

II

Shusui  
Hazuki

Illustration: necomi

My **Magical Career** at  
**Court**☆

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





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# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Dramatis Personae](#)

[Prologue: Two Slips of Paper](#)

[Chapter 1: A Meeting with the Dragon, and a Special Training Program](#)

[Chapter 2: A Day at the Theater, and a Covert Operation](#)

[Chapter 3: The Royal Invitational Tournament](#)

[Interlude: The Queen's Gambit](#)

[Chapter 4: The Most Dangerous Dungeon, and the King of the Dead](#)

[Epilogue: The Feeling I Can't Describe](#)

[Extra Chapter 1: On Dragon Mountain](#)

[Extra Chapter 2: Before and after the Day at the Theater](#)

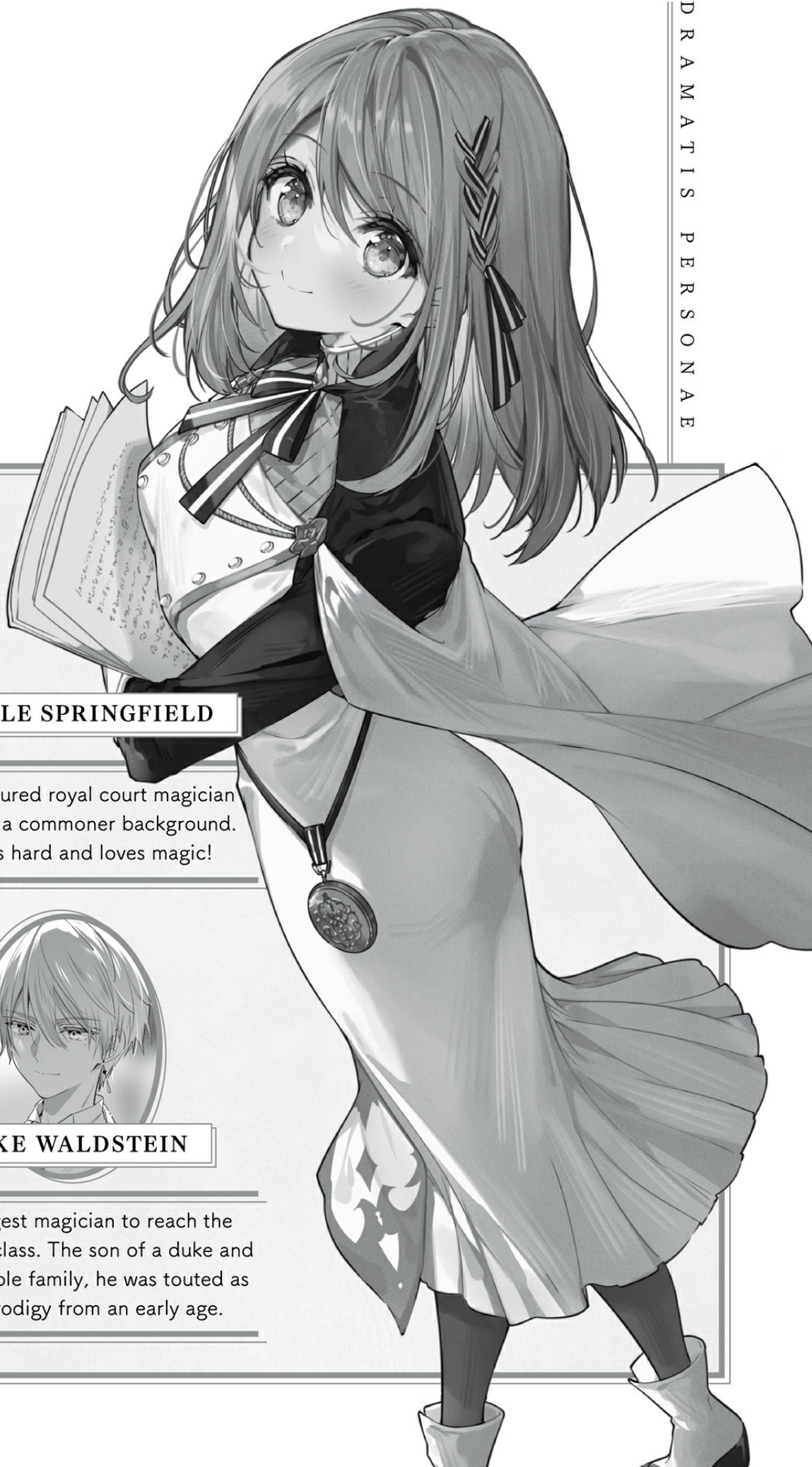
[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

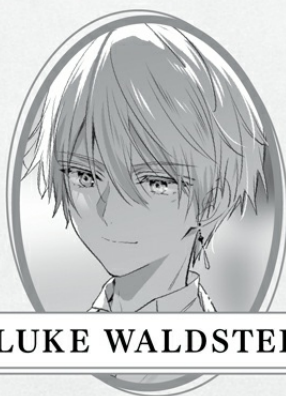
[About J-Novel Club](#)

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### NOELLE SPRINGFIELD

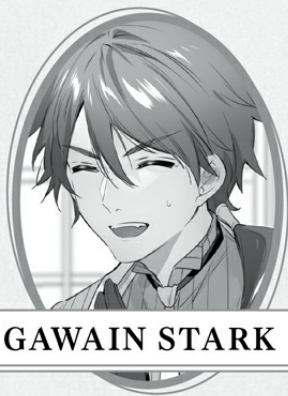
A small-statured royal court magician rookie from a commoner background. She works hard and loves magic!



