘No, you can’t marry just *anyone!*’”

“He must be so stressed out over this.”

“To be honest, I’m quite worried. Then again, I’m sure everyone my age feels this way.”

I’d never seen this side of Letitia before. She always seemed so cool and flawless that I couldn’t imagine her having relationship troubles like this.

But the difference between her exterior and her true self makes her even cooler! I love it!

In the end, I was so impressed that it just made me even more certain that Letitia could be trusted.

She isn’t hiding anything. Somebody else must have stolen the intelligence from the Second Unit. But that opens up another question. Seamus said there were two culprits, so if we assume that Luke is one of them, who in the world could the other person be?

Together with the lingering taste of coffee, that question stuck with me.

Interlude: Her Memories

My teacher was an ally of justice. He was a man of pride and conviction who always stood with those who faced oppression.

He ran a small private school. He charged very little for tuition, and kindly taught magic to all, including the children of commoners.

There was a badly behaved boy who had come from a local orphanage that couldn't handle him. He would always pick fights with older delinquents and cause problems. Yet my teacher would teach children like that boy with the same enthusiasm as always, never talking down to them. He always took that boy seriously.

There were plenty of difficult incidents, but the boy came to love magic. He stopped getting into fights and causing mischief.

One stormy night, a girl had fallen terribly ill. Her father was the head of a noble family. Unable to get hold of the family doctor, he rushed toward a local witch doctor's home only to find that flooding had caused the bridge to collapse. He felt like the most powerless man in the world. He doubted that his daughter would make it till morning.

Just as he was ready to give up all hope, the father remembered my teacher. Now that my teacher was a shabby old outcast, he was not somebody that the man would normally associate with. Nevertheless, the man went and begged my teacher to save his daughter. My teacher used spectacular magic to heal the girl.

Thanks to his help, I—that girl—survived. I was forever grateful. I went to my teacher's private school and gradually got to know him for myself.

My teacher had once been a royal court magician. He had fought against the corruption of that world and tried to bring to justice one particular crooked aristocrat, who'd constantly covered up his crimes. These heinous infractions included accepting bribes, dealing in illegal drugs and weapons, and the most

disgusting of all, sexually abusing children from orphanages. My teacher tried to expose him.

But it had ended in failure. Miserable, hopeless failure. People spread rumors about my teacher, accusing him of all the crimes he knew that aristocrat was guilty of. He became known as the worst kind of criminal.

Even after serving thirty years in a prison specifically for magicians, my teacher felt weighed down by those false charges. He was always apologetic, saying, "It hurts me that I frighten people away." Now in his seventies, my teacher was small and seemingly fragile, but whenever monsters attacked the town, he put his own life on the line to protect the townspeople.

My teacher was amazing. Even with his wrinkly face and his bald head, he was the person I admired the most. I loved him. My respect for him had no bounds, and I wanted to do whatever I could to protect him. Even if the whole world was against him, I was determined to be his lone supporter.

One summer's day when I was ten years old, my teacher came to my house in secret.

"Sorry, but I want to ask you a favor," he said, serving me a cup of ice-cold tea. "Take my notebook. If anything happens to me, I want you to give it to your father. But you must never look inside."

I wanted to stay faithful to his instructions, but the notebook fascinated me. I couldn't resist its terrible pull.

It'll be fine as long as I don't tell anybody, I thought, and opened the notebook.

However, I couldn't understand what was written. My teacher's handwriting was perfectly clear, but the words he used were too complicated for a child to comprehend. There were even sections he'd written in code. Using a dictionary I'd received as a birthday present, I went through the notebook, gradually attempting to decipher it all.

Finally, I understood. This notebook contained all the evidence my teacher had found forty years previously in his failed attempt to expose the crimes of that high-ranking nobleman. He had also added information that he had

uncovered within the past ten years.

My teacher hadn't given up. Even after serving thirty years for crimes he hadn't committed, he was still an ally of justice.

I remembered something he'd once told me: "I know why I was put on this earth and why I am still here. That knowledge makes me completely satisfied and content, no matter how wretched my life may seem."

My heart was full of admiration.

I can't just keep this to myself. I have to tell him how I feel!

I must have wanted to encourage him. I wanted to tell him that I was on his side, even if everyone else bad-mouthed him.

The next morning, I made my way to his house. It was a quiet morning, just like any other day. Wispy white clouds hung high up in the bright blue sky. I could hear the distant chirping of cicadas. Under the summer sunshine, a gentle breeze caressed my cheek. Feeling good, I happily ran toward my teacher's front door.

When I got there, I saw a throng of people. I will never forget what I saw next.

My teacher was dead.

His body was so horrifically shriveled and discolored that he looked like a monkey. His body was covered in wounds. I couldn't bear to look at those marks of torture.

Supporters of the dastardly aristocrat dealt with the body. My teacher, charged with twenty-nine new counts, had died as a laughingstock and a criminal.

I immediately gave my teacher's notebook to my father.

"Have you read this?" he asked, trembling, after reading its contents.

"No." I shook my head.

My father gave a soft sigh of relief. "This notebook is a dreadful thing. Listen to me: you know nothing about this. You've never seen it. It's just something your old man happened to find. Got it?"

The tone of his voice was unusually urgent. My father's behavior made me uncomfortable—he seemed like a stranger to me at that moment—but I complied.

My father handed the notebook over to the High Court, the top level of the Ardenfeld judiciary. In addition to its general legal jurisdiction, the High Court also had the power to write royal decrees and laws, and to make proposals directly to the king.

"We would like to ask you a few questions," one of the High Court officials said.

The officials asked me and my family for an explanation. I pretended to know nothing, just like my father had told me.

"Thank you for your cooperation," the first official finished.

I never forgot how accomplished I felt as I watched them walk away. At that time, I was relieved. I felt like I had successfully fulfilled my teacher's final wish.

A year went by. Everything was incredibly quiet and peaceful. The corrupt noble my teacher had exposed pretended to be an ally of justice himself as he railed against plans to abolish the Tax Exemption Law.

Another year passed. Nothing had happened. I figured that it must take a long time to gather concrete evidence.

In the ten years following my teacher's death, even I wasn't so foolish as to misunderstand what was going on. The High Court had suppressed my teacher's claims. They had chosen to sweep it all under the rug. Once I'd learned more about the court, it made total sense. Bribery ran rampant in the High Court.

It was clear that honesty didn't pay. Truth and justice were nothing in the face of money and power. This world was a rotten place, and bloated villains had made it that way. Knowing that, I was determined to follow in my teacher's footsteps. As an ally of justice, I would fulfill his final wish.

Within six years since the High Court officials had questioned us, I had recreated my teacher's notebook. I'd done my best to come up with the details I couldn't remember and put them into words.

Compiling the evidence to back up the claims took another thirteen years. The information was so carefully hidden that I needed painstaking effort and persistence to gather it all. Even so, this was nothing compared to everything my teacher had been forced to endure: thirty years of imprisonment, the loss of his good name, and the pitiful life he had lived since.

Watch me, I thought, picturing my teacher. You can count on me to condemn those monsters to hell.

“Lieutenant?” somebody said.

I must have been daydreaming. I rubbed my temples and turned around.

“Yes?” I responded.

“I came to submit my report on the recent expedition to the western region.” Polite as ever, my junior cheerfully held out some papers. “Um, is everything all right? For a moment there, I could’ve sworn you had a scary look on your face.”

“Is that so? I must be tired. Thanks for handing this in.”

As I watched her go, I reminded myself to keep my cool. I couldn’t let her find out what I was up to. If she knew, there was a risk that she would wind up getting involved.

I’m sorry, Noelle.

She’d said she wanted to help me. On one hand, it pained me to watch her walk away, clueless, but on the other hand, I was confident about my priorities. I couldn’t afford to drag that sweet girl into something so dangerous.

My teacher is watching.

Letitia Lisette-Stone continued to keep her explosive secret safe.



Chapter 3: The Raid

“Letitia won’t be able to help us,” I reported back to Seamus in his office. “I couldn’t confirm whether she was really the person who stole intelligence from the IMUB.”

Seamus didn’t seem particularly bothered. “Never mind. Let’s just get ready for our operation.”

Everything seemed hectic as I helped them in their preparations. It became apparent to me that this raid wasn’t something they’d been expecting to carry out. They were far from being fully ready, but the prince’s worsening condition had spurred them into action.

The tension was palpable. Failure was not an option. Inspired by the intense atmosphere, I kicked myself into gear.

Three hours later, we were waiting outside Count Wilhelm’s villa. The final rays of sunlight gently illuminated the mountains on the horizon. High in the deep ultramarine sky, the first star of the evening began to twinkle.

“We have come from the Improper Magic Usage Bureau,” one of the agents announced, standing in front of the grandiose double doors at the villa’s front gate. “We have a search warrant in connection with suspected involvement in the attempted assassination of His Royal Highness the Third Prince.”

The doors opened, and twenty-one magicians from the IMUB rushed inside. As planned, the priority was to efficiently investigate the main rooms of the villa to find evidence.

“Noelle, can you check the books in the library?”

“Roger that!”

Quickly doing lots of work was my specialty. I’d also gained valuable experience in speed-reading when I assisted the Fourth Unit. Using Spell Boost, I worked my way through everything I found from beginning to end.

Is there any evidence of a link to the assassination attempt or other wrongdoing? I asked myself, but I was having a hard time finding anything concrete. Even the things that seemed fishy at first glance turned out to be unrelated once I read on. *I suppose it's not so surprising when there are this many books.*

It was just as you might expect from an influential and scheming aristocrat's mansion. Even so, the more I read, the more uneasy I started to feel about all of this.

There's so little that has anything to do with criminal activity. It's almost as if he was expecting us. Did he suspect that this raid would happen and make special preparations? No, surely that would be over the top.

But as I continued to zip through each document I picked up, I couldn't shake off this worrying feeling.

Could Count Wilhelm have known that we would conduct this raid tonight?

I rejoined the group to share my concerns. "Um, excuse me, Lieutenant Seamus. There's something on my mind."

He furrowed his brow intensely as he listened to my hunch. "I had the same thought," he replied.

"Does that mean that he might've already removed the most incriminating pieces of evidence?"

"No, that isn't possible. We placed this mansion under surveillance right after Prince Raphael was poisoned. At the very least, information on the anti-healing magic sequence and the dungeon relic used to shrink it down must be here somewhere."

"Then we'd better make sure we find them."

If we found that information, we would finally be able to save the young prince. I was about to delve back into my investigation when an impressive-looking man appeared.

"Seamus Glass, I presume? I am Wilhelm, the master of this house. The current search is in violation of laws enacted by the High Court. I must insist

that you call off this illegal search at once.”

“Our investigation is in full accordance with the laws of the land,” Seamus responded. “You should be very careful about making false claims.”

“False claims? No, no. This search violates a law passed by the High Court earlier today.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“It just happened.”

“You certainly didn’t waste any time. How much did it cost?”

“We follow the principles of law and justice. That means we must act to stop the likes of you.”

Count Wilhelm’s guards sleekly surrounded us. It was obvious from a glance that they were highly trained soldiers.

He knew enough to plan his response this carefully...?

The guards clearly outnumbered us, but we had some of the IMUB’s best magicians on our side. They faced any adversity with pride and confidence.

I should get ready to fight too. I attempted to establish a magic sequence, but then I stopped suddenly. *My magic isn’t working!*

I realized it must have been the work of a dungeon relic that limited the use of magic within its range, just like the one used against me and Evangeline before. At that point, I knew that throughout this raid, Count Wilhelm had been pulling the strings. He’d laid a trap to produce this precise outcome.

“Our spells won’t work!” somebody cried out.

“Did he really plan for this from the very beginning?!” another shouted.

I could sense the other magicians’ growing panic from their voices.

Isn’t there some way out of this...?

Moving only my eyes, I assessed the situation. At the corner of my vision, I spotted Seamus doing something with his hands behind his back. From his back pocket, he took out something the size and shape of a small bottle—a smoke grenade. He pulled the pin from the grenade, and it fell to the floor, revolving

slowly.

As white smoke filled the air, I felt Seamus grab my hand.

“Let’s go,” he said. “We’re retreating to the cellar.”

Seamus thrust one of the surrounding soldiers out of the way and flung open the door to the cellar. We made our way down, working as hard as we could to push the pursuing guards back.

“There are too many of them!” I exclaimed. “There’s no way we can hold out!”

“Stay calm! Just concentrate on what’s right in front of you!” Seamus responded sharply, before adding in a whisper, “Can you fit into that vent?”

There was a ventilation shaft leading from the cellar up to the ground. I could see that the entrance was pretty tight, but I was smaller than most people, so it seemed like I might manage.

“I’m not sure, but maybe!”

“We’ll stall while you get out through there.”

“But what about y—”

“We already have no chance of escape. If any of us can get out, it’s you. Please. Find some information and rescue the prince!”

I no longer had time to think. I hauled myself up and clambered in through the dusty vent.

“Don’t lose faith,” I heard a voice call from behind me. “You can do this.”

Hearing muffled noise all around, I gritted my teeth and crawled through the ventilation shaft toward the surface. It was tight and uncomfortable. It obviously wasn’t designed for a person to fit inside, but I managed—with difficulty—to squeeze my way through.

Finally, I slammed against the rusty metal grating at the other end and tumbled out into the open air. I was horrified to hear nearby footsteps.

They’ve got me surrounded! They’re already coming!

I quickly ran into a narrow passageway, but it was only a matter of time

before the guards would find and detain me.

“Keep looking! She must be here somewhere!” somebody shouted from what sounded like right behind me. I felt like my heart was about to stop.

I was about to try and run out from the passageway when I heard footsteps up ahead. I couldn’t breathe.

Damn it... They’re gonna catch me!

All of a sudden, somebody else leaped out from the shadows, grabbed my hand, and covered my mouth.

“Stay quiet,” came his command.

I looked and saw a tall man with a heavy black hood pulled over his eyes. My first instinct was to punch his lights out, but the sound of his voice stopped me at the last moment.

“Another smoke grenade!” I heard one of the guards exclaim close by.

“She went to the east side! Find her!”

The man and I held our breaths in the narrow passageway. Once the footsteps had passed us by, I looked up at the man more closely. I could smell a slight whiff of vanilla—a sweet aroma I knew I remembered.

B-But how...?

There was no way that person could be here, but at the same time, there was no way I was wrong.

Still discombobulated, I asked, “What are you doing here, Luke?”

“Luke? I don’t know who that is,” the hooded man murmured. “My name is Gihren Hammitt. I’m an agent from the Royal Intelligence Agency.”

“Nah, you’re Luke. It’s so obvious.”

“Whatever. Who is that anyway?” The man shrugged exasperatedly.

I reached out to lift his hood. He hastily backed away, but there was no escape in this tiny passageway. I spotted a flash of silver hair and sapphire blue eyes.

"It *is* you, Luke!"

"How did you figure that out so quickly?" Luke muttered, avoiding my gaze. If I had to guess, he was embarrassed that I'd seen through his lie so easily.

Oh, did I make you blush?

Just as I was trying to decide how best to tease Luke, I realized with a start that his face was extremely close to mine.

"J-Just call it intuition..." I backed up and looked away. "Anyway, why are you here?"

"The IMUB is conducting a raid on Count Wilhelm's villa, of course. How could I just stay quiet and let this golden opportunity pass me by?"

"I can't believe you'd ditch your bedrest for—"

"I've pretty much made a complete recovery by now."

"'Pretty much' is *not* actually 'complete,'" I retorted, pouting.

Luke smiled. "You're my mentee and friend. How could I ever let you be in danger?"

I felt like I should be angry—like I should tell him to stop overexerting himself and get some much needed rest. But I couldn't do it. Seeing him filled me with relief. The responsibility for saving the prince was on my shoulders, but I didn't know if I was strong enough. On some level, I felt like I couldn't do it on my own.

My eyesight was blurry with tears. I was so reassured to have him around that I'd dropped my guard.

Weird. This isn't like me.

I'd been so insistent on being strong enough not to let Luke get the better of me.

"I think I got dirt in my eye." I quickly wiped my eyes.

"Makes sense." Thankfully, Luke pretended not to have noticed.

Here in this tiny passageway, hidden from the view of both god and man, the time passed by in silence.





“Captain, Luke has escaped,” Harribel reported.

Gawain’s expression remained unchanged. “I thought the area was secured? Did something happen?”

“He managed to persuade Henry, the person he knew best.”

“What cunning words did he offer this time?”

“It seems he was gushing about how his mentee is such a valuable friend to him. Saying things like, ‘I can’t live without Noelle,’ ‘I’d do anything for Noelle,’ and ‘I feel like I might lose something more important than my life.’ It all pulled on Henry’s heartstrings enough to win him over.”

“It is just like Luke to say all that and still refer to her as his ‘friend.’”

“I believe that was part of what moved Henry so much. And since Henry betrayed us, we didn’t catch on to Luke’s escape attempt until it was too late. He might even have reached Ardenfeld by now.”

“I don’t doubt it. What’s the status of his treatment?”

“He is close to a full recovery. I think that’s why Henry felt he could let him go.”

“Henry can be too kind sometimes.”

“But it’s true that he disobeyed your orders, Captain. He said he’s prepared for whatever punishment may come.”

“Just tell him that if he thought it was safe to let Luke go, then it’s fine.” Gawain sighed and looked out of the window. “Anyway, do you have any information from the IMUB about the raid?”

“As of now, there have been no updates.”

“Something might have happened. Get ready to take action.”

“You worry too much, Captain.” Harribel laughed softly. “Besides Noelle, their team is full of experienced magicians, including former Third Unit members. The Improper Magic Usage Bureau is made up of the Second Unit’s best and brightest, after all.”

“I know. I’m just worried that somebody might take matters into their own hands and do something stupid.”

“You can’t be talking about Luke? I don’t think that’s possible. There’s no way he could make it all the way there so quickly.”

No, but somebody else might, Gawain thought, sighing.

He glanced at a document on his desk: a beautifully written request for half a day off from work. Letitia had handed it in just after midday to ask for permission to leave work three hours earlier than normal. She hadn’t told Gawain her reason, but he had a bad feeling about it. Her actions made it seem like she’d anticipated the IMUB’s raid.

I hope she doesn’t do anything she might regret.



I cried for a little while in the dark passageway, but once it was all out of my system, I told Luke what had happened so far. “The IMUB agents walked into a trap and got caught. Count Wilhelm has a dungeon relic that stops you from using magic.”

“Like the one used in the attacks on you and the Fairy Queen, I suppose.”

“He has about a hundred guards. They’re probably still looking for us right now.”

“This won’t be easy.”

“To be honest, I don’t think we can deal with this if it’s just the two of us,” I admitted. “We’d better call for backup.”

“I’m not sure we can do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because of the new law the High Court passed.”

I gulped. “Right. They made it so that this raid would be illegal.”

“Practically speaking, the Royal Court Magicians’ Division’s hands are tied.”

“You seem to know a lot about it. Even Seamus hadn’t heard about the new law.”

“Even in the High Court, there are some nobles I know how to handle,” Luke explained casually.

“Anyway, if we can’t call for backup, that means it’s all in our hands. How can just two people overcome security that’s too tough for all of the IMUB agents to deal with?”

It seemed totally impossible.

“If it’s us two, then it can be done,” Luke said. “We’re unstoppable. There’s no way we’d let a crooked aristocrat beat us. Am I right?”

He flashed a bold smile. I felt a comforting warmth begin to course through my body. It gave me the strength to keep going. It gave me courage.

I nodded. “You’re right. Let’s go in there together and give him a good beating.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“I mean, we’re talking about somebody who pretends to uphold justice while he’s involved in all kinds of terrible stuff behind the scenes. He even uses bribery to make laws for his own personal benefit.”

“Perfect. We shouldn’t feel guilty about violating unethical laws. You don’t mind breaking a few rules, right?”

I thought back to when I was a student and I would break curfew to slip away in the night.

“Not at all,” I said with a sneaky grin. “I love to be bad.”

“Then let’s be bad guys for a while,” Luke responded, “so we can wipe out the biggest bad guy of them all.”

We moved out of range of the magic-restricting dungeon relic before carefully progressing onward under a concealment spell. Luke was aiming for the mansion’s southern annex, which was used by Count Wilhelm’s son. He believed that this was the count’s weak point.

“Count Wilhelm dotes on Baldur, his only son,” Luke explained. “As a result, Baldur grew up to be spoiled and arrogant. He looks down on his servants and

keeps causing problems for the count with his indiscreet comments. If the guards think I'm him, then I'll be able to act with relative freedom even under the heightened security."

"Why would they think you're him?"

"I'll use this."

Luke produced a small bottle that smelled faintly of bergamot. I knew its contents: a mixture of bicorn horn, witchweed, mandrake root, magicite, and bergamot orange. It was a shape-shifting potion.

"First, let's sneak into the barn in the annex," Luke said. "Baldur's carriage is in there."

We went to the barn, found the carriage, and collected a hair from the seat. It took about three and a half minutes for the completed potion to work. Once Luke had drunk it, he transformed before my eyes into a sneering young aristocrat.

"Wait here," Luke told me as we left the barn. "I'll unlock the window from inside."

I watched him approach a guard at the entrance to the annex and make his way past with a condescending glare.

He's a real thespian, huh, I thought, impressed. Before long, the lock on the rear window opened.

"Can you get in this way?" Luke asked me.

"Piece of cake."

I clawed my way up the gutter, shoved my left leg into the little window, and forced myself inside. As somebody with a wealth of experience in climbing trees and catching bugs back in the day, this was right up my alley.

I went inside and squinted at the glaring light of chandeliers. I'd found myself in some sort of dressing room. It was decorated with extravagant red carpets and exquisite furnishings. The room was full of dresses in every color.

"Baldur has a sweetheart three years his elder, and he's head over heels for her. He had this dressing room made just for her." Luke snatched up a fallen

blonde hair as he spoke.

“And you’re asking me to turn into her?”

“Precisely.”

“Are you sure that’s okay? The real Baldur is still around here somewhere, isn’t he?”

“It’s perfectly safe. I put him to sleep just now.”

“You’re a quick worker as always.” Reassured by Luke’s ingenuity, I dropped the woman’s hair into the shape-shifting potion.

“Uh, I’ll keep watch outside,” Luke said awkwardly.

Oh, right. I need to get changed.

I wasn’t the type to be all that concerned about changing in the same space as somebody my age of the opposite sex. However, I immediately started thinking about the moment when Luke embraced me in Grambern, and it made me feel a little self-conscious.

This is no good. I have to focus on the task at hand! I told myself.

I began changing into the woman’s clothes. I pulled on a gorgeous, embroidered dress, then I looked in a mirror and was plunged into despair. I saw excessively rolled sleeves, a daring neckline with nothing to see underneath, and a hem that was much too far down.

Stop thinking about it... Just stop!

I downed the shape-shifting potion and quickly grew taller. The dress now fitted me perfectly, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I still didn’t feel too good about it.

“All done, Luke,” I announced, walking to the door.

“Sure.” Luke turned and saw me. “Why do you have that look on your face?”

“It’s fine. I pushed past the pain and finally grew up.”

“What...?”

He didn’t seem to understand, but that was probably for the best. I preferred

that he didn't know what I was thinking.

I straightened out my new, world-weary, adult face and took in my surroundings. "What's next?"

"We'll search the mansion for clues while pretending to be Baldur and his sweetheart. I get the sense he's quite eager to impress her, so I'll act like I want to show you how smart I am."

"And what should I do?"

"Act like you're fawning over your boy toy, I guess."

"A mature lady of luxury, then. I've got this in the bag."

As a composed, quick-witted woman myself, this was my time to shine.

"Do you have any idea of where the incriminating evidence might be hidden?" Luke asked.

"Probably somewhere we wouldn't normally find it even if we'd tried, since the count seems to have known the raid would happen."

"Right. In that case, let's go to the library in the main building first. There's something I want to read." The face of the self-indulgent Baldur shot me a glance. "Our undercover mission starts here."

In disguise, we began our new search of Count Wilhelm's villa. I was timid, unsure whether I could pull this off, but in sharp contrast, Luke's acting was outstanding.

"Wordsworth, where the devil are you?" he snapped, and a butler ran over. "I wish to show Elsa the main library. Bring me my shoes at once."

"B-But, sir..." the butler stammered. "The royal court magicians have just raided the villa. We mustn't step on the guards' toes."

"What do I care? Do you defy me?"

"U-Understood, sir. One moment, please." Wordsworth scampered away to fetch Baldur's shoes.

Shocked, I whispered to Luke, "I didn't know you had acting experience."

“I don’t. But in a way, I’ve been acting ever since I was young.”

“You have?”

“Yes. I played the roles of my father’s perfect son and the enviable model student.”

“I see what you mean.”

I remembered how Luke used to effortlessly portray himself as an ideal student. That must have helped him cultivate his acting ability. On top of that, as somebody who had grown up in high society, he had surely encountered countless high-handed aristocrats.

I was very impressed. As a natural-born leading lady myself, I could ask for nothing more from my costar. But this was no time for me to hold back either. It was time to harness the acting skills I had polished as I sang musical numbers while scrubbing the bathtub.

“Simply marvelous, my dear!” I cooed. “So smart and dashing. Tee-hee! Ahh!”

“Uh... Aren’t you laying on the affectations a little thick?”

“What do you mean? I’m a wonderful actress. Can you imagine a more mature and sophisticated performance?”

Luke stared at me blankly. “Just say nothing and follow my lead.”

I’d been removed from active service—but why? I thought I’d done a great job!

I couldn’t wrap my head around this. As I was casting around for an explanation, something struck me.

I see how it is. My performance was too seductive and it got Luke all flustered! Now it all makes sense.

“I understand. I’ll keep quiet,” I said softly. “I’ve been a bad girl.”

“What? Sure, whatever.”

We followed the butler across the grounds of the villa. The courtyard was vibrant with purple salvias and delphiniums. I saw Count Wilhelm’s soldiers rushing back and forth, presumably looking for me.

The security around the main building was remarkably stringent. I looked up at the magnificent four-story structure.

This really seems like the most likely place to find something.

Bathed in glowing orange light, two soldiers flanked the front entrance like gatekeepers, carefully scanning the area.

“What is your business?” one of them asked flatly.

“Master Baldur wishes to visit the main library,” the butler replied, standing a little ahead of us.

“That won’t be possible,” the guard said sharply. “Come back tomorrow.”

Count Wilhelm’s guards were on high alert after the raid. I could imagine that they would want to avoid letting anybody inside. That would be a huge problem for us, though.

We need to get in there somehow!

Next to me, Luke spoke up. “Tomorrow? You must be joking! I can’t stand for this insubordination.”

“We cannot let anybody inside right now, sir. There is still a court magician at large.”

“I don’t give a damn. I said I want to visit the library. Is that too hard for you to understand?”

“Please come again tomorrow.”

“When my father hears about this, you will be out of a job!” Luke spat.

The guard gulped and paused. “Understood, sir.”

The gate opened and we walked into the building behind the butler.

“Wanna start a new career as an actor?” I whispered to Luke.

“If I get fired, I’ll consider it.”

The two of us didn’t look out of place whatsoever as we walked down the grand corridors decked out in wonderful decorations and paintings. Nobody had noticed that we weren’t the real deal.

“I hope you enjoy perusing the main library,” the butler said, bowing graciously.

We walked past him into the largest of the libraries on the villa’s first floor. This room had been our top priority during the raid.

“Why did you want to come here?” I asked Luke, knowing that I’d already searched the main library thoroughly.

“I want to find documents about the villa itself—things like blueprints or plans.”

“But how can those help us?”

“You’ll see once we’ve found them.”

We began exploring the room together. Since I’d spent pretty much every day looking for books in the school library back when we were students, this was child’s play to me.

“Is this good?” I showed Luke a construction drawing.

“Perfect. Just what I was hoping for.”

We spread the drawing out on the floor and examined it closely. Luke paid special attention to the minutely detailed measurements.

“These numbers aren’t right,” he remarked. “Same over here.”

“How can you tell?”

“I made sure to calculate the distance while we walked here.”

“Since when did you have that superpower?”

“I know that my stride is seventy-two centimeters. By counting my steps, I can make an approximate estimate.”

“Sure, but you can’t rely on your stride being the same every time.”

“As a child, I was forced to walk with elegance and precision,” Luke explained matter-of-factly, continuing to look over the drawing. “Now, here’s the hallway leading to the east wing. This seems fishy.”

“Is something there?”

“There’s a hidden room.” Luke smirked. “We’ve found Count Wilhelm’s heart.”

There were a few obstacles to locating the entrance to the hidden room. First was the matter of the butler waiting on the other side of the door to the library.

“Wordsworth, get in here,” Luke demanded.

Once the butler entered, Luke moved swiftly. He slipped behind Wordsworth, restraining him and covering his mouth. Finally, he cast Sleep and hid the unconscious butler among the library shelves.

He poked his head out of the door and checked down the corridor. “If somebody spots us, just act natural. All we’re doing is walking around my father’s house, all right?”

“Got it,” I murmured with a nod.

As we continued down the long corridor, I felt my heart stop every time we passed one of the count’s guards.

Have we been found out? I would think. Did we slip up somewhere and give ourselves away?

I did my best to suppress the anxiety that kept on creeping back. As nervous as I was, though, the guards seemed surprisingly unconcerned about us. It probably helped that there were two of us. They were looking for just one escaped court magician, and they wouldn’t have expected that somebody who’d gotten away by the skin of her teeth could have made her way back into the main building. We’d done a great job of outsmarting them.

Even so, it was still a risky situation with over a hundred guards on high alert.