### 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.





**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. She supports Gawain.



**MICHAEL ARDENFELD**

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



**MASTER SWORDSMAN  
SIR ERIC RASHFORD**

Leader of the order of royal knights and the strongest. He boasts seven hundred wins.



*I know something isn't right.*

## Prologue: Two Slips of Paper

The Kingdom of Ardenfeld was widely known as one of the most advanced nations of magic in the western continent.

The headquarters of the kingdom's Royal Court Magicians' Division was located in the palace's east wing. The royal architect Carlo Grandiva had designed this five-story building and its arched facade in the imperial style—it was all dazzling white walls and imposing towers. While one side of the garden was covered in a verdant lawn, the other side burned brightly with vivid red flowers.

A cold, clear voice rang around the room. "I've read the report." It was not loud by any means, but the sound carried strangely well.

It was surely her sharp intellect that produced such a head-turning sound. This woman was the lieutenant of the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division—Letitia Lisette-Stone. She was also the third woman ever to be promoted to the adamantite class. As the most trusted subordinate of Gawain Stark, captain of the Third Unit, she was an influential magician.

Standing before Letitia was a magician with silver hair and enigmatic sapphire eyes.

"Were any concerns raised in the report?" he asked, turning to Letitia.

This young man was Luke Waldstein, that same unit's third-in-command, and the youngest magician to ever reach the adamantite class. He was a prodigy who had earned a reputation for his icy, machinelike demeanor.

"No, it's perfect. Almost too perfect." Letitia glanced down at the report and continued. "They strongly praised the decision to leave the Fifth Unit lieutenant in charge of the platoon and go alone to the wyvern's location. They described it as a brave judgment that kept harm to a minimum."

"Thank you."



“However, there is one detail I suspect can’t be right.”

Luke raised his head and locked onto her with his crystalline blue eyes.

“You’re wrong. I swear it’s all true.”

“Well, *you* would say that. It’s fine. I’m not looking to criticize. But as your superior officer, I want to make sure I have all the facts straight.” Letitia stared directly back at Luke. “Am I correct in thinking that you headed for the wyvern not out of responsibility, but to protect that girl?”

Silence fell upon the room—a long silence. Within the magically soundproof walls of that room, it was as quiet as the bottom of the ocean.

No emotion showed in Luke’s eyes as he gazed out the window. “And if you are correct, will I be punished?”

“No, but on a personal level, I fear for you. You are putting yourself at risk,” Letitia replied. “It’s a wonderful thing to have something important enough to prioritize above all else. However, you’ve become much too involved. Wishing for her happiness is too saccharine for you. I don’t like it.”

“I don’t particularly care about others’ opinions.”

“I’m telling you, you’re playing a dangerous game. What makes her happy might hurt you. That’s something you fail to understand.”

“I understand. I understand just fine.”

“Suppose she marries somebody else?”

Luke’s eyes widened as he was momentarily lost for words. “If that brings Noelle happiness, then I’ll accept it,” he muttered eventually.

“You may say that, but when you look at me like that, I’m not in the least bit convinced.” Letitia sighed deeply. “Feel free to wallow in platitudes. But you’re making a mistake in depending on another person for your own happiness. You should do what makes *you* happy. Otherwise, you’re bound to cause yourself trouble sooner or later.”

While Luke remained silent, Letitia held out two slips of paper to him.

“These are tickets to the theater in the capital. An acquaintance gave them to me, but I can’t go. I want you to have them.” Finally, she gave him a serious



look. “You must do what makes you happy.”

Luke stood motionless even after Letitia had left the room. In this complete silence, one might have expected to even hear the specks of dust gently floating in the air.

All he could do was go on staring at the two tickets in his hand.

Letitia Lisette-Stone’s words had brought Luke face-to-face with an inconvenient truth—one that he’d been avoiding.

Luke knew how risky this was.

He loved Noelle. He had loved her for so long. With his typically calculated methods, he had created an environment where they could be together. His approach might not have been the most admirable, but it was worth it to have her by his side. He could see her, and he could hear that precious voice that he would recognize anywhere. He was already as happy as he could wish to be.

*“I’m never gonna let you leave me in the dust. Prepare yourself!”*

Luke was so pleased to know that she wanted to stand alongside him as his equal. It was enough for him to feel like he’d continue to be happy even if nothing ever changed.

But now, his more experienced superior officer was telling him that he should’ve been putting more effort into focusing on his own happiness.

*“Suppose she marries somebody else?”*

That was a possibility that Luke had long been aware of. He knew he’d have to give Noelle his blessing. He’d been sure that if it made her happy, he wouldn’t begrudge her that.

And yet, he hadn’t been able to give Letitia a straight answer. Was he just a greedy person? He wanted to be with Noelle—always. As much as he wished for her happiness, there was a side of him that honestly didn’t want her to be with anybody else.

*I don’t know when this will all come to an end,* he thought.

He remembered the tumult of the recent incident with the wyvern. He had

been unable to breathe when he saw Noelle on the ground, rendered motionless by hypomagia. Everything had gone blank in that moment, and he could no longer remember clearly what had happened after that.

He'd been out of his mind with desperation as he carried her to the local infirmary and prayed for her recovery. Even after being told that her situation wasn't actually that serious, he simply hadn't been able to rest easy. He'd been on tenterhooks, wondering if there was still a chance she might not wake up.

*"She isn't so frail that there should be any problems at this stage. Don't worry. You need to make sure that you get something to eat."*

Her mother surely would've been more worried than anybody else, and even she'd accepted those instructions.