“I think the entrance should be somewhere around the painting of the Epteoise Cathedral,” Luke whispered. “The dust on it is different from the other paintings.”

“And it seems like there are always two guards there.”

They were standing watch on either side of the painting, just far enough away that nobody would realize that there was a hidden entrance there. Their view

up and down the long corridor made it easy for them to quickly spot any suspicious behavior.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“We don’t have much time. We’ll have to force our way through.” Luke switched from his quiet whispering to a more boisterous voice to sell his performance. “You two! I want this statue brought to my chamber right now!”

In a flash, he had become an entirely different person. In awe of Luke’s acting ability, I quickly joined in by playing my own role as a prim and proper lady.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, sir,” one of the guards replied, looking uncomfortable. “I’m under strict orders to protect the building.”

“Do you hear me? I want it *now*.”

“But sir, I—”

That was when Luke struck. Catching the guard by surprise, he sneaked in to seize him from behind and cast Sleep. The other guard reacted with a start, but I was already behind him. I put him to sleep and grabbed hold of his powerless body.

“I expected no less,” Luke commented.

“Of course. After all these years, I know you too well.”

We quickly hid the guards’ sleeping bodies and inspected the painting of the cathedral. We knocked on the wall and listened to try and work out how the hidden door worked. It didn’t take long before Luke had opened the door. We went inside and closed the door behind us.

A brick-red rug covered the floor of the little room, and a magical light bulb cast a dim light from above. Three of the walls were covered in bookshelves full of bulky books and other documents.

Can we find something to help us save Prince Raphael?

We didn’t have all night. I used Spell Boost to let me pore through one volume after another. However, I was having trouble finding the vital clues we needed, and there were very few that related to Count Wilhelm’s crimes.

“Luke, what if this is another trap?”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe it’s all a distraction to give Count Wilhelm more time. I just have a funny feeling about it.”

“That *is* possible.” Putting a thoughtful hand over his mouth, Luke surveyed the room. He bent over and opened his eyes a little wider as he lifted up the corner of the rug. “Here we are. Another hidden door.”

Under the rug was a square trapdoor. We opened it to see a vertical shaft leading far below the ground like a well, with metal rungs affixed to the wall.

Luke was about to start climbing down, but then he stopped. “Noelle, you go ahead of me.”

“Why?”

Luke pointed wordlessly at the skirt of my dress.

Good point. I guess I should go first.

I made my way down, holding on to one cold metal rung after another. I felt lukewarm air blowing from below and smelled a musty stench. Once I knew I was close enough to the ground, I carefully dropped the rest of the way. Standing up, I saw something that took my breath away.

The floor was covered with a mountain of gold. Piled up haphazardly, countless gold ingots eerily reflected the faint light.

“So this is the count’s secret treasure,” Luke said from behind me as he reached the floor. “He’s amassed a significant fortune here.”

“D-Do you think I could take a little bit home with me?”

“No.”

There was enough gold here for someone to live a life of luxury for two thousand years. But while my weak mind was easily led astray by the temptation of the gold, Luke was calm and collected.

“There’s another bookcase at the back,” he said. “I think we’ll find the missing piece of the puzzle.”

“Oh, right!” In all the excitement, I’d almost forgotten that we were here to look for information to help us save the young prince.

I hurried over to the bookcase and began my search. The documents revealed a shocking volume of misdeeds. They were full of details of bribery and corruption, like a concentrated dose of all of society’s ills. Most troublingly, these documents showed the vast amount of money paid in bribes to the High Court and its judges. Obviously, nobody receiving these sums could be trusted to give an impartial verdict.

I read about a dizzying number of cover-ups. Evidence of all manner of crimes had been suppressed: assault and battery, blackmail, murder, rape, and the sexual abuse of young servants and orphans. Count Wilhelm had even pinned many of these crimes on innocent people, framing them and using his power to force them into submission.

What a monster... I wanna beat him to a pulp!

I was shaking all over. My fists were ready for action. I kept looking for something connected to Prince Raphael’s poisoning, but I still couldn’t find anything. Not only that, but the shape-shifting potion was starting to wear off. My blonde hair had begun to darken slightly. It would be only a few minutes before I was right back to normal.

I need to find something fast!

As I frantically flipped the pages of the staggering number of documents, I suddenly came across something.

“The Poisoning of King Cleomenes”?

Recorded using a classical writing system, the document was about the magic sequences of an ancient civilization. Slowly and carefully, I deciphered the information and the details on how the sequences were constructed.

Dungeon relics for weaving magic sequences into poison... Magic sequences for preventing the use of healing magic...

I gulped. This was what I’d been looking for all along. If I could provide such detailed information about the magic sequence, then the Savior Magician would surely be able to rescue the prince.

He'll be saved with this so long as I can get back to the palace!

"Luke!" I shouted. "I've found it! Let's get out of here!"

"All right!"

Luke tied up the evidence to make it easier to carry. It was frustrating that we could only take a small amount of what we'd found, but the top priority right now was to help the prince.

I followed Luke back up the shaft to the room with the red rug. Unfortunately, in the time we'd been looking, the shape-shifting potion had worn off completely. We could no longer pretend to be the count's arrogant son and his girlfriend like we had at the beginning. Even worse, I'd lost Elsa's curvaceous figure.

I can't believe this... I blame the evil count for my cup size too! I'll grind him into the dirt for this!

I decided to take all my aimless rage and vent it at Count Wilhelm, the source of so much evil. But just as I was concocting that plan, I heard a yell.

"Hurry up and find that reprobate who put me to sleep! What are you waiting for?"

"The suspect is disguised as Master Baldur! Find him!"

Besides the angry demands of Baldur and the panicked shouting of the count's soldiers, I could hear innumerable hurried footsteps.

"Somebody put these guards to sleep!"

"The hidden door! They must be inside the room!"

We'd been found out.

While I was still reacting to this inconvenience, Luke spoke with calmness and confidence. "There's no time to lose. Let's lay a trap to get the better of them. Are you with me?"

Luke's unwavering faith in me brought a smile to my face. I could tell he trusted my abilities, and I was eager to live up to his expectations of me.

Hiding my grin, I replied, "Leave it to me."

Chapter 4: The Price of a Wish

Count Wilhelm ran twenty-six orphanages in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld. While he used them as a front for money laundering, the count had another major reason for operating these facilities: exploiting needy children with no family to protect them.

Over the course of forty years, Count Wilhelm had assaulted 1,974 young girls and 1,886 young boys, ranging from the ages of five to seventeen. His preference was for delicate, androgynous boys.

Quite a few people were aware of this, but they all kept quiet. It was well-known that people who publicly spoke out against him tended to die under mysterious circumstances. Count Wilhelm would also offer those girls and boys as sexual favors to other influential aristocrats and businesspeople, so any attempt to expose these practices would incur their wrath too. For those involved, it was best to keep everything hidden. At the very least, most thought it wasn't worth putting their lives at risk. Those principled few who tried to reveal the truth often faced false charges or wound up dead.

It was an era of peace and harmony. As long as everyone looked the other way, everything would be just fine.

An eleven-year-old girl had been sent from one of the orphanages in the royal capital to Count Wilhelm's villa. Her hair was short, and her features were well proportioned and somewhat boyish. Confident that the girl was the count's type, the director of the orphanage felt proud and satisfied that he'd done a good job. The director had long since lost his moral compass during years of serving the count.

The girl knew nothing. All she'd been told was that she'd been chosen specially, that this was a great honor, that it was a special task only she could do. She was genuinely happy. She felt a sense of pride and responsibility. She'd been selected, so she had to do her very best.

The adults brought the girl to Count Wilhelm's private chamber.

"Wonderful. She's perfect." The count grinned. "You may go now. I'd like to speak to the girl alone."

Clever and catlike, the count's butler bowed, exited the room, and closed the door. In the extravagantly furnished chamber, only Count Wilhelm and the girl remained.

"Come," he said to the girl. He sat down on the large bed and patted the spot next to him, encouraging her to join him. "This will all be our little secret."

The girl walked over and sat next to the count.

Caressing her back, Count Wilhelm continued, "Listen to me. I'm doing this for your sake. Within your body is a black fog. It caused your parents to abandon you. But you are not evil—it's what's inside your body that is evil." He leaned in and whispered into her ear, "I'm going to take the evil out of you."

Then, just as he began to remove the girl's camisole, she made her move. Suddenly, she used all her weight to drag the count down onto the bed, then forced the sheets into his mouth. His eyes wide in shock, he gaped at her.

The girl's voice sounded adult, like a different person entirely. "I have the power to freeze your eyeballs so you can never see again. Or I could freeze your throat so you can never breathe again." Unflinching, she continued, "For nineteen years, I have wanted to kill you. When you speak, don't forget that. Don't say anything stupid, or I might slaughter you where you lie."

With great skill, the girl held Count Wilhelm down. He managed only to remove the bedsheets from his mouth.

"Who are you?" he croaked.

"I am the one who will pass judgment on your sins."

The girl's hair began to turn lilac as the bergamot-scented shape-shifting potion started wearing off. From behind the young girl's emotionless face, Letitia Lisette-Stone looked down at Count Wilhelm.

Having tied the count's hands behind his back using the sheets, Letitia opened

a closet and picked out clothes that would create the impression of an unassuming servant. They were baggy when she first put them on, but she grew into them as the effects of the shape-shifting potion continued to fade.

“I know your face,” Count Wilhelm sneered. “You’re that court magician who’s stubbornly pursued me. From what I’ve heard, you’ve made plenty of enemies over the years. All your trying to expose scandals led you to be transferred to another unit.”

“My superiors learned that people were slipping poison into my food and decided I needed protection.”

“Why struggle after me for so long?”

“What does it matter?”

“It must be something personal. Come to think of it, you remind me of a man I encountered once.” Count Wilhelm stared at Letitia. “He was a court magician too. He was obsessed with exposing injustice, but you know, his hands weren’t so clean either.”

“I assume you mean that you bought off the High Court officers and had him convicted of crimes he didn’t commit.”

“That man truly never knew when to quit. I could’ve sworn I’d had him locked up for life, but I guess he was too well-behaved. Some clueless prison warden must have released him, and of course, history repeated itself. He committed more crimes than ever before. But in the end, he paid for those crimes with his life.”

“Don’t you dare say another word against him.”

“He was a damn fool. Beyond redemption.” The count paused. “By the way, I suppose you know that your people tried in vain to raid this house earlier.”

“I heard. And?”

“I’ve detained them in one of the buildings on this estate. My company’s Berthold gunpowder is stored there. Two thousand kilograms of it. If it were to ignite, that building would be gone without a trace, and it would take the lives of twenty-one promising magicians with it. Incidentally, I have a detonator.”

Count Wilhelm revealed a device in his bound hands. “Don’t move. I’ll ignite the gunpowder if you do anything suspicious.”

Letitia gulped. All of a sudden, two of the count’s guards called from outside the door.

“Excuse us, sir. We have something to report.”

“Get in here!” the count shouted.

The soldiers entered the room, spotted Letitia, and after a moment of stunned surprise, drew their swords.

“Don’t even think about resisting,” the count said. “One wrong move, and twenty-one of your colleagues will be dead.”

Letitia gritted her teeth and started to activate a blue magic sequence, but it vanished ineffectually like dust in the wind.

“Looks like the shoe is on the other foot,” Count Wilhelm jeered as the guards restrained Letitia. He gestured to his own tied hands. “You really are a lot like that man. He did the same thing, giving himself such an overwhelming advantage that one more push would’ve finished me off. And yet, he couldn’t do it. I just had to tell him his students would die if he laid a finger on me, and he looked like he’d seen a ghost. What an idiot he was.” He glared down at Letitia, now on the floor. “The problem with you people is that you don’t have a killer instinct. Keep doing things your way, and you’ll never defeat me.”



The door to the hidden room opened, revealing the red carpeted corridor. Fourteen muscular guards surrounded me and Luke, and behind them, the original smug son of Count Wilhelm smiled sadistically.

“Did you think you could get away with knocking me out and impersonating me?” Baldur barked. “I will not merely kill you. I will destroy your pride and go on tormenting you until you can take no more!”

Seeing the genuine article made me newly appreciative of Luke’s acting.

“The award for best performance by an actor in a leading role must go to you,” I remarked.

“Then I guess you should get the best actress award,” Luke replied.

“See? My talent just can’t be contained.”

Maybe I should prepare to be scouted for my stage debut!

However, it seemed that our quiet quips were falling on deaf ears.

“On your knees! Beg for forgiveness!” Baldur demanded. “And don’t think I’ll stop at just the two of you. I’ll see to it that your parents, your families, anyone you’ve ever met, will be unable to go on living in civilized society!”

“My family? By all means, go ahead,” Luke said nonchalantly. “By the way, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“What? You scared of what’s to come?”

“I just think it’s curious that you’ve chosen *not* to use the dungeon relic that prevents people from casting spells. Wouldn’t it be better to use it?”

“If I can make you surrender without having to use it, is that not more humiliating for you? After all, I must beat you two into submission. It’s much sweeter for me if I let you get your hopes up.”

“Damn it. And I set up a trap and everything.” Luke rubbed his temples in annoyance.

“Do I frighten you?” Baldur smiled cruelly again. “You filthy, common thieves. Let me show you the difference between us!”

Luke sighed deeply. “See, it’s just so hard to know what to do against such weak opposition.”

A lightning attack suddenly tore through the air. In an instant, the forty soldiers were all out cold. They stood motionlessly for a moment before crumpling to the floor one by one.

He launched that attack so fast! He’s really upped his game!

I gasped in amazement. Luke had seriously hurt himself at the World Magic Championships by working too hard when he was already injured. Thanks to the long period of medical treatment afterward, he had recovered and his wounds had healed. But then, he had taken his experience of battling Evangeline at the

WMC and used it to become more powerful than ever.

And that's why he's the best in the business. The sight of Luke in battle wasn't just impressive; it filled me with happiness too. *He's back!*

He was as infuriatingly talented as he'd always been. He was the real deal.

"Th-They're m-monsters!" Baldur spluttered, falling to the floor. "Activate the relic!"

Several guards who had been hanging back produced the dungeon relic and activated it. Immediately, we became unable to use magic.

Luke, though, was as calm as ever. "Now, the real battle begins."

"We'll have to come up with a way to win without using magic." I smirked as a bright idea occurred to me. "Hey, I just thought of something."

"What do you have in mind?"

"The ultimate shield, strong enough to protect us from any attack."

Luke followed my gaze to where I was looking and nodded in understanding. "I see."

Still on the ground, the count's arrogant son looked up vacantly at the sneaky look on my face. "Huh?"

"All right, you worms!" I cried out a few minutes later. "If you care what happens to this guy, you'd better get out of our way!"

With Baldur as our hostage, we made our way toward the exit. The guards shrank back as we passed. They had never anticipated a development like this. Even though they had a supreme relic that could prevent the use of magic, they couldn't attack as long as we had a hostage.

"S-Such cowardly fiends!" they whispered.

"Ha ha! All's fair in love and war!" I cackled. This was clearly not a heroic course of action, but I didn't let it bother me. I was having a blast.

"D-Don't even think of attacking!" Baldur yelped restlessly. "Remember, defending my life is paramount! Do as they tell you! Make way! Make way, I

say!”

I was endlessly thankful that the guards all obeyed his orders without question.

“You really *are* the ultimate shield,” I muttered to him. “Good work convincing them.”

Baldur reacted with a start. “W-Well, I have to ensure that I make it out in one piece too! This is no time for me to hold back.”

“I think it’s a great thing to value your life so much. Not everyone does.”

“R-Really?” He seemed perplexed.

From that point on, our shield continued to cooperate well. When the guards heard Baldur’s shrill commands, there was nothing they could do but retreat. This was unlike anything Baldur had experienced before. It seemed to be teaching him a lesson.

“It’s like you’re not even trying to act,” I remarked. “I can hardly believe how well you’re doing.”

Baldur seemed shocked for a moment, then hung his head. “It’s always seemed like everything I do is wrong. They all see me as a fool, and I feel awful.”

“I had no idea.”

“I only feel at ease when I put others down. It makes me feel like I’m worth more than them.”

“Ahhh. Is that why you act like such a bully?”

“Well, now I might finally have found something I’m good at.” His cheeks turned red. “I’ll do my very best. The three of us will get out alive!”

“Yeah!”

That moment nearly moved me to tears. After enduring such a difficult time, something had finally given his life meaning. I was welling up over his inspirational story.

“Is ‘being a good hostage’ really a talent?” Luke whispered beside me.

“Come on, Luke, don’t be so cynical. It’s a great thing to find your true

calling.”

“Am I wrong, though...?” Luke seemed perturbed, but I nodded vigorously, very sure that he was indeed wrong.

“S-Stop! Don’t shoot! My survival is all that matters!” Baldur went on shouting pathetically.

“That’s it. Great work,” I quietly encouraged him. “The trembling voice really sells it.”

“Just leave it to me. The best part of my performance is coming right up.” He was seriously getting into his role as the frightened hostage.

But just as the villa’s main door started to come into view, we heard another voice.

“That’s quite enough,” Count Wilhelm declared, blocking our escape.

In the count’s right hand was a pistol. Its muzzle was pointed directly at a handcuffed woman with lilac hair and long, slender arms and legs.

“Wh-What...?” I spluttered.

I knew her; that was the person I admired most—the coolest and best magician in the Third Unit.

Count Wilhelm had taken Letitia hostage.

“It’s not just her,” the count said. “I have also detained the twenty-one court magicians who invaded my house under the pretext of conducting a raid.” He showed us a cuboid object: a remote detonator. “As it happens, the building they’re in contains two thousand kilograms of Berthold gunpowder. If I activate this detonator, every one of them will perish. You should be very careful about your next move.”

“The magi won’t stay silent if you do that,” Luke retorted. “You’ll give up your position and your reputation.”

“Ah, the troublesome heir of the Waldstein family.” Count Wilhelm’s mouth contorted in disdain. “Well, you’ll be disappointed to know that the truth is only what is reported. I provide a great deal of financial support to the news agencies of this country. Naturally, I don’t expect them to lie for me, but it’s a

different matter if I offer them a believable story.”

His voice and eyes went neutral despite what he said next. “How about this? While the court magicians tried to hide the evidence of their illegal raid, they accidentally ignited two thousand kilograms of Berthold gunpowder stored for my company’s use. Truly a sad and embarrassing state of affairs.”

“Wow. Some people might see you as a spin doctor carefully holding sway over the northern region, but you’re just a greedy pig, throwing your weight around.”

“Quiet, young Waldstein. Your time on this earth is nearly up.”

Baldur’s shaking voice cut through the tense atmosphere. “F-Father, stop this! Let’s discuss this like reasonable adults. Is it really worth the lives of twenty-one people? I’m sure there’s some way to sort this all out peacefully. Isn’t that what you’re good at?”

Count Wilhelm quietly stared at his son. There was a glimmer of light in his dark eyes.

Right! I heard that Count Wilhelm always spoiled his son. If there’s any way out for us, it’s through him.

Bracing myself, I spoke carefully. “He’s right. Maybe we have opposing interests, but we all have to be careful right now. We need to be calm and reasonable in our choices. People’s lives are in the balance. We could lose people we care about. That goes for both sides here.”

“Yes, people we care about,” Count Wilhelm said after a moment of silence. He then turned his gaze to Baldur. “Son, I loved you very much. Even in your cowardice and stupidity, I found something to love. You are the only one I truly see as family; the only person I genuinely cared about.”

“Father...” Baldur’s eyes were brimming with tears.

“But I no longer have any need for you.”

A gunshot echoed around the room. The smoking mouth of the count’s pistol was pointed at me. I didn’t understand what had just happened. The count’s son probably didn’t either.

“Huh...?” I breathed.

The next moment, I was racked by a burning pain in my side. Unable to stand, I collapsed to the floor.

I must have been shot. A red substance spread out from the injury in my side, staining my clothes.

“Noelle!” Luke cried out, his face white as a sheet.

Everything looked like it was happening in slow motion. The count’s son also fell to the floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Letitia shaking off the guards restraining her and rushing toward other soldiers in the distance. I understood right away that she was aiming for the dungeon relic. If only we had the power of magic, we could gain the upper hand. I saw Letitia throw her entire weight at the soldiers. The relic fell to the floor with a crash.

But just as Letitia pushed forward, I heard another sound: a second gunshot. Immediately, Letitia was on the floor, blood streaming from her thigh.

Letitia, no!

My eyes opened wide. In that same moment, I could feel that my magic power had come back. I was far weaker than normal, but I knew it should be enough for me to cast spells.

“Noelle! Hold on, Noelle...” Luke was uncharacteristically flustered as he performed healing magic on me.

It took a little time for the bleeding to stop. Presumably, the tool preventing magic use was still working in some capacity.

“You’re safe.” Luke breathed a sigh of relief once he could see that I wasn’t bleeding anymore. He looked like he’d been rescued—but of course, *he* was the one rescuing *me*.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Seriously, I’m okay,” I insisted, feeling a little awkward.

I cast healing magic on Baldur and tried to keep myself calm. I knew that I couldn’t afford to err in my judgment if I wanted to help Letitia. I had to be coolheaded and precise to rescue her as quickly as possible.

“How is the Arianrhod?” Count Wilhelm asked the guards with the dungeon

relic.

“Damaged, but functional. It can’t prevent the activation of magic sequences anymore, but magicians should only be able to use about ten percent of their power.”

“Ten percent? That sounds good to me.” The count had a satisfied smirk on his face. “Watch as I make these powerless magicians squirm.”

“You’ve done something that can’t be undone.” Luke’s face was frightening, like he’d been replaced by someone else. Even though our power was limited, the force of his magic aura was enough for me to feel a scorching pain in my cheeks.

“Calm down,” I said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t let your anger take over.”

“Noelle, you rest.”

“But we’re mentor and mentee. You matter to me just like I matter to you. You’re my best friend; we’re like family. I’m gonna fight too. We’ll fight together.”

Luke paused. “Okay.”

Seeing him in profile, I thought he looked a little sad for a moment, but I must have been imagining things. I blinked once, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the same fearless, annoyingly self-confident face I knew so well.

“I’m going all out here. Are you with me?” he asked.

“You bet. If anything, you should be careful not to let me leave you in the dust.” I returned his bold smile.

We need to teach this evil aristocrat a lesson and help Letitia and the others!

Within an instant, the room was flooded with bright yellow and jade green light from our magic sequences.



Castro Garcia was a soldier in Count Wilhelm’s private army. He was a former mercenary who had been involved in conflicts in the Southern Nations.

He hadn't chosen this lifestyle. Fighting was just the only way for him to make a living. His parents had died before he could remember. His sister, two years younger than him, was disabled and unable to walk by herself. First, Castro provided food by stealing it, and soon he became a child soldier so that he could earn better money.

As luck would have it, Castro was gifted. While his friends and the adults around him died, he was different. He had the natural intuition and immense fortitude to come back fighting, no matter what challenges he faced.

Whenever Castro's clients paid him his reward, he would spend the majority of it on his sister. He ignored the laughter of the other soldiers as he picked out things to bring back to her as souvenirs. That was the way he preferred to live. It was all for her, his only remaining family. He cared greatly about blood ties—at least until he found out that he and his sister were not truly related, after which blood stopped mattering to him.

"Who cares if we aren't related by blood?" he would say. "She's my family."

No matter what, he loved her as his sister. Ultimately, what he needed was somebody who would accept his affection—somebody who needed him. Somebody who couldn't survive without him.

"I only feel like I deserve to be alive when I see her smile. She makes me feel like I'm not such a bad guy after all."

She was more important to him than she realized. It was his devotion to her that kept him going.

Castro had chosen to work for Count Wilhelm solely because of the good pay and working conditions. He knew there was no way he could go on fighting in a war zone forever, and there weren't many employers who would take on somebody who had never even learned to write. It was obvious to him that his boss was a nasty piece of work, but Castro was no saint either.

I'm going to hell one way or another, he thought. I don't care what I have to do as long as I can make her happy.

Such an experienced fighter didn't see the royal court magicians before him as much of a threat. It wasn't that he was unaware of their strength: famed

throughout the kingdom for his outstanding talents, Luke Waldstein was known as the Shining Light of Ardenfeld, while his ally Noelle Springfield was a rising star who had held her own against the Fairy Queen at the World Magic Championships. If he were to fight those two on equal terms, Castro's chances of victory would've been next to nothing.

However, the court magicians were in a seriously tight spot right now. The power of the Arianrhod restricted them to a mere tenth of their full potential. Not only were they tired from constant fighting, but even Noelle Springfield was injured. To make matters worse, fifty-eight of the count's toughest soldiers had them surrounded.

The outcome is obvious, but I won't be showing any mercy.

He knew that even though his side had such an overwhelming advantage, one moment of weakness could cause it all to unravel.

I'll aim for the injured girl.

The soldiers all moved in at once. While holding Luke Waldstein back with their sustained fire, they would crush Noelle Springfield. She would be powerless to stop them. When she was already exhausted, she wouldn't have the composure to fight with limited power.

She did her best to cope with the hail of bullets, but she was several steps behind. Even with the help of Spell Boost, it was taking all she had just to narrowly avoid being hit. The soldiers closed in. One of them approached her from behind and was on the verge of landing a decisive blow—only to be hit by a surprise attack.

"Blast Rising!"

A flash of light turned everything white for a moment. The intensity of the spell was incredible, given that its caster was limited to ten percent of his power.

However, by suddenly launching such a powerful spell, Luke had left himself open to attacks from behind. He was defenseless as another flurry of bullets came at him from the rear.

"Wind Blast!"

At that moment, a great roar shook the room. Just as they fired their guns, a great cannonball of wind sent the two soldiers behind Luke flying like pinballs.

“Nice work, Noelle.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

The two exchanged glances. It might’ve seemed initially like they were simply covering for each other’s mistakes, but the effectiveness of their coordination made Castro Garcia gulp.

They’re luring us in to attack from behind because each of them has faith that the other will always launch a counterattack. I can’t believe they have that kind of nerve and awareness.

A single slipup could prove fatal, and yet they totally trusted each other for protection. Their coordination was flawless. The time that Noelle had spent aiding her coworkers in the hellish environment of the Mages’ Guild had sharpened her situational awareness to an absurd degree. At the same time, Luke knew his mentee’s style perfectly, from her favored spells and casting speed right down to the tiniest details. After watching her for so long, his level of understanding was extraordinary.

But it doesn’t matter how effectively they bring out each other’s power when the odds are stacked against them. There’s no way they can make a breakthrough.

The soldiers used their numerical advantage to ensnare the pair of magicians. The difference in strength was clear. The soldiers closed in, ready to put an end to the battle. At that moment, though, an intense wave of cold washed over Castro.

They’re fighting even better than before...

Wind and lightning attacks grazed his face. With a tremendous noise, the spells tore a hole in the wall of the mansion. Before Castro even understood what was going on, he saw that five of his fellow soldiers were out of action.

How is this possible? They only have ten percent of their magic power!

It seemed inconceivable, but it was happening right before his eyes. The two

magicians were making light work of what had looked like a ridiculous disadvantage. Exceeding all expectations, they had a monstrous ability to get stronger as their situation became worse.

Those two... What the hell are they?



Surrounded by layers upon layers of magic sequences and disbelieving soldiers, the two magicians were still fighting, but their miraculous feats couldn't continue forever. Their magic power was already restricted, and it was running out too. Moreover, Noelle Springfield had been fighting with a severe injury the entire time. Little by little, she was approaching her limit. Defending herself and prolonging the battle was all she could do.

"Sorry, Luke," she murmured.

Her movements were growing sluggish. She couldn't quite deal with all the oncoming bullets.

"It's okay," Luke Waldstein replied. "I'll do something."

A flash of lightning ripped through the air, filling the area with harsh light. Luke's next move struck fear into the hearts of his opponents.

He'd been hospitalized for an extended period. After spending over three years working without rest in pursuit of his ultimate goal, it had become normal for him to operate in a suboptimal state, but things were different now. After his superiors had forced him to recuperate, he was now in the best physical condition of his life.

What will it take to stop this boy...? Count Wilhelm thought, astounded.

However, the constant fighting was taking its toll. As he neared his limit, Luke's firepower declined. It took all his strength just to endure the onslaught and buy time.

"Give up, young Waldstein," the count muttered. "You know best of all that there is no point in continuing to fight."

"Sorry, but I don't believe in quitting. Neither does she."

Noelle was on her knees next to Luke, but her eyes burned with passion. She

was carefully watching their opponents and launching attacks just at the right moments to help him. Observing the two of them, Count Wilhelm pursed his lips.

“But maybe there’s an opportunity for negotiation.” Nobody in the room had expected Luke to suggest such a thing. “If you guarantee our safety and that of the other magicians, we can choose to overlook your crimes, as if nothing ever happened. That’s what I’m proposing.”

Count Wilhelm blinked.

“Huh?” Noelle broke the tense silence. “Wait, come on! He’s the worst! Like, the *worst!!!* We should be knocking him into next week!”

“Listen. The fact is, we’re in dire straits. This is the best way to draw a line under it all.”

Noelle quietly looked up at Luke. She chewed her lip for a moment, then looked down and let out a heavy sigh. “You’re right.”

The count looked doubtful. “Why should I believe you? Why the sudden change of heart?”

“I’ve determined that even if we keep fighting, it’ll be hard to break the deadlock. We could beat all your guards, but you still have hostages. I’m not so desperate to defeat you that I’d sacrifice my colleagues. And I know that for the people who rule from the top, there are complications. Things aren’t always black-and-white.” Luke paused. “As the Waldstein family heir, I may consider offering you my support.”