Luke had thought he'd grown up. He'd thought that he could make it through just about anything. It was unbelievable that he'd now shown himself to be so weak. How could he *not* see himself as pathetic in this light?

*"Never mind that. Did you hear about how I fought a wyvern? It was running wild because of a supreme relic, but I figured it out and saved the town!"*

Seeing her wake up and hearing her voice ring with excitement had rescued him from his self-pity. Now he revisited those memories with a smile. He stared at the tickets in his hand.

Letitia had told him to step forward and reach out, but could he do that? As the heir to a prestigious family, all eyes were on him. Marrying a commoner was unacceptable, and he couldn't imagine what people would think if he married purely for love. It would surely spark nasty rumors and cause hurt.

If that was what she wanted, though, he was willing to do anything. Whatever people might say, it would be of no concern to him. He'd happily throw away his title and social standing.

But if she didn't desire that, would it be right for him to drag her into his personal troubles out of his own self-interest? Was that really any way to behave toward somebody so important to him?

He had no answer to those questions. Regardless, he headed for her house the next day with only one thought in mind: he wanted to take her to the



theater.

The more he thought about it, the more determined he became. He'd always thought about how a romantic relationship between the two of them would be unacceptable, but surely nobody could complain about him simply inviting her out. After all, he and Noelle were friends. There was no problem whatsoever in them spending time together.

*Yes, that's it. My superior officer gave me these tickets, and now I'm just going to spend some time with a friend. There's nothing unusual about that.*

It was the perfect plan. Once Luke realized that there was no reason for anybody to suspect a thing, his imagination ran wild. He pictured them visiting various boutiques around the royal capital and eating gelato together. Perhaps he was getting a little too excited.

*I need to work this out more precisely. It must be foolproof.*

He'd spent hours ruminating instead of getting a good night's rest, and he gave his sleepy eyes a rub as he arrived at her front door. She was living at the cozy little rented house Luke had found for her and her mother.

His heart was pounding. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

*Take it easy, Luke,* he repeated to himself. *You're just asking her as a friend. Be cool. Be normal.*

He was usually so calm and observant, but not today. He had failed to notice the concealment spell hiding something enormous outside Noelle's home.

"Huh...?"

He stood there dumbfounded as he became aware of a black shadow spreading out across the lawn like a great mountain. It was a wyvern, one of the western continent's most powerful creatures. Meanwhile, looking up at that huge black dragon with a foolish, wide-eyed gaze was the girl of Luke's dreams.

At first glance, Luke thought they must have been facing off against each other, but it seemed like that wasn't the case after all. Apparently, the wyvern had come to pay her back for saving it when it had gone berserk.

Luke was ready to leap out at any moment should something go wrong, but it

didn't look like that would be necessary. He remained hidden behind a wall and heaved a great sigh. It was hard not to laugh at a time like this.

*You never cease to blow away my expectations like they're nothing.*



# Chapter 1: A Meeting with the Dragon, and a Special Training Program

Its immense form blotted out the sky. Its beautiful scales sparkled in the early evening light. Its limbs were like great trees, and the jagged ends of its wings were as sharp as swords. The enormous black dragon before my eyes was a magnificent, wondrous beast.

When I opened the front door to find the wyvern standing there, I could hardly believe my eyes. For some time—I don't even know how long—I clutched my head, totally perplexed.

*C-Calm down, I thought.*

I slowly regained my composure. It turned out that the dragon was here to offer me repayment. It was the kind of situation you would find in old folktales in the “animal or demon returns a favor” tradition.

The dragon completely filled up the empty lot in front of the house. For a moment, I was relieved it had found a convenient spot to land, but then a serious problem occurred to me: wyverns were the most dangerous monsters in the western continent. They were a massive threat known to burn towns down to nothing.

*If anybody sees it without knowing what's going on, they'll think the city is in danger. This is the kind of situation where the Royal Court Magicians' Division and the Order of Royal Knights would be deployed to stop it! This could be a disaster!*

“Excuse me!” I called, looking up at the wyvern. “Thanks for coming to repay me and everything, but you should really get out of here quick!”

The dragon tilted its head to one side.

*AND WHY IS THAT?* its voice boomed. *WHY MUST I LEAVE THIS PLACE?*

The wyvern's voice was unlike anything else I'd ever heard. It felt much closer

to my eardrums than other sounds. I realized then that it was coming from within my own head. This was telepathy, a means of communication that only a tiny proportion of monsters could use.

“People will panic if they find out a dragon’s here! I bet some would even attack you to protect the city.”

*EVEN IF THEY BANDED TOGETHER, PUNY HUMANS WOULD BE NO MATCH FOR ME. LET THEM COME. I WILL REDUCE THEM TO ASH.*

“How about you don’t do that?!”

I had no doubt that any such incident would end up in the history books. *It would be so sad for everyone involved if the dragon’s attempt to pay me back led to all-out warfare! As a peace-loving citizen, I have to do whatever I can to nip this danger in the bud!*

“Let’s not have any fighting!” I shouted frantically. “Can we just be peaceful? Yeah, let’s have some peace!”

*VERY WELL. AS MY RESCUER, YOUR WISH IS MY COMMAND,* the dragon answered before settling down and continuing. *YOU NEED NOT BE CONCERNED. I AM CLOAKED IN CONCEALMENT MAGIC. I CAN BE PERCEIVED ONLY FROM AN EXTREMELY CLOSE DISTANCE.*

“Oh, I see.”