“The Waldsteins are Royalists. Your father can’t stand provincial nobles like me.”

“Precisely—I am on bad terms with my father. I’m sure someone as well-informed as you is aware of that.” Luke smiled calmly. “I think we can be good partners. Indeed, we both do whatever we must to achieve our goals.”

“Yes, you and I are cut from the same cloth.”

“Quite. There is a benefit to you in having connections with one of the big three Royalist families. Meanwhile, with your help, I think I could rise to

become head of the family sooner than expected.”

“I see what you mean. Our interests align.” Count Wilhelm fell silent for a moment. He placed a hand on his chin and glanced down thoughtfully toward Luke. “I hear what you’re saying, but I think you’ve forgotten what a clear advantage I have right now.”

“And that’s why I’m offering you so much in return.”

“You think that’s enough?” The count smirked cruelly. “Well, it isn’t. Make me an offer I can’t refuse, young Waldstein. Unless you’d rather die where you stand, that is,” he sneered.

“I had a feeling you might say that.” Luke sighed. “But you couldn’t help but consider it when I explained what you could gain. Hold up a shiny penny in front of a money-grubbing pig, and you can guarantee it’ll lose sight of what really matters.” He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. “Obviously, I was never going to help you. I was just playing for time while reinforcements arrived. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“No reinforcements are coming. The villa is surrounded by a magical barrier preventing contact with the outside world.”

“Oh, they’re coming, all right.” The corners of Luke’s mouth quietly turned upward. “You see, the captain is *very* protective of his subordinates.”

As soon as Luke spoke, Count Wilhelm felt the sting of an enormous magical aura. Somebody was approaching with slow, careful footsteps. It was strange that the count hadn’t noticed sooner, but by the time he turned around, the man was already right behind him. The man’s body was like carved steel, and his hair burned bright red.

He was the Hellfire Magician, the kingdom’s toughest user of fire-type magic: Captain Gawain Stark.

“Don’t move! One more step, and twenty-one of your fellow magicians will be blown to smithereens.” The count glared and brandished the detonator.

Everything was quiet. Gawain walked forward wordlessly and unceasingly, as if he couldn’t even hear the count’s threats. His eyes were blank, and his face was blank.

“Are you sure about this?” Count Wilhelm jeered. “I really will activate the detonator.”

Gawain said nothing. He simply kept walking, unflinching.

Count Wilhelm hadn't considered this possibility. Now that Gawain was pressuring him to take action, he was totally perplexed. The count had the strongest hand in this situation, given that the IMUB agents were locked up and at his mercy. All he had to do to stop his opponents was threaten to ignite the gunpowder. Furthermore, Captain Gawain Stark was well-known for having a soft spot for his comrades, so keeping them as hostages should have had a particularly strong effect on him. However, Gawain Stark was not relenting.

He must have expected that I would use this as a threat. Does he think I won't really do it?

Conflicted, the count hesitated. Playing his trump card at this stage was definitely not the best thing to do, but he had no choice if he wanted to prove that he wasn't bluffing.

Fine. If he's trying to lose his comrades, then I'll give him what he wants.

Count Wilhelm pressed the switch. But as soon as he did so, he felt some kind of viscous fluid oozing from between his fingers.

“Ugh!”

A sharp pain made his mind go blank for a moment—a nervous reaction to touching something extremely hot. The molten detonator dripped to the floor, leaving the palm of his right hand red and raw. What was once the detonator bubbled and gurgled as it began to melt.

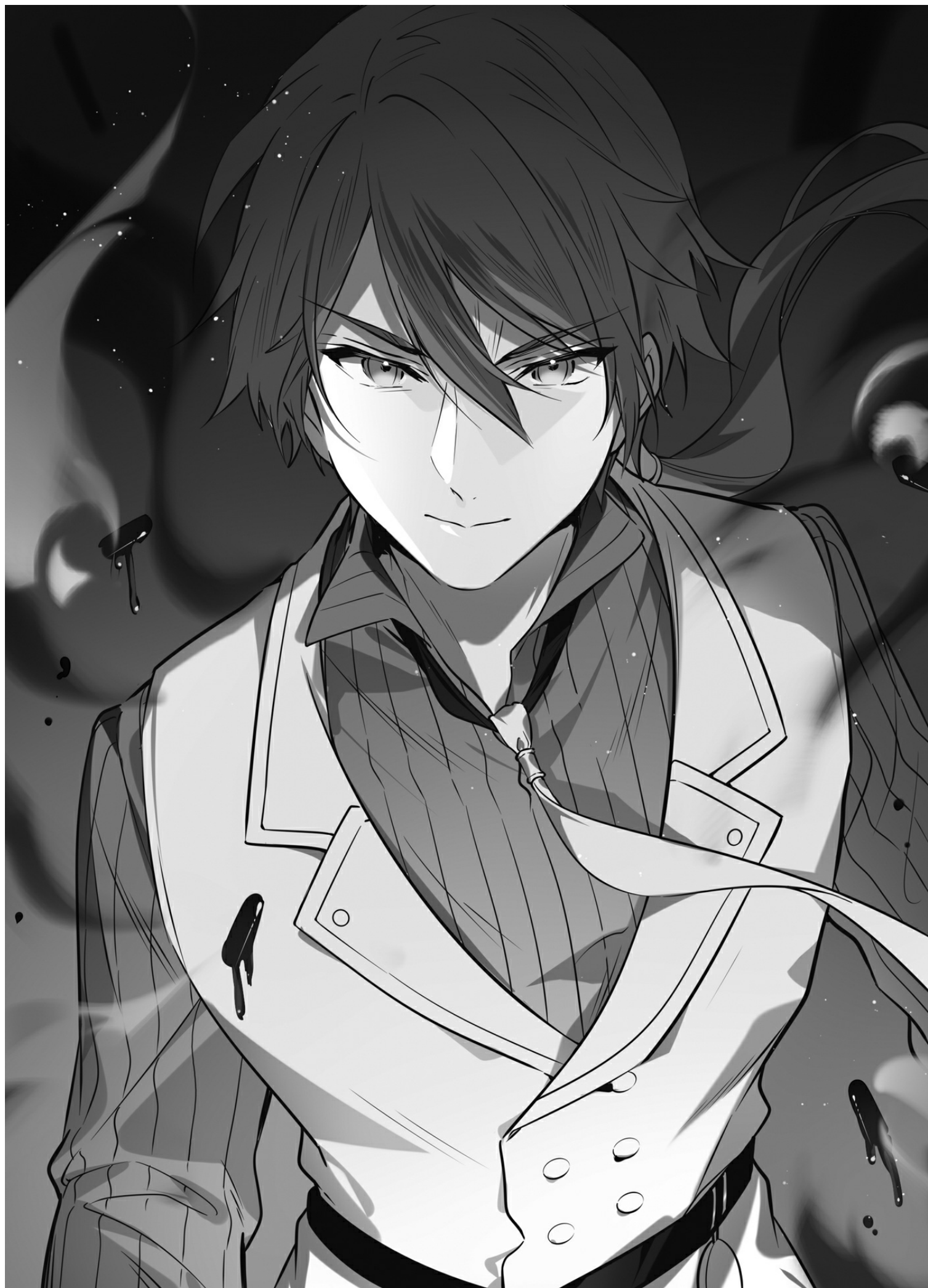
What just...?

This seemed beyond the realm of possibility.

“Shoot him!” the count barked, clutching his right hand. “Kill him!”

The soldiers fired their guns, but Gawain continued to walk as normal. The bullets flew toward him like falling rain. However, when they got close, the bullets burst into smoke as if they'd come into contact with the heat of a star. They melted and disintegrated into the air, leaving nothing but the stench of

molten metal.



Impossible... He only has a tenth of his power!

The soldiers present were the best of the best—the ones Count Wilhelm was proudest of. But even with state-of-the-art magical weapons at their disposal, they couldn't land a single scratch on the magus.

This is ridiculous! What is this power?

The room was full of extravagant decorations, from beautiful furniture and paintings to red carpets and crystal chandeliers. One by one, they bubbled, smoked, and finally evaporated.

Count Wilhelm hadn't known that there was something one must never do in front of the Hellfire Magician: taking hostages was not an option. If somebody ever broke that golden rule...

Captain Gawain would see red and turn into an unstoppable monster.

I-Isn't there something I can do...? the count thought, looking around frantically.

He spotted Letitia, bound and injured. He pressed the muzzle of his pistol against her cheek.

"The gun is too close for you to melt it," Count Wilhelm declared. "It would leave this woman's face with scars that will never heal."

Gawain's eyes opened a little wider. The magic surrounding him grew stronger. His aura was more powerful than ever, giving off a scorching heat. His power was beyond understanding; it was completely off the charts.

But what followed caught everyone off guard, even Gawain himself.

Somebody cast an ice spell faster than the eye could see. The guards restraining Letitia instantly fell unconscious and slowly slumped to the floor. The eardrum-rending sound of a gunshot could be heard, but by the time the bullet was fired, Letitia was no longer there.

In an instant, Letitia had shifted position and slammed Count Wilhelm to the ground. The handcuffs binding her had become brittle at a temperature below

minus-150 degrees, and now their remains hung around her wrists like bracelets.

After throwing the count against the red carpeted floor, she swung an ice sword down toward his head. The blade was sharp enough to slice through human flesh like jelly, but somebody pushed in, and the sword merely grazed the count's ear.

"He isn't worth killing," Gawain said softly, his right hand gripping her wrist.

Letitia gritted her teeth. Her left hand shook as she tightly clenched the sword. Count Wilhelm was her teacher's enemy—the man she'd been hunting down all these years. She wanted to slaughter him. Rage and passion surged through her veins.

But Gawain wasn't holding her back out of malice. Letitia knew as well as he did that she would never forgive herself for succumbing to this moment of weakness.

"You're right," she murmured, avoiding his gaze.

She had always longed to condemn her mortal enemy to hell. She'd understood all along that revenge was pointless, but she'd been unable to stop herself from pursuing him regardless. She expected that her teacher would've been angry with her. "What are you doing?" he would have asked. "Is this really how you want to live your life?"

But it was important to me, she thought. I'm not looking for forgiveness. I don't care about being understood. This is my life and I've made my choices.

Still, when the end comes, maybe I'll meet my teacher again in some other place. I hope he'll tell me off the way he used to.

In that moment, these childish thoughts filled Letitia's head.

Epilogue: His and Her Connection

The last thing I could remember after Captain Gawain came to our rescue was that I gave him the formula for the spell blocking healing magic on Prince Raphael. Even though I'd received first aid, I'd still gone on fighting after losing a significant amount of blood. As I found out later, I had blacked out from anemia.

I woke up in a bed in the Fourth Unit's infirmary. Rays of sunlight shone in through a gap in the immaculate white curtains. According to a clock on the wall, it was six o'clock, but I had some trouble figuring out whether it was morning or evening. The softness of the light suggested that it was probably morning.

"I see you're awake, Noelle Springfield." A friendly smile peeked out between long, glossy locks of hair. The woman—or man, as I realized when I looked again—was Fourth Unit Captain Vicente Cera. "It looks like you pushed yourself a little too hard. Normally, you'd need two weeks in the hospital after receiving an injury like that. However, with my skills, I can see to it that you'll be discharged after five days." Captain Vicente flashed a playful smirk. "I only told Captain Gawain the first part, so he thinks you need two weeks for a full recovery. Please think of the rest of that time as a little bit of extra vacation for yourself."

"Thank you very much."

"I should be thanking you. It's all because of your efforts that we were able to save His Royal Highness. To be honest, you did more than I ever could've expected."

"I'm just glad he'll be okay." I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Yes, but I must say, I'm still a little tired after being at his bedside for so long." Captain Vicente rubbed his eyes. "Her Majesty the Queen was overjoyed. She said she would like to see you and offer her thanks in person."

“W-Well, I’m flattered, but I think I’d get sick during something as formal as that.”

“You needn’t be so concerned. She also gave me a letter to pass on to you.”

I looked at the paper he’d handed to me. The handwriting looked hurried, but it was still beautiful. It seemed she had been desperate to put her feelings down in words even though she had so much going on.

The letter conveyed the feelings of a mother who loved her little boy. She spoke of how he was so important that she wouldn’t hesitate to take his place if it would free him from pain. I was still something of a child myself, so I couldn’t say I understood those feelings perfectly, but I did know how it felt to be close to losing something of great personal importance. It made me feel pleased that I’d been able to help. I couldn’t stop myself from beaming when I reached the end of the letter and saw “Thank you!” written in a childish scrawl.

“You did well.” Captain Vicente’s smile was warm, like basking in spring sunlight. “By the way, Seamus from the Improper Magic Usage Bureau commended you too. He said it was thanks to you that Count Wilhelm’s crimes were finally brought to light.”

“Oh, I don’t think I really—”

“But he still isn’t happy with the Third Unit magicians. He said they’d stolen the IMUB’s thunder yet again.”

“Yeah, sorry about that...”

“Don’t worry. You can just treat it as an idle complaint.” The magus then looked at me intensely. “You know, I’d heard you were talented, but you turned out to be more special than I’d imagined.”

“Huh?”

“Would you consider joining the Fourth Unit? I can’t offer you the position of lieutenant, but you could be third-in-command.”

“Th-Third-in-command?” I couldn’t believe my ears.

Th-This has to be a joke, right?

Sounding totally serious, Captain Vicente continued, “The position comes with

benefits. You would receive a salary increase.”

“R-Really?!”

“The work environment is very relaxed. You could take the witch doctors’ exam or get other qualifications. Credentials like those could really help you. And no matter what, we’d make sure you never have to go hungry.”

“I can get qualifications?! I can *never go hungry*?!”

“And I’ve heard you’re a real lover of magic, Noelle. Wouldn’t you like to learn the Fourth Unit’s secrets of healing magic?”

“S-S-S-Secrets?!?”

“Let me give you an example. If you draw *this* magic sequence *this* way, then you get *this*!”

“Oooh!”

“And if you put this line here, it produces this interesting effect.”

“Wow!”

“What really matters is this secondary support sequence...*but* I can’t tell you more than that unless you join us. What comes next is for Fourth Unit eyes only.”

“O-Oh...”

It was a very attractive offer. I lacked experience in studying healing magic, so it would obviously be useful to my career as a magician.

Oh, I wanna know... I really wanna know their secrets!

I could barely contain my lust for knowledge. I caught myself starting to drool. Perhaps if things had been different, I would’ve thrown caution to the wind and jumped at the chance.

However, I didn’t want to lose what I had. It was unfortunate—truly unfortunate—but my mind was made up from the very start.

“I’m sorry,” I replied, “but I still need to repay Luke for all of his help.”

“I appreciate your honesty. Well, I suppose that means I can’t tempt you

unless I bring Luke in as well.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll come up with a plan, but let’s leave it there for now. I look forward to doing business with you again.” Captain Vicente waved and left the room.