That made sense now that it was brought to my attention. True, nobody nearby seemed to be panicking at the sight of a huge dragon. Realistically, if people could see it, surely it would’ve been spotted by now, and a battle would’ve begun long before it reached my front door. It was probably thanks to concealment magic like this that wyverns were regarded as legendary creatures that few had ever seen.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of a shopping bag hitting the ground.

“Wha...?” My mother was standing there.

She must’ve just come back and wandered close enough for the concealment magic to have no effect. She stood frozen in fear staring up at the dragon until she shuddered and crumpled to the ground, seemingly in a daze.



“Mom?!” I cried out, hurriedly catching her in my arms before she completely fell. She had fainted in shock.

*Fair enough. You did just come home from shopping to see a dragon in front of the house.*

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean for this to happen, mom!”

Continuing to apologize, I carried her into her room. I laid her down on her bed and made sure her heart rate and breathing were normal. I cast a healing spell on her to be on the safe side.

Once I was satisfied she would be okay, I returned to the dragon. It seemed hesitant as its voice resonated inside my head: *I MUST HAVE FRIGHTENED THE HUMAN. MY APOLOGIES.*

I looked up into the wyvern’s eyes far above my head. The apology sounded genuine.

*IN ORDER TO AVOID CAUSING CONCERN, I ATTEMPTED TO FOLLOW HUMAN CUSTOMS IN VISITING YOU.*

It had tried to be considerate. It was true that it had rung the doorbell and waited at the front door. The dragon’s shoulders drooped. Somehow, even a colossal body like that started to look small.

“Oh, no, I really appreciate the effort. I’m glad you came.”

The dragon looked at me with its huge eyes and blinked. *INDEED? THAT IS GOOD.*

It breathed heavily, as if relieved. It then reached a great treelike limb toward me and held out a small silver object.

*Is that...a magic flute?*

As I took it with both hands, I couldn’t help but open my eyes wide in astonishment. It was a tiny silver flute, carved from a single magicite crystal. A magic sequence was elegantly engraved onto its surface. The marks appeared to be Ancient Almerian, the magical language used on relics found in the deepest dungeons, but I had no idea how somebody could write a magic sequence like this. I had never seen something this precious before.

While I gazed at the flute, a voice from above my head brought me back to reality: *HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN ABOUT ME?*

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just entranced.”

*I SEE YOU TRULY LOVE MAGIC, LITTLE ONE*, the dragon boomed in amusement. *THIS IS ONE OF THE TREASURES IN MY POSSESSION. WHEN ONE BLOWS THIS WHISTLE, IT DEPLOYS A SUMMONING CIRCLE OF TELEPORTATION. IT HAS THE POWER TO CALL FOR ME.*

“Huh...?”

*That can’t be right*, I thought. *There’s no way a novice magician like me should have this. You can’t just give me the power to summon a dragon by blowing a whistle! It would be a historic disaster as soon as it showed up!*

*Then again, if I were summoning a dragon of all things, we’d have to be in the middle of a historic disaster already, I guess...*

This was far beyond what I had the power to handle. I continued to stand there in wide-eyed amazement.

*YOU MAY CALL FOR ME AT ANY TIME. I PLEDGE TO GRANT YOU ANY REQUEST.*

The wyvern flapped its wings. My eyes were forced shut by a powerful gust of wind. By the time I could look up again, the huge dragon was already out of sight—probably due to the concealment spell.

Unseen by anyone, it had returned to the freedom of the sky. The view from my front door was back to normal, as if it really had been just a dream. The only evidence that it had actually happened was the little flute in my hand.

“What’s going on?” With the sound of that voice came the sight of swaying silver hair and deep blue eyes.

My dear friend Luke approached, sighing in exasperation. For whatever reason, he’d happened to pass by and had witnessed what had happened.

I looked up at the sky in bewilderment and answered, “I don’t know either...”

“Anyway, make sure you don’t tell anybody about this,” Luke suggested. “I’ll pretend I saw nothing.”



I nodded. If it emerged that a wyvern had appeared, people who didn't understand the circumstances would surely think the city was in danger. It might even result in a special task force being formed and sent on a monumental expedition. If it came to that, it would certainly lead to an unfortunate turn of events, both for the dragon who had come to pay me back and for the people of the kingdom.

Worst of all, as the source of the disturbance, I would probably be held responsible and likely face punishment. I could just hear the judge now:

*"Noelle Springfield, you are hereby sentenced to death!"*

*"Aiiieeeee!"*

*No! I can't take that!*

And with that thought in mind, I closed my eyes to the awkward reality of my situation. I would simply act like nothing had happened. This was the kind of time when hardworking adults like me had to be sly. I prayed that this wouldn't become an issue.

Suddenly, I thought of something. "Wait a minute. What brought you here anyway, Luke?"

It was the weekend. I was sure that we were both off from work. Was he here for some urgent matter?

"Huh? Oh, well, I mean, you know..." His blue eyes widened, and he spoke timidly, like a totally different person. He cast his gaze around for a moment, looking troubled. "Nothing..."

*Come on, there has to be something, if you're acting like that.*

I noticed another thing: Luke was holding something behind his back.

*Aha! It must be related to whatever you're hiding. You can't fool a smart, grown-up lady like me! It's time to expose your secret!*

"Hey, whatcha got there?" I wheedled, leaning forward for a closer look.

"I told you, it's nothing."

He avoided my eyes. His face looked a little red in the light of the sunset. It

seemed as if there was something embarrassing him.

*What does that mean? Now I really want to know!*

I feinted one way and moved around him the other, trying to peek at whatever he was holding, but he immediately turned to hide it away from me again.

“Sorry, I just remembered something I have to do,” he said suddenly.