Did that really just happen?

At first, I was too shocked to even move. Gradually, joy welled up within me as I understood what a great honor this was.

He’s trying to headhunt me!

By working with magic, I was doing what I loved most. Nothing could make me happier than hearing people compliment me and tell me I was needed. Better yet, this time I was receiving praise for healing magic, one of my weaker areas. I felt like I was improving one step at a time. I was developing as a magician, and it was so encouraging to see the fruits of my labor.

Just as I was clutching the light, floral scented blanket to my chest in excitement, I heard a voice.

“You look like you’ve received the best news of your life.”

When I looked up, I saw Luke in the doorway, dressed in a light blue hospital gown.

“Is it okay for you to be out of bed?” I asked.

“It’s fine. I’m practically recovered. Unfortunately, that’s only because before all this, I was confined to my room with somebody on watch at all times.”

“Confined? What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s my business.”

It sounded like there was a deeper, darker story to this. I wondered what on earth had gone on at the rest home in Grambern.

“Are you okay, Noelle?”

“Yup. I’m resilient. After all, I used to eat random stuff growing in the wild when I was a kid.”

“Your stories from childhood are as unsettling as ever.”

“There were these colorful mushrooms I couldn’t get enough of. They had a real kick to them.”

“Don’t eat those again. I’m begging you.”

I went on to tell Luke about everything that had happened in his absence. There was so much that I wanted to say. He listened quietly while I spoke, throwing in smiles and looks of exasperation here and there.

That’s what I love about Luke, I thought, but I wasn’t sure quite what kind of “love” that was. I obviously saw him as a dear friend, but I hadn’t worked out whether it was a romantic love I felt. Besides, I hadn’t gotten any closer to knowing what Luke’s “love” meant.

Anyway, I figured I was happy enough not knowing for the time being. There was no rush to label these feelings as platonic or romantic. All over the world, people had friends and lovers, but the meanings of those relationships were specific to each of them. In the same way, my connection with Luke simply was what it was.

Luke was a clever guy. I was sure that he’d explain when the time was right. His feelings were his alone, and they had nothing to do with anybody else. I didn’t know the exact nature of those feelings, but I had confidence that the two of us would be just fine, whatever happened. I had no evidence for it, but that’s what I believed.

On the day of my discharge, Misha came to the infirmary.

“Hey, you’re getting out today, right? I came to give you a hand. Oh, listen to this, Noelle. Somebody came up to me in the street recently and gave me his contact details. He said it was love at first sight!”

“Wow, that’s exciting!”

“Right? I was like, ‘Damn, I’ve still got it!’ Anyway, I thought I’d give him a fair chance, but then on our second date, he suddenly said, ‘Do you have a moment to talk about the Lord?’ and started trying to sell me some dodgy religious books. And for three thousand gold coins each!”

“Oh...”

“I was so angry I slapped him silly. I should just stick to cats, no doubt about it.”

“You’re so cool.”

We continued to chat cheerfully as we gathered my belongings together.

“I just remembered something you mentioned a while ago,” Misha said. “Something about not knowing whether you like somebody as a friend or if you’re actually into them?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Did you ever get the answer you were looking for?”

“I did,” I replied, nodding.

“Wait, seriously?” Misha leaned forward excitedly. “So? Which is it?”

“Neither.”

She didn’t seem to understand what I was saying. “What a cop-out! Come on, a girl your age must have certain *desires*. Don’t you wanna try dating people? Kissing?”

“Of course I have desires.”

“You do? Like what?”

“I wanna become even better at magic. I wanna keep pushing myself harder!”

“Uh...” Misha froze for a moment, before putting her head in her hands.

“I-Is that bad?” I said, uncertain.

“No, I just realized how hard things must be for a certain someone.” Misha laughed. “But it’s very *you*. I like it.”



Ernest Maeterlinck, also known as the Glimmering Magician, was the captain of the First Unit of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division and leader of the Central Administration Office. His private office was a strange place, protected by eighteenfold magical barriers erected by the kingdom’s leading specialists.

The magus's guest was a magician with silver hair and sapphire eyes—none other than Luke Waldstein. The young man was a prodigy who had risen through the ranks faster than anybody else in history and become the Third Unit's third-in-command.

"Have you had a chance to consider what I brought up in my recent letter?" Luke asked.

Captain Ernest's solemn expression remained unchanged. "I believe I've told you before that you're still too early in your career."

"Yes, I agreed with you at that time." Luke nodded. "However, in the time since, I have accomplished more than any of the other candidates for the position of the next magus. I took down Nightfall, the notorious crime syndicate. My involvement in exploring the uncharted areas of the Weissrosa Abyss opened up new avenues for the Kingdom of Ardenfeld to acquire dungeon relics and magic resources. At the World Magic Championships, I was the first human to defeat Esther Blueforest, and I went toe-to-toe with the Fairy Queen too. Moreover, I'm sure you know that Noelle and I made a key contribution during the recent Count Wilhelm affair."

"I certainly can't deny your achievements. But if I grant your wish, you must accept the responsibility that comes with it. We're talking about something that has never happened in the history of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. You may be exposed to harsh criticism. It is precisely because you are such a talented magician that I want to train you with great care."

"I appreciate the thought, but I don't have much time."

Luke carefully explained his reasons. There were parts of his story that Captain Ernest had had no idea about.

At the end, the magus looked at Luke sternly. "If you make one wrong move, you'll lose everything. Are you saying that doesn't concern you?"

"I don't fear losing my rank or reputation. I've never particularly cared about having prestige. I'm prepared to give up everything, with one important exception."

"And you want me to do this for you so that you won't lose that one thing."

“Indeed.”

Captain Ernest closed his eyes and folded his arms. A strained, heavy silence fell over the room.

“I understand your intentions,” the magus said eventually, his eyes still closed. “I’ll think about it. Be prepared.”



That day, Letitia Lisette-Stone felt something unusual. She went about the same daily tasks as normal, saw the usual sights, and had trivial conversations that she’d probably never think about again. However, it all seemed strangely new and exciting. It was like she’d stepped into another world that just happened to look familiar.

I’m really lucky to be here, she thought, feeling that deep in her heart like never before.

At the same time, a more selfish side of her felt restless. Everything, good and bad, had turned out just the way she’d hoped. She could say with certainty that she had what she wanted, but as she walked, she shook her head.

I mustn’t let myself be weak.

She wanted to take responsibility for her actions. Enduring the pain in her heart, she smiled as if everything were fine. She felt like that was the adult thing to do.

“Excuse me,” she said, arriving at the office of Captain Gawain, her mentor.

Gawain shifted his gaze from a thick pile of paperwork to the sealed envelope Letitia had placed on his desk. He furrowed his brow. “What’s this?”

“My letter of resignation,” Letitia replied. “I wish to leave the Royal Court Magicians’ Division.”

“Can I ask you why?”

Letitia responded with a slight nod. “It’s related to the investigation into Count Wilhelm’s many crimes. I stole information from the Improper Magic Usage Bureau and illegally conducted inquiries into the orphanages run by Count Wilhelm. I also tranquilized an orphan girl and used a shape-shifting

potion to steal her identity and infiltrate Count Wilhelm's villa. My conduct breached organizational protocol and the rules of society."

"In my opinion, it was all necessary to solve this case. I've said you did it under my orders. You won't be held responsible."

"But I did it all without authorization. I even lied to you when you asked me. How can you call that anything other than professional misconduct?"

"Considering the fact that there were unidentified enemy informants within the royal palace, I think that was the right choice too. Besides, as your senior officer, I should accept blame for allowing you to do those things."

Letitia pursed her lips for a moment. "How can you sacrifice yourself so readily for the sake of others?"

"There's nothing especially noble about it. I just don't want the people I like to leave. It's pure selfishness."

"But you nominated me to be your lieutenant when I was still in the First Unit. You did that to protect me from court nobles, didn't you?"

"All right. I guess I'll come out with it," Gawain said quietly. "One cold night, the rain wouldn't stop. I met up with somebody—my junior from when I was a student. He said he had something important weighing on him that he couldn't share with anyone." He paused. "He whispered into my ear, 'I have a proposal that will make you unlimited money overnight.'"

"Huh?"

"I decided it would be prudent to hear him out. I ended up agreeing to his proposal. I trusted him and believed it would work out. The offer of unlimited money sounded too good to turn down."

"May I ask you to apologize to everyone who has ever been called 'prudent'?"

"To my surprise, it was a scam. I ended up with mountains of debt."

"Well, of course."

"I turned to Ernest for help. I said I was worried that I'd end up dipping into the division's coffers, so I wanted him to send me somebody who was good at managing finances. And that's how, after we'd joined the division together, you

and I were reunited in the Third Unit.”

“The truth is so much more pathetic than I thought. I feel embarrassed for you.”

“Please, don’t flatter me like that. You’ll make me blush.”

“I can’t see how you’d ever interpret that as flattery.” Letitia rolled her eyes.

Gawain chuckled and scratched his head sheepishly. “The point is, I’m too trusting and easily led astray. I’m useless on my own. That’s why I need somebody at my side who’s cool and rational, unlike me.” He looked Letitia in the eye. “I’ll make sure there’s a place for you here, no matter what happens. In return, help me out. I need you.”

The room was totally silent. Letitia opened her eyes wide. She looked down, trying to find the words to respond.

“All right,” she said in the end. “I’ll stay if you still want me.”

“Great. I’m glad to have you on board.” Gawain grinned. “Now, I have something to ask you about right away. Somebody was telling me about a possible side gig that would let me double my annual salary if I do this thing for just one hour a day, and I was thinking I should seriously consider—”

“Please stop talking.”



“I hear your chat with Letitia went well,” Second Unit Captain Chris Sherlock said.

He had come to Gawain’s office shortly after Gawain’s meeting with Letitia. Having attended the same magic academy at the same time as the two of them, Chris was well aware of Gawain and Letitia’s situation. He knew about Letitia’s efforts to chase down Count Wilhelm as an act of revenge for her “teacher,” a former First Unit magician. Finally, Chris knew something that Letitia didn’t.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t tell her that you were one of her teacher’s students?” Chris asked.

“There’s no need. I was a bad kid raised in an orphanage, and she was a landowner’s daughter. We lived in entirely different worlds. There’s no reason

she would remember.”

Gawain looked out of the window and reminisced about his and Letitia’s childhoods.

In those days, Gawain was a delinquent, known for being difficult to handle. He had no parents, no money, and no adults in his life to offer him affection. He only had his buddies at the orphanage. If anybody hurt them, he would give them hell, no matter who it was, and he was always willing to take the blame if one of his buddies did something bad. He earned a reputation as an incorrigible ruffian whom everyone eyed with fear and suspicion.

But one man took a liking to him and made a point of speaking to him nearly every day.

“Fantastic work, lad. You have a knack for this,” the man told him at one point.

He explained that he was a former royal court magician, and invited Gawain to his private school where he taught magic to impoverished children. Gawain was uninterested at first, but he soon caved in to the man’s repeated invitations and began studying magic.

The man turned out to be a great teacher. Just as he’d claimed, Gawain had talent—the kind of outstanding talent that was enough to catch the eye of a former court magician. Gawain quickly surpassed the other children in magical ability, but there was one he couldn’t beat.

That child’s name was Letitia Lisette-Stone. She came from a noble family that controlled the local area, and she had been learning magic for two years longer than Gawain. As well as receiving the kind of private education typical for a nobleman’s daughter, Letitia demonstrated magical ability on a level beyond any of the other children. Secretly, Gawain saw her as his rival.

One day, I’ll overtake her and blow everyone’s minds! he thought, and he threw himself into his training.

His teacher smiled upon seeing his efforts. “You learn so quickly! You’re a wonderful student.”

But Gawain didn't think he was special, even if he was doing a good job under the circumstances. Even so, his teacher knew just how to inflate his ego.

"I dunno about that," Gawain retorted skeptically, trying to hide his embarrassment. "I'm not that great."

Excited to receive such praise, he devoted more energy than ever to his studies, probably because he adored his teacher. After all, no other adult had ever accepted him or spoken so highly of him.

One day, his teacher called him over to talk. "There's something I want to ask you to do. If that girl is ever in trouble, I want you to help her. I've given her a very difficult task."

Of course, he was talking about Letitia, the girl Gawain regarded as his rival.

Why me? Gawain thought, but seeing the seriousness in his teacher's expression, he could tell that this was no ordinary request. He felt like this was something too important to ignore.

Well, whatever. I'll help her, he thought as he walked home under the glowing orange sky. *My teacher will be so pleased with me if I do a good job!*

However, that conversation turned out to be Gawain's last meeting with his teacher. The next day, his teacher died, and young Gawain learned the true meaning of sadness.

In hindsight, when he said, "I want you to help her," their teacher had probably meant that he expected Gawain to speak to Letitia and be a good friend. She'd never been the type to actively seek out friendship, and she'd always been wrapped up in the expectations that came with her noble birth. As a result, she seemed to lack friends or even acquaintances her own age.

Their teacher must have been counting on the fact that the two of them shared the common language of magic, but after his death, Gawain no longer had the opportunity to speak to Letitia. After all, he was a bratty orphan, and she was a nobleman's daughter. Without their teacher's school as a point of contact between them, they were worlds apart.

I guess I'll just do everything I can.

He decided to start by becoming somebody capable of assisting Letitia. Using his talent as a selling point, he got himself adopted by the Stark family, who were looking for a child with magical ability. He then started attending a prestigious academy of magic, but he felt out of place in an environment where the majority of students came from aristocratic backgrounds.

“My family has produced many cabinet ministers,” the older students would say. “Our world is nothing like the world of commoners.”

It wasn't unusual to hear such absurd, illogical comments. His roommate was a commoner who faced bullying on a daily basis, but Gawain always fought back against his tormentors and faced punishment as a consequence.

“This is already the third time this month...” the teachers would say on multiple occasions.

“I don't think I've done anything wrong,” he'd respond. “They're the ones who started the fight.”

Conveniently, he was the most experienced fighter in the academy. He also knew that if he kept doing the humane thing, there would always be people to back him up—including the Starks.

“Wonderful work, Gawain!” his adoptive mother exclaimed one day. “You're too brave to bend to authority. That's my boy!”

“But I'm not sure it's good to be causing trouble...” his meek father suggested. While Gawain's mother was a Stark through and through, his father had married into the family.

“Nobody asked!”

“Yes, dear.”

Gawain rapidly improved his skills, and soon he had the best grades in the academy when it came to practical subjects. He couldn't compete with Chris and Letitia in the more theoretical classes, but that gave him a good excuse to reach out and get to know them. He didn't have any special relationship with Letitia, though. Now that he was an adopted member of the Stark household, she didn't realize that he was the same boy she'd known before, and he didn't feel the need to divulge that information.

Everyone saw Letitia as a model student in those days, but at the same time, she was involved in dangerous stuff behind the scenes. She was determined to expose the evils that ran rampant among the kingdom's nobility and the clergy. To that end, she was constantly trespassing and carrying out other illegal investigations.

"Even the biggest troublemakers in the school have nothing on her," Gawain remarked to Chris one night.

"Her goals are simply on a greater scale. And I don't think we have any right to complain." Standing with him on the roof of a crooked aristocrat's villa, Chris rolled his eyes. "Anyway, why did you drag me along?"

"I had to. If something goes wrong, I won't have the strength to stop her from getting caught on my own. That's why I need help from none other than the Great Chris, the academy's shining talent."

"You say that, but I know it's because you really think you're stronger than me."

"I mean, I *am* stronger."

"You only have one more win than me. How about we level that score right now?"

"Hold on. Letitia's just come out, and somebody's following her."

"Well, I suppose I'll just have to let it slide for now. But please tell me this is the last time you'll ask me to help."

"Got it."

From then on, Gawain continued to bring Chris along nearly every week to watch over Letitia's operations in different aristocrats' homes. The trio's odd relationship persisted even after they'd joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division. Letitia would put her life at risk to find out about nobles who were up to no good, while Gawain and Chris would follow at a safe distance to keep an eye on her during her escapades.

Now that Gawain was older, he looked back fondly on those days. He felt like

he'd had the time of his life back then, whether or not that would make sense to most other people.

"It was fun for what it was," he said wistfully.

"True. It was good to have some excitement," Chris agreed. "But I never really understood why you got so involved."

"Is it strange to look out for a friend in need?"

"You might think it's normal, but I think you tend to take it too far. Then again, I've known you for so long that I understand it's just who you are."

If his classmate was being bullied, Gawain would send those bullies flying. If he heard an old school friend was having money troubles, he'd pretend to fall for a scam and give them the cash they needed. And that was why everyone said—out of respect and more than a little annoyance—that Captain Gawain Stark had a special weakness for his comrades.



After getting out of the infirmary, I did nothing all day but lounge in bed and read the grimoires I'd gathered. Once I'd gotten all the relaxation I wanted, I returned to work. As nice as it was to take a breather and enjoy myself, I had to admit that magic kept calling my name.

I still can't believe I get to use magic at work... This is the best!

As I repaired some magical items used in a recent expedition, I couldn't stop smiling.

"You're really crazy about magic, huh?" Misha remarked. "I'd call it an obsession, but it's more than that. It's practically a fetish."

I giggled. "You're too kind."

We were still chatting happily when Luke appeared. "Noelle, you've been summoned."

"Me?"

Wondering what this could be about, I followed Luke as he brought me to a large conference room at the Central Administration Office.

“Yikes!” I blurted out. “A conference...?”

“Why do you look like you’ve just run into your nemesis?”

“I have! Situations requiring proper etiquette are my natural enemy. Ohhh, I can see it right now... I’m having flashbacks to when I hit Captain Ernest on the head with my shoe!”

“Oh, right. That was pretty funny. It wouldn’t have been right to laugh, so we were all trying so hard to keep a straight face.”

“This is no laughing matter! That was the moment when my whole career flashed before my eyes! It was catastrophic!”

“I don’t think anybody was all that bothered about it. It was just a bit of a ‘whoopsie’ moment.”

Grrr... You meanie, taking advantage of this chance to tease me!

I stared daggers at Luke, but as much as it pained me, I knew that the grown-up thing to do was to grin and bear it. I took a deep breath, tried my best to calm down, and walked into the conference room.

Inside were six magi—all of them save Chronos Casablanco, the secretary-general of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division. Captain Ernest, the so-called Glimmering Magician, was in the middle. He was the division’s highest-ranking member after the secretary-general. The others stood on either side of him, including Fourth Unit Captain Vicente Cera, the Savior Magician, who smiled and waved at me.

I’m so nervous... This is not the time for being friendly! Freaking out on the inside, I did all I could to maintain my composure. It’s okay. I’m smart; I’m smooth; I’m hot. My manners are flawless. I’m invincible.

I kept repeating the mantra in my head as I followed Luke through the room. The mood was serious and dignified.

“First, Noelle Springfield,” Captain Ernest began quietly.

“Y-Y-Y-Yesh?!”

Silence returned. Nobody could bear to look at the poor unfortunate girl who had just messed up the first word she’d uttered in this important meeting. That

girl, of course, was me.

“You performed admirably,” Captain Ernest eventually continued. His voice was still calm and detached. “You will receive a reward and a special bonus payment.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied delicately with a bow, while Luke stood rigidly next to me.

Nothing bad happened. Everything went okay. I did it! As I banished those embarrassing memories, the meeting went on.

“Now, I will speak about the new Seventh Unit of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division,” Captain Ernest announced. “After much deliberation, it has been decided that we will establish this experimental unit in response to evolving global challenges and magic-related crime. It will be far smaller in scale than the existing units, but we may consider expanding its jurisdiction depending on early results.”

Wow, a new unit...

Just as the world changed with new technology, the Royal Court Magicians’ Division also had to change with the times. I was wondering what responsibilities the new unit could possibly have when the next piece of information hit me.

“We have decided to entrust the captaincy of the Seventh Unit to Luke Waldstein.”

Huh...? My mind went blank. Luke’s gonna be a captain...? Then what about the Third Unit? Will I still be his mentee?

I couldn’t fully comprehend what was happening. Bewildered, I glanced up at Luke, but he was staring fixedly forward.

Luke was moving onward, and that fact rocked me to the core. It shouldn’t have been such a shock to my system. Obviously, nothing could endlessly remain unchanged, and on an intellectual level, I knew there was no such thing as “forever.” However, somewhere along the way, I’d begun to imagine that we’d get to continue just the way we already were.

I was still frozen in stunned silence when I heard a door open somewhere behind me. The sound carried an unusual gravity and resonance, like I was hearing it from another dimension.

I then heard many quick footsteps as the best magicians in the King's Guard appeared, flanking a man with beautiful golden hair—the crown prince, Michael Ardenfeld. Prince Michael seemed somehow unreal. His perfect features were like a work of art, or like something not of this world.

"I dropped by to say something," the prince said. "I trust you don't mind?"

"Not at all, Your Highness," Captain Ernest replied. "But we have various matters of business to attend to, so I would ask you to make it brief."

"Yes, my apologies. I'll be quick. I am here with a request for the Third Unit magician Noelle Springfield. I would like her to join the King's Guard as its chief magician, as soon as she can—starting next month, if possible."

Huh?! I couldn't understand. Chief magician of the King's Guard? Me? Why?!

The crown prince smiled broadly at me. "I hope you'll consider my offer."

"One moment, please," somebody said quietly beside me. It was a voice I knew all too well. "The captain of each unit has the power to nominate a lieutenant. Doesn't the captain of the new Seventh Unit also have that power?" Luke spoke calmly, but with what sounded like a touch of anger. "As captain of the Seventh Unit, I nominate my mentee, Noelle Springfield, as my lieutenant."

In the tense moment that followed, it felt as if time had stopped. Their eyes met, one pair blue and one pair gold. Meanwhile, as I looked up at the two of them, I had no idea what to do.

Dear Mother,

How is everything at home? I thought I was still a novice in the Royal Court Magicians' Division, but it looks like my career is taking its wildest turn yet.

To be continued in volume 5

Extra Chapter: Looking to the Future

Ten years earlier, Vicente Cera was third-in-command in the Fourth Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. He was working hard on research to fulfill his greatest wish and was willing to do whatever it took to make this dream come true. Ever since the dawn of humanity, many had sought this same goal but had still never achieved it: cosmetic magic that could preserve one's youth forever.

Hmm... Another failed experiment, Vicente thought, peering at a specimen through a magic microscope. The problem must lie in the secondary support sequence. If that isn't it, then I'll have to change the entire structure from the ground up.

It was one failure after another. The challenge was so great that it seemed like it might never be solved. However, quitting was not an option for Vicente.

He was a person who adored beauty. It was his main preoccupation and the thing that drove him to devote his life to research. Despite what some people assumed, Vicente had no particular romantic interest in men—or women, for that matter. The delightful forms of love that appeared in opera appealed to Vicente, but there was something different about it in real life. For him, the aesthetic of beauty was more desirable than the romantic pursuit of others.

Now, where should I make changes? Vicente pondered, leaning back in his chair and staring at the ceiling.

At that moment, the door opened. In walked Vicente's mentee, Klose.

"Vicente, we have a bit of a problem."

"Of what sort?"

"You remember the former prime minister's son who joined two years ago? He's been accused of bullying a new recruit from a commoner background."

"Not again!"

“Yes, it appears he is doing it again.”

“That boy needs a serious talking-to. There’s a lot to take into account when it comes to disciplining a former prime minister’s son, but the reason he’s turned out like this is because the adults in his life went too easy on him.”

“We need to be very careful about how we handle this. Then again, the new recruit had no qualms about kicking him into the air.”

“Into the air?”

“Yes, his flight time was approximately six seconds.”

“He must have gone quite some distance.”

“Indeed.”

“Who was this remarkable rookie?”

“Gawain Stark, a new member of the Third Unit. The one everyone was talking about recently when he became the first person to blow a hole in the wall used to test magic power.”

“Ah, so he’s back in the news.”

“Yes.”

Vicente sighed and stood up. “Let’s go. First of all, we’d better talk to those two.”



Time for me to be mature and responsible, Gawain Stark thought, a few hours before the incident, as he saw how worried his adoptive father was. Gawain was an orphan with no relatives at all, but the Starks had taken him in as one of their own.

“Just be yourself!” his mother would say. “You stand up to people, and that’s what makes you so strong and admirable.”

While she was very much in charge of the household, Gawain’s father had more experience with high society. As a result, he had plenty of concerns about his son.

I have to stop causing trouble so I can pay my parents back for everything

they've done for me, Gawain promised himself.

But on one of his first days at work, he came upon an otherwise empty room and saw another royal court magician bullying one of Gawain's fellow new recruits. Gawain hit the bully with a high kick that launched him into the air for six seconds. He'd just caused a new problem.

That lunchtime, Gawain hung his head like a drenched dog. "Letitia, I think I'm in big trouble."

"Is that so?" Letitia responded coolly, prodding at her lunch without giving Gawain so much as a glance.

"I knew I shouldn't do it, but it was like my body moved on its own! I can't stop myself, even though I know better."

"Is that so?"

"Please help me! You're so great and smart, you must be able to think up some way to stop me from losing my job!"

"Wrong. Please stop asking me," Letitia said flatly.

But Gawain didn't let that stop him. Even if he was going to be the only participant in the conversation, he persisted. "This is a real opportunity. If you think of a solution to my predicament, it'll benefit you too."

"How so?"

"See, I'll be super grateful. And then, I'll go around and make sure everybody in the division knows how smart you are. So basically, if you just help me out, it'll work wonders for your reputation."

"No deal."

"This is your chance to prove that you're the smartest person in the division!"

"I am. In the exam, my total score was second only to Chris, who chose to go to university rather than become a royal court magician."

"Right, and I was top of the class for the practical stuff."

"True. Therefore, if you're out of the picture, then I can be the best in terms of practical subjects too."

“Stop that. I’m begging you for help, so don’t turn on me now.”

In the end, Gawain didn’t manage to secure an offer of assistance from Letitia. But even though he hadn’t gotten the result he wanted, as he watched her leave after lunch, he felt like he’d achieved something.

Talking to somebody at lunch now and then can give you a good change of pace. Ever since we joined the division, Letitia’s been looking more tense than before.

Now that she was in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, Letitia had plenty more opportunities to conduct her investigations, and it seemed to have made her more determined than ever to uncover the crimes of aristocrats. On the other hand, Gawain was concerned that she wasn’t mixing with the other rookie magicians.

She does prefer to be alone, though. I guess I’m poking my nose in too much.

Nevertheless, Gawain was the type of person who couldn’t help but worry about the people close to him. He could still remember clearly what his teacher had said to him on that fateful day.

“There’s something I want to ask you to do. If that girl is ever in trouble, I want you to help her.”

Gawain doubted that his issues were anything serious compared with Letitia’s secret, but when he thought about what his parents had done for him, he felt a responsibility to help her.

Oh, boy. What should I do?

Scratching his head like he always did, Gawain went back to work after lunch.



Letitia Lisette-Stone saw Gawain Stark as just one of her classmates from her time at the academy of magic. He was someone who was soft on the people he cared about and would never let an injustice slide.

Whereas Letitia was so talented that she ended up seeming cold and aloof, Gawain was always surrounded by people, but he came asking Letitia for help whenever he could. Perhaps he saw her as his equal after competing with her

so frequently for test scores, or perhaps he just thought she was a particularly reliable person.

But I get the strange sense that he has some other reason, Letitia thought.

She sometimes felt that he seemed to care about her, though she couldn't work out why. She wondered whether there was something about her that interested him, or if he merely saw her as one of his crew. Regardless, she didn't particularly want to know. She knew that people's feelings were complicated and that learning more about them could change things irreversibly. Above all, she had something more important to worry about—something she was putting her life on the line for.

I don't have time to waste on thinking about things that don't matter. I have to focus on what I need to do.

But even though she was determined to concentrate on her ultimate goal, Letitia also wanted to be like her teacher, who had always fought for what was right. She felt uncomfortable about the inequality propagated by court nobles and wanted to do whatever she could to make things better.

She went to speak to Vicente Cera, third-in-command in the Fourth Unit. As somebody who lived life according to his own rules, regardless of the opinions of others, Vicente was highly regarded within the organization.

"Well, if it isn't the magician who got the top score in this year's entrance exam!" Vicente exclaimed, pleasantly surprised to see her.

Letitia entered Vicente's office. An elegant floral scent wafted in the air as she sat down on a pretty sofa.

"I didn't expect to see a rookie magician here. It must be my lucky day." Vicente poured Letitia a cup of tea, but as she struggled with hot liquids, she only took a little sip before leaving it to cool down.

"Now, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"It's about a fight involving one of my coworkers."

"You must mean the Six-Meter High Kick Incident."

"Sorry, what did you just call it?"

“Never mind. Anyway, what do you want to discuss?”

“I wanted to ask how the case is moving along. You see, the person who did it is an old classmate of mine.”

“Ah, friendship is a beautiful thing.” Vicente grinned. “Well, the situation isn’t great. The magician he kicked claims that he didn’t bully anyone and that the attack was completely unprovoked. It seems he has a lot of social capital, so no one has come forward to challenge his claim. The newbie he was supposed to have bullied isn’t saying anything either, possibly under threat of reprisal.” Vicente let out a sigh. “You see, the Stark family is much weaker than his. There’s no proof that any bullying occurred, and it’s likely that we’ll have to take the accused’s word as truth.”

“Evidence is what we need?”

“That’s right.” Vicente nodded.

“Supposing one were to find records proving that he bullied people, would that change the situation?”