“Huh? No, wait a second...”

His departure felt more like he was fleeing. I was left behind, standing in front of the house with a confused expression.

“What’s his deal?”



Luke Waldstein ran into an alleyway, then stood with his back against the wall. He looked down at the pair of tickets he’d kept hidden and sighed.

“What on earth am I doing...?”



“Hey, Noelle,” my mother said blearily as she woke up. “I feel like I saw you talking to a dragon outside the house...”

“What are you talking about? Sounds like a dream.”

“Oh, that’s a relief. What a realistic dream. It gave your old mother a real fright.”

Just out of her sight, I clenched my fist in satisfaction at having successfully covered up the incident. Now I just had to try my best to forget that a dragon had ever visited me and go back to my normal life.

I had hidden away the whistle the wyvern gave me right at the bottom of the chest of drawers in my bedroom. It would be disastrous if my mother happened to find the whistle and tried blowing it. It was locked away in my secret box from childhood, right next to a cheesy poem I’d scrawled many years ago.

The contents of that box must never be released. It would be a nightmare for the royal capital, but more importantly, my continued existence on this earth

would become untenable.

*“Hey, Noelle. Did you write this? Some poem called ‘I Am Dark like the Night.’”*

*“Stooooop!!!”*

I’d written that edgy, mortifying magnum opus back when I fancied myself as a tomboy. In those days, I’d really thought that was cool...

As I continued to reel from unexpected blasts from the past, I returned to my daily efforts to succeed at court as a cosmopolitan young lady.

One day, Captain Gawain made an announcement. “Hey, time for another promotion. You’re a silver-class magician now.”

He told me I was being recognized for my actions in protecting a town from a berserk wyvern, and that my salary was being increased. Not only that, but Gawain gave me a bonus out of his own pocket.

*I’m so lucky... I’m not good enough for this nonexploitative workplace!*

“D-Do you mind climbing the ranks a bit slower from now on?” Gawain’s voice trembled slightly as he handed me an envelope.

*He must be happy to see somebody in his unit grow, though. I’ll have to work hard to reach the next rank!*

Still excited by the idea, I remembered something: the friend and rival I was desperate to beat.

“I don’t suppose I might be the fastest of all time?” I asked.

The silver class was the fifth rank for Royal Court Magicians. As there were ten ranks in all, that meant I’d entered the upper half, and there were fewer of us. Out of nearly one thousand court magicians, fewer than a hundred reached the upper ranks.

*Heh. I guess that means I’m pretty great. Even by his standards, this must be quick.*

My heart was overflowing with aspirations.

“Second fastest of all time,” Gawain said. “You’re off by one week.”

“I figured that might be the case. Luke is really abnormal, huh?”



“Everyone’s saying you’re just as abnormal,” Gawain replied with a sigh. “Anyway, there have been a few other people in the past who rose through the ranks very quickly. The Royal Court Magicians’ Division emphasizes ability over age or social position. Other people have reached the silver class within a short period due to their outstanding achievements. That’s the kind of progress that can lead somebody to become a magus.”

“Did you get promoted quickly too, Captain Gawain?”

“I broke records at the time. But then again, our division still had some traces of elitism and the old seniority system back then. As the culture improved, promotions became easier to achieve, so it’s only natural that we were setting new records. It’s not like I was better than those before me. If anything, I think the older generations were more impressive.”

Now I could see that it wasn’t that speed of career advancement correlated perfectly to individual greatness. The circumstances and environment of the era also had an impact on how quickly people could be promoted.

Thinking about it, I was really lucky to have a job where I had the chance to earn promotions. I couldn’t let myself get carried away. I had to stay humble and keep on working hard.

“Having said all that, climbing the ladder gets really tough from this point onward,” Gawain added.

“It does?”

“The barriers to entry for the gold, mithril, and adamantite classes are much higher than what you’ve experienced so far. Even for Luke, it took a while to advance past silver.”

“Now that you mention it, that makes sense.”

I knew that it had taken Luke over two and a half years to become an adamantite-class magician. Even then, he was the youngest to ever reach that rank. It was such an impressive achievement that people had been talking about it all over the country.

Considering my own experiences compared to his, it really struck me that the barrier to the upper classes would be far, far higher from now on.

“The important thing is not to lose your head,” Gawain went on. “Everyone reaches a point where things take time. If you get worked up and lose sight of who you really are, you’ll just cause problems for yourself. So take it easy. Go one step at a time. As long as you can look back and say you’re a little further ahead than you were yesterday, you’re doing great. I believe the best thing to do is work on always moving forward. And don’t be too hard on yourself either.”

“Huh? Shouldn’t I be holding myself to a high standard?” I said, looking up at Gawain. I’d thought that the route to success lay in being disciplined and pushing myself hard.

“It’s good to have high ambitions, but those come with risks too. The worst thing you can do is be too intense. You won’t get anywhere if all you’re focused on are results, and sooner or later, you’ll pay the price. The strongest people out there are the ones who enjoy what they do. Those who can have fun and keep going produce the most results too.”

“Is it all right to have fun? Even at work?”

“From what I can see, you have more fun than anyone else.”

*Eek. I froze.*

“Oh, n-no, I take it v-very seriously,” I spluttered. “But I mean, I love magic, so I guess there are times when I find it fun...”

“It’s fine. You should enjoy yourself. In my opinion, that attitude is what makes you such a good magician.” Gawain smiled. “Anyway, you only live once. Isn’t it much better to be positive about your job and have fun with it?”

*It’s all right to have fun.*

I really took that idea to heart. I loved magic more than anything in the whole world. This was my dream job.

*I’m gonna have as much fun as I want. I’m gonna enjoy every second of it. And I’m gonna become better and better as a magician, and I’ll knock Luke’s socks off!*

*Okay, here we go!*

With renewed enthusiasm, I threw myself back into my work.

I'd cheerfully returned to headquarters from my lunch break after downing one of the best-bang-for-the-buck meals for big eaters out of all the cafeterias in town. Letitia found me once I arrived and told me something interesting.

"A special training program for magic?" I echoed her.

"Exactly," she replied. "It's a program where we bring in lecturers from outside the organization. What do you think?"

Letitia explained that they held these lectures regularly so that anybody with an interest could take classes and improve their skills as magicians.

"The content is very specialized and high-level, and it doesn't directly help with work all that much, so a lot of people don't bother with it," she went on. "But if you're interested, I'm sure you'll get something out of it."

However, these courses would have required a large time commitment, and they'd be hard too. It sounded like this program wasn't particularly popular.

"What kind of classes are they offering?" I asked.

"This program is being taught by Dr. Friedrich Ross, the professor from the Royal University of Magic who won last year's Werner Prize. It's about magic sequences. He'll be lecturing on elliptic curves and complex analytical functions in antistable magic sequences."

"Wow, I'd love to take a course like that!" I leaned forward in excitement.

"You would?" Letitia said, puzzled. "Is it really that interesting?"

"I love studying magic sequences. The first time I ever beat Luke was on a test about forming magic sequences. Besides, doesn't it sound super intellectual and cool when you use all the jargon? Goldbach's Law of Unfixed Multipliers and Gasschmidt's Last Theorem and everything. Doesn't it make you feel smarter just hearing stuff like that?"

"You certainly are an odd one." Letitia chuckled. "I really like that about you."

She was so kind to me—not anything like the kids at school who'd made fun of me, saying things like, *"See how that creep smirks to herself when she*



*studies? That weird pip-squeak.*” Of course, I’d always scared them into silence with a little demonstration of my (physical) special attack, Super Magic Punch.

Anyway, it was so nice to hear that somebody appreciated the parts of me that were out of the ordinary. That’s how I wanted to be: the kind of person who could see value in the weirdness of others.

*Wow, she’s so mature and cool,* I thought.

“By the way,” Letitia added, “can I ask you about something else? It’s unrelated to work.”

*A private chat?!* This was a real rarity, coming from somebody like Letitia who was always hard at work.

“Sure!” I answered, pleased by the prospect that we’d become friends. “What is it?”

“I don’t suppose...you’re into theater?”

“Theater...?”

*Like, opera and musicals and stuff, right?*

I’d always thought of those as refined art forms for the upper classes. It seemed like a world away from my life as a commoner. I explained this to Letitia.

“I think it’s good to experience a different world,” she replied. “If you get the chance, it might be worth going.”

To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t really all that interested, but I figured that if Letitia was recommending it, maybe I ought to give it a shot. Perhaps I’d like it more than I expected.

Speaking of things she’d recommended to me, I barely got any sleep before my first lecture series. I’d been looking forward to it so eagerly—so much so that I’d slept *only* nine hours last night.

*What will the university professor be like?* I wondered. *I bet hearing him speak will be enough to raise my IQ.* As I excitedly opened the door to the classroom and headed for an empty seat, I could hear other court magicians whispering to one another.

“Did you see those incomprehensible materials from last year?”

“He’s known for giving the hardest lectures at the Royal University of Magic.”

“And I heard that he makes it even tougher and more confusing in this program, so he can prove that he’s better than the court magicians. They say he gets a kick out of seeing students fail to answer questions.”

“What a stinker. I’m gonna get a perfect score and teach *him* a lesson.”

“Relax, guys. I’ve been planning for this day all year. I’ve got a foolproof strategy.”

*Huh?! Is it r-really that tough?* I felt the color drain from my face as I caught wind of my coworkers’ gossip.

I’d casually decided to enroll in the program just because the subject sounded interesting, but now it occurred to me that I’d never actually attended a university-level course before. Not only that, but the Royal University of Magic was also the most rigorous educational institution in the kingdom. And not only *that*, but apparently this was also the professor who taught RUM’s hardest classes, and he was making this program even harder just to be mean...

*There’s no way I’m cut out for this...*

As I was clutching my head in worry, I heard some more voices.

“Hey, isn’t that Noelle Springfield?” somebody from another unit asked.

“You mean the monstrous newbie who blows people’s minds everywhere she goes and who got promoted to the silver class within months of joining? What’s she doing here?”

“I bet she heard how awful the professor is. She must’ve come here to save us!”

“That makes me feel so much better... Knowing she’s here, surely we can beat the professor!”

*And now people are expecting things from me?!*

*No way. I need to clear this up right now, before I disappoint them.*

I hesitantly began to speak. “Um, y-you see, I—”

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell them,” a nearby coworker interjected. It was one of my superiors from the Third Unit who was always really nice to me. “It must be hard to explain to all these people from other units when they’re all looking at you. It’s okay. I know just how you feel.”

“Thank you!”

*What a great person! I’m saved!* I thought, breathing a sigh of relief as I watched my superior address the others.

“Hey, everyone. She says you can rely on her! No need to get worked up! Even if worse comes to worst and we can’t do anything on our own, Noelle is sure to come to our aid!”

“Wait a minute!”

*That’s not right! You’re way off the mark!*

Paying no heed to my fretting, the noise level in the classroom increased.

“We’re counting on you, newbie!”

“Please, Ms. Noelle! Show that nasty professor who’s boss!”