“I would think so, provided it’s something that can’t be explained away.”

“I see. Thank you very much.” Letitia reached into her inner pocket and retrieved a magical listening device. “On the day of the incident, I recorded everything that happened in that room.”

“So you knew about the bullying and took action before Gawain?”

“I just happened to have seen something.”

“You did well to record this audio. Good work. However, this evidence mustn’t be made public. Please don’t reveal this recording to anybody. It needs to stay between you and me.”

“But why?”

“It could land you in danger. Nothing is worth letting others bear a grudge against you, especially if it becomes some sort of vendetta.”

“You want to abandon him?” There was a note of quiet rage in Letitia’s voice.

Vicente paused for a moment. “I will examine the newbie’s injuries,

comparing that tissue with that on articles left at the scene of the incident. I'm the best in the kingdom when it comes to healing magic, so you can trust that I'll find evidence if the claims are true. So please don't worry. As your senior, I'll take responsibility for solving this case. Save your smoking gun for later, all right?"

"Thank you." Letitia straightened up, nodded, and sipped her tea. It was still too hot.

"You must be disappointed that this kind of thing still goes on in the Royal Court Magicians' Division."

"Honestly, I am a little bit."

"I feel the same way. The world we live in is irrational and imperfect. It is full of little faults and cruel thoughts. This is especially true for our experience, with our close ties to the aristocracy. There are many times when we must struggle through and try to take the good with the bad." Vicente cast his eyes downward and went on. "But that's why I am determined to keep going. We must work from within the organization to make the world a better place, one step at a time. My goal is to make the Royal Court Magicians' Division into a great workplace, so that one day, new recruits will be amazed by how well they are treated. Because of that, I have very, very high hopes for honest young magicians like you." He smiled playfully. "Together, let's do the best we can. Little rising star Letitia, I'm counting on you."

There was much news a few days later. An obsidian-class magician was found guilty of bullying his coworker. As it was his third offense, he was disciplined much more harshly than before, and so he resigned in protest.

Gawain was also suspended for a month. This was a considerable punishment, but at the same time, he got the impression that it was partly for his protection. If he'd been let off too lightly, there was a good chance that others would resent him for it, so by penalizing him strictly, the organization protected him from unfair treatment by court nobles.

It looked like the Royal Court Magicians' Division had improved somewhat since the days of Gawain and Letitia's teacher. People were making an effort to

turn the division into a place where good conduct was justly rewarded. Letitia wanted to contribute to that progress. The pursuit of her all-important goal was still her top priority, but she would do what she could to help.

“Hey, Letitia.” After his one-month suspension, Gawain was back at work. “Thanks. You really saved my butt.”

Letitia’s expression conveyed nothing. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Sure. I’m grateful all the same.”

“But seriously, don’t—” Letitia blurted out unthinkingly, but instantly regretted it.

“You’re kinder than you look, you know.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

Under a clear blue sky, the pair walked together, keeping just a little distance between them.

Afterword

My mother used to eat weeds. It might sound like an unrealistic stereotype, but it's true.

The house she grew up in—my grandma's house—was way out in the countryside, a thirty-minute drive through the mountains. The nearest convenience store was thirty-five minutes away on foot. It was so far out in the sticks that it took an hour and a half to get to a movie theater. They wouldn't get the morning paper until the evening.

One time, my mother was visiting home and the taxi driver stopped part of the way there. "It's too scary to drive any farther in the dark," the driver told her. "You'll have to get out here."

She told me later how she'd then walked for forty minutes, crying with fear, before she finally reached the house. That's just the kind of place this was.

I remember one day when I was little, we were out picking bamboo shoots in the area around my grandma's house in the early afternoon. My mother pointed out some kind of weed nearby and told me, "I used to eat this when I was younger."

At that time in my life, I'd never considered that weeds like those could be food. I listened to my mother with the same clueless expression as a cat from an internet meme. That moment left a lasting impression on me.

My mother loved her childhood home, so we visited that house in the mountains during every long vacation. The TV only had two channels, and I didn't have a handheld game console at that time. For a total of ten days every year, on our summer and winter trips to my grandma's house, I had more downtime than I knew what to do with.

But children are resourceful. If there was no entertainment, I could come up with ways to amuse myself. I would throw balls up onto the blue corrugated iron roof and catch them when they fell back down, or pretend to go bouldering

on the stone walls outside. I would play games like badminton and gateball—a game like croquet—in the garden with my little sister. My cousin and I would roll up newspapers to act as our bats when we played baseball, and we ended up breaking two windows. Since they were upstairs windows in the unused barn, they're still broken today.

Another memorable moment was when I got stung by a giant hornet. My mother came running desperately along the mountain path toward me. When she held me in her arms, I felt so loved that I could appreciate it even as a child. That feeling of relief and happiness stayed with me more than the pain ever did.

“A giant hornet? That’s nothing worth going to the hospital for!” my grandma said afterward. “Rub it with some kumquat and it’ll be all better in a jiffy. I’ve been stung at least ten times!”

She said it like it was so obvious. It really gave me the feeling that life was tough out in the countryside.

In short, my mother’s childhood home was a place where I experienced things that never would’ve happened anywhere else, and it left me with lasting memories. Even though I was bored a lot of the time, the time I spent playing was extra fun.

My mother still adores that house. My grandparents died a few years ago, so nobody lives there anymore, but she still goes and cleans the empty house periodically. Due to rural depopulation, hardly anybody lives around there now. I find it sad, but it is what it is. Nothing stays the same forever. For all the sadness and pain in life, there are happy times too, so all we can do is keep our chins up and live our lives with a positive outlook.

I want to wrap this up by saying that I love my grandma’s house. In my memories, it’s still vivid and full of light. I remember the bright sunlight, the armies of hardworking ants, the demonic-looking incinerator, the scents of summer... I feel like those memories influenced *My Magical Career* in various ways. A message to the readers who were shocked by Noelle’s childhood eating habits: I, too, was shocked when I encountered that lifestyle, but I hope you understand it better through this afterword.

I imagine you all have strong, precious memories too. They might include

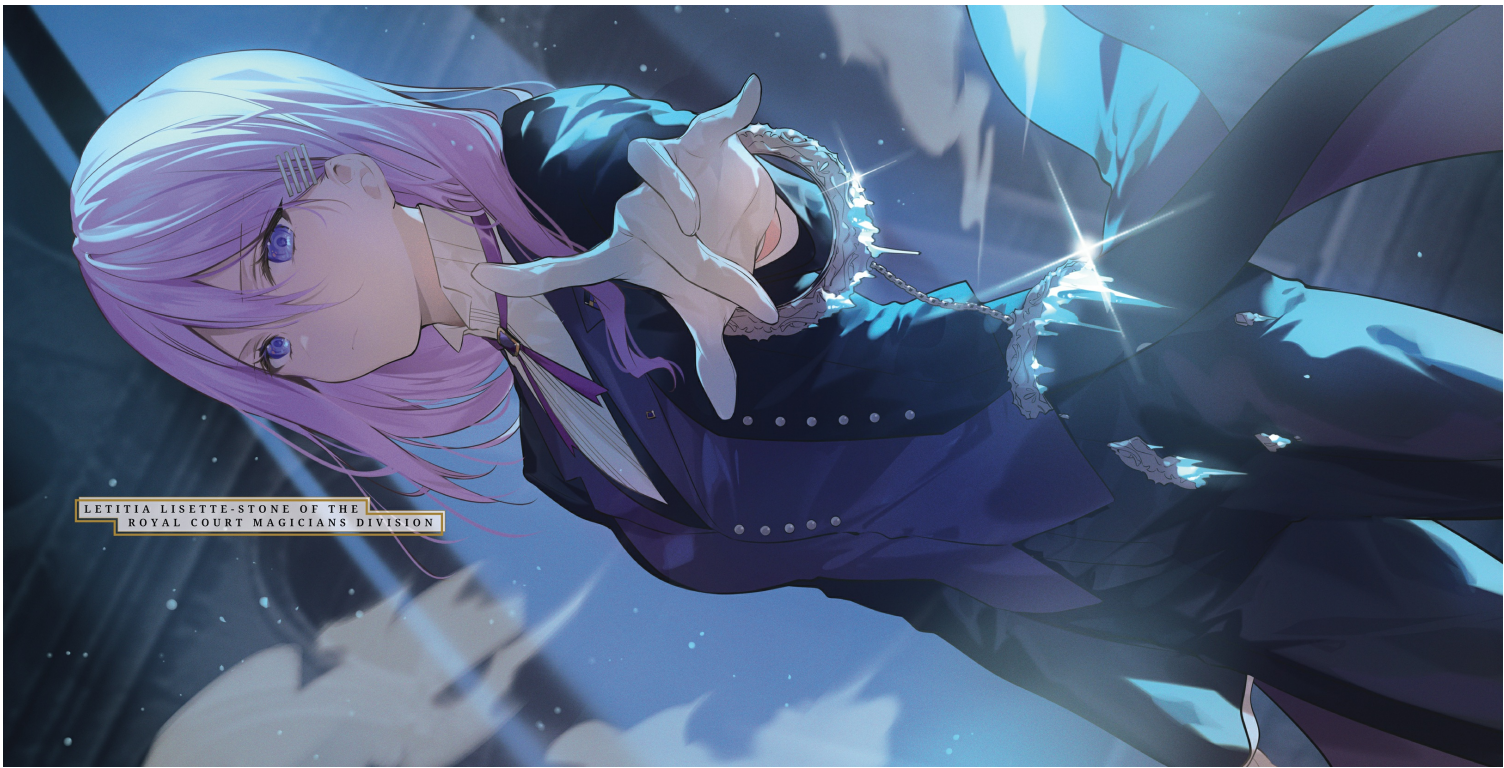
things that are gone and can never come back. But even those things continue to live in your heart, just the way you remember them. And as time goes by, the things you lost will seem fresher than ever. When you're feeling beaten down, relive those cherished memories and they might just give you some strength. Going back over those memories just now certainly made me a little emotional.

Finally, I want to apologize for keeping everybody waiting for so long. I'll be doing my best to get the next part of the story out sooner and make it the best yet. I'd appreciate it if you stuck with me.

I hope you can all have some more wonderful moments to remember forever.

Shusui Hazuki

The Writer Who Remembered That June When I Tried Too Hard to Save Money and Began Wondering Whether I Could Eat Roadside Dandelions



LETITIA LISETTE-STONE OF THE
ROYAL COURT MAGICIANS DIVISION



Illustration: **necömi**

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

An illustration of two anime-style characters. On the left is a woman with long, flowing orange hair and pointed ears, wearing a white off-the-shoulder dress with a large bow. On the right is a younger girl with shorter orange hair, also with pointed ears, wearing a dark brown and white outfit with a large bow. Both have bright green eyes. They are standing in a sunlit outdoor setting with trees and a building in the background. The scene is framed by a thin gold border.

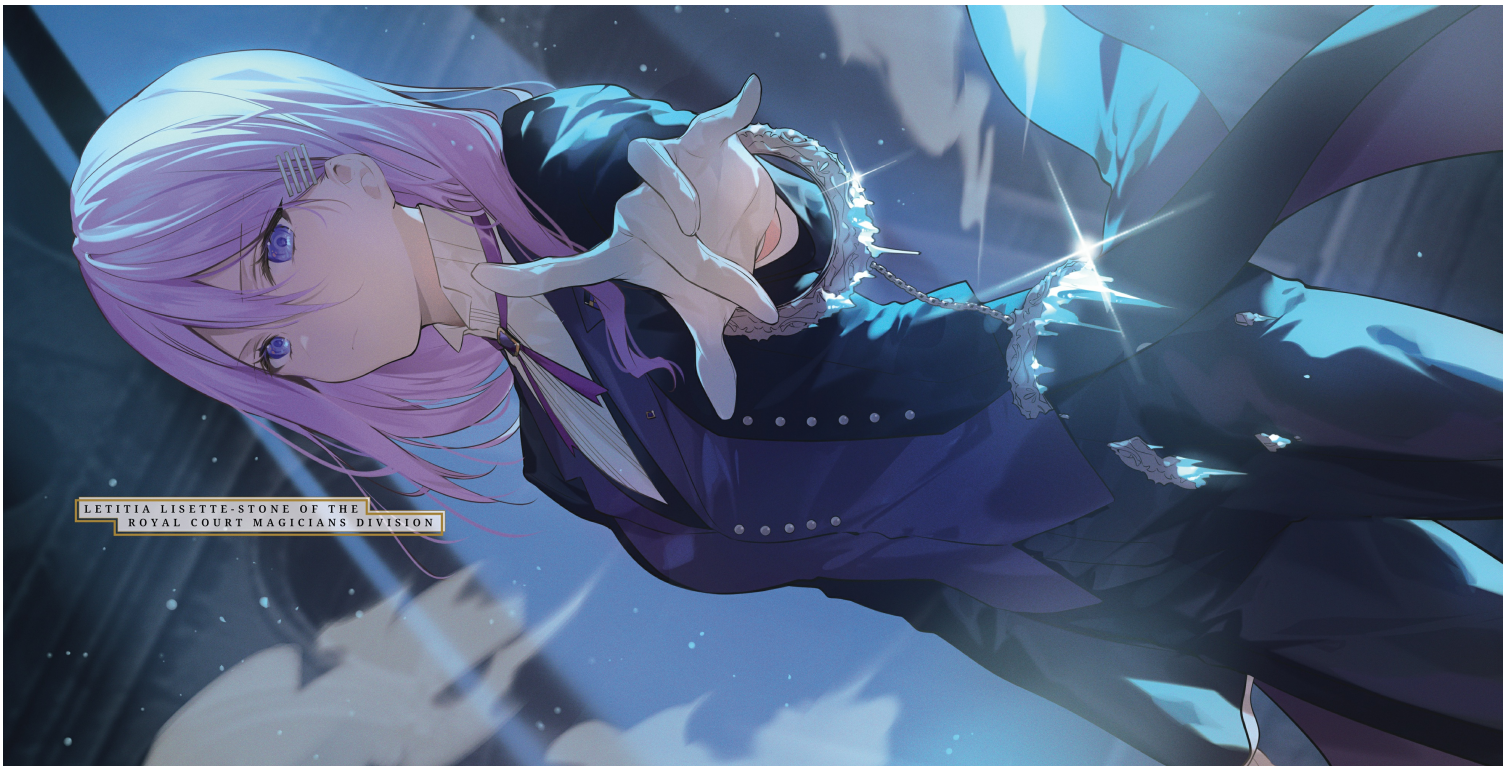
IV

**Shusui
Hazuki**

Illustration: **necomi**

My **Magical Career** at
Court ✧

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



LETITIA LISETTE-STONE OF THE
ROYAL COURT MAGICIANS DIVISION



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My Magical Career at Court: Living the Dream After My Nightmare Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild! Volume 4

by Shusui Hazuki

Translated by Mari Koch Edited by Carly Smith

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