I didn’t know what to do. I was totally frantic amid the cheers of the other court magicians.

Our professor Friedrich Ross entered the room a minute before the class was due to start. He was a large man with a dignified presence and had the appearance of someone in his thirties.

His three assistants quickly distributed papers with questions and proofs: example problems along with the magic sequences for solving them. I shuddered as I tried to understand the written solutions. This material was frighteningly complex.

I heard others mutter around me.

“What the hell is this...?”

“Damn, this year looks tough. It’s way worse than last time.”

“No way... I spent a year preparing and everything...”

It sounded like everybody else shared my feelings.



“It’s okay. Even if we can’t handle it, Noelle will manage somehow.”

“Right! Noelle, we’re counting on you to save us!”

They meant to encourage me, but I only felt like throwing up. I tried my best to listen to the lecture despite how little of it sank in. I was shocked. People were depending on me and I wanted to live up to their expectations, but I was utterly helpless. Magic sequences had always been among my favorite subjects, but now it sounded like the tongue of a distant land.

*I don’t understand a thing! It’s no use! I’m sorry, everyone. I just can’t do this!*

Just as I was about to give up, a memory from my school days crossed my mind—back when I first got really stuck during my third year at the magic academy. I’d been preparing for an exam on enchantments, a subject I’d always struggled with.

Straining to keep up with the lessons, I’d been totally at a loss. I had been running out of ideas when I reached for my final option and spoke to the boy I’d hated so much back then.

*“Hey, you’re the last person I’d want to ask for help, but there’s something here I just can’t figure out.”*

Luke had sounded impatient when he’d answered me then, but it’d been easier to understand than the teacher’s explanation.

*“You try to solve the whole thing in one go without taking your time, don’t you?”* he’d observed that day.

The part that left the strongest impression was his solution for dealing with a problem he couldn’t understand. *“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.”*

*Calm down*, I thought, back in the classroom for the special training program, looking down at the question paper. I took a deep breath to soothe my nerves. I just needed to break down the problem and carefully work through it a bit at a time, starting with what I did understand. It certainly wasn’t easy—it was hard work and I struggled to follow it—but I patiently approached the question.

I lost track of time, so who knows how long it took me, but I eventually came across the barest hint of understanding. *Hmm? Could this be...?*

On closer inspection, I realized one part of the secondary support sequence was connected to something I knew very well: it was the sequence I always used for casting Spell Boost. That magic sequence was one that I'd used so often that I could compose it with my eyes closed. I was sure that nobody could outmatch the number of times I'd used it or how well I understood it.

Little by little, I began to realize what was being asked. I began to turn this seemingly foreign language into something that made sense to me.

"All done!" As I raised my hand, the professor watched me with a suspicious glare.

One of his assistants approached me and asked, "May I show this to the professor?"

The assistant took my notebook to the professor sitting behind his desk, and the two began talking. A few minutes later, the assistant came back.

"Your magic sequence fulfills the requirements."

"Yes!" I breathed in satisfaction.

"Nice job!" somebody whispered toward me. "I knew you'd save us!"

"You're so cool, Noelle!"

I broke into a smile as I heard the adulation from the others.

"Heh, that's right. Our Noelle really knows her stuff," said the magician from my unit sitting nearby.

*Well, it's not like you did anything,* I thought, shooting my overexcited senior a cold look, before moving on to the next question.

"You're our number one!" somebody called. "You can do this one too!"

"You can count on me!" I responded, pleased by my classmates' expectations and settling right into my role as their so-called number one. "Let's all get a perfect score and really give the professor a shock!"

All of a sudden, the special training program had turned into a team battle

between the professor and the royal court magicians.



Dr. Friedrich Ross was a professor at the Royal University of Magic who worked at the top levels of the kingdom's magical community, devoting his life to the advancement of magic. He was widely known for his fastidious nature.

There were only three things he claimed to like: magic, cats, and outstanding researchers. In other words, there were a great many things that he *didn't* like. High society, merchants, dogs, publishers, carrots—the list went on. Rumor had it that there were more things he disliked than there were grains of sand in a desert.

He was also known for his antipathy toward the establishment and the political power of the upper classes, despite being an aristocrat himself.

“In that case,” a reporter had once asked in response to Ross's criticism of the peerage system, “would you say that you prefer the common people over the upper classes?”

“The common people?” he'd responded dispassionately. “They're just as bad.”

Anybody who was not a great researcher was equally deserving of disdain in Friedrich Ross's eyes. The people he hated the most were royal court magicians. He didn't hesitate to call them dogs trained by the system, bringing shame on all magicians.

However, he was held in surprisingly high esteem by the top brass in the Royal Court Magicians' Division. It was a rare thing for him to say such things to their faces, so as far as they were concerned, his outspoken tendencies were a cause for amusement. They didn't mind that he disliked everyone equally—or at least, almost everyone. The royal court magician superiors approved of those who treated everyone impartially, even if Ross's attitude was somewhat concerning.

As a result, the Royal Court Magicians' Division always invited him to lead the special training program despite his contempt for the institution. For Ross, the program was a nice opportunity to amuse himself. He took advantage of this by

deliberately setting difficult questions so he could enjoy watching the court magicians squirm.

Although those who enrolled in the program rated the experience horribly, the number of participants ticked up a little every year. It seemed that people who had experienced the humiliation of the program once were often motivated to right those wrongs the following year.

*Fine, I'll put them back in their place*, Ross would think as he raised the difficulty level every year. By now, it was at a point where even some of his university colleagues would've had a hard time with his classes, but that meant nothing to Friedrich Ross.

He didn't care whether it was manageable for people he'd never liked in the first place. It satisfied him to see the shock on the faces of the court magicians whenever they faced the questions he had set. That's all he could ever expect from the dogs of the kingdom. They ought to see how powerless they were.

As he was thinking this, one magician raised her hand and called out, "All done!"

*What on earth is she saying?* he thought, staring at her icily. She was so tiny, like a child.

He had seen her gaping blankly at the paper with the most vacant expression in the room. This set of questions was so hard that even researchers specializing in the formation of magic sequences would have had difficulty in solving it. Surely she couldn't have reached a solution that quickly.

One of Ross's assistants brought her notebook to him. He looked down at it coldly, and it took his breath away. The magic sequence in the notebook was unrefined and totally out of step with existing theory, but even though her approach was nothing like the answer he'd prepared, he had to concede that it met the requirements.

*How did she pull this off...?*

Everything about it was unlike the magic sequence Ross had constructed with his theoretical approach. It could only have been produced through an inefficient method that required writing out a vast number of sequences and a



hellish process of iteration and refinement.

*No, there's no way. At her age, she couldn't possibly carry out that much repetition.*

What he was seeing was enough to make even a lifelong researcher like himself wince. This was something that surely couldn't be achieved without putting oneself through the punishment of constantly accelerating time. Not only that, but after that arduous process, she'd continued to search for a solution, with methods totally opposed to all the current magical theories that researchers had developed.

*No, surely not...* he thought, looking for a way to write it off as impossible. However, as the subject's leading expert, he knew better than anybody else that there was truth conveyed in the magic sequence she had composed. *How many sequences did she have to write to get to this point...?*

He was lost for words. This little girl had come up with a magic sequence that was on an entirely different level from normal. To produce such a ridiculous amount of work within accelerated time, she would have to be a monster of immeasurable skill.



Dr. Friedrich Ross's lesson material was seriously tough, but luckily for me, the topic for that day had included magic sequences used for Spell Boost—something I knew all about. I'd thought I wouldn't have been able to handle it, but one way or another, I'd managed to understand about half of it. By the end, it had become so difficult that I'd had no other option but to bulldoze through it using my own methods.

The other court magicians quietly celebrated my success.

"Nice work, Noelle! That's why you're our number one!"

"Did you see the look on that jerk's face? This is what court magicians are really made of!"

"Yeah! Blow him away!"

Even so, while it seemed that I'd succeeded in fulfilling the requirements with

my magic sequence, the truth was that, in the finer details, I hadn't done it correctly at all. My approach was based on no more than a secondary education in magic, so what I'd written was probably a total mess from a university professor's point of view.

*No, I can't let my nerves get the better of me now. I just have to stay calm and show my best work.*

After getting eighty percent of the answers right, I was top of the class. My classmates' flattery fed my pride, but that changed when the professor's assistant came and spoke to me.

"The professor would like a word with you."

I gulped. *Does that mean he's mad?* I was expecting some kind of snide remark like, *"Your magic sequence might fulfill the requirements, but the formation of your sequences is the worst I've ever seen."*

"I have her here, sir," the assistant said after bringing me to the professor's desk. I was cowering, feeling like a calf being taken to market.

Friedrich Ross said nothing. He looked down at the book in his hands as if he wasn't even listening. After a moment, he raised his eyes irritably and looked at me with a penetrating stare. It was like he was observing me, appraising me. It was so silent, we could've cut the tension with a knife. His expression was icy cold.

"I don't care for you royal court magicians," the professor said plainly. "Just breathing the same air as magicians in thrall to political forces makes me sick. From the bottom of my heart, I wish you would all disappear. I hate everyone in this program, and I most certainly hate you."

*Uh-oh... You really don't like me... But sir, I think that's just your preconceptions talking!*

The Royal Court Magicians' Division was full of wonderful people, and the workplace atmosphere was great too. I was compelled to defend my superiors' honor.

"And then there's your magic sequence," Friedrich Ross went on as I tried to pull together a response. "Everything about it is a complete departure from

current magic research. I would hardly even call it a true magic sequence. If I were to show your work to most researchers, I'm sure they'd say it was fundamentally wrong. That would be the natural response. Your magic sequence is an utter rejection of common sense."

*Ugh... I can't really argue with that. I came up with that magic sequence through my own methods, after all.* I sighed deeply, feeling that this was what I would expect of a scolding from a university professor.

"But make no mistake, it's a magic sequence that you alone could produce," he continued. "You needn't change a thing about it. I'm sure you'll write many more sequences that drive me and other researchers mad."

*Huh? Could it be...?* I thought, dumbfounded.

"Keep doing what you do best," he said.

I was in disbelief. It sounded like he was...praising me. *"You needn't change a thing about it."* It was all right for me to do it my way. I'd only studied magic by myself ever since I finished high school, so to me, it was incredibly reassuring to hear that from him.

Sure, there were things about me and my work that the professor didn't like, but maybe that was also why he'd made such a point of calling me over. He was encouraging me to stick to my guns and follow my own path, even if everyone else were to take issue with my magic sequence.

I kept replaying his words in my mind. My first experience of the special training program had been so much better than I'd ever imagined, and I was getting much more out of it too.





The Holy Nation of Clares was devoted to a great priestess believed to have been chosen by the Goddess Clares. In the underworld, though, the country was known for the strength of its intelligence network. Its leaders acquired elusive information on distant lands long before other countries, and used it to take appropriate action. This was all made possible by the spies they deployed around the western continent.

Riley Graham was one of those spies. He had seventeen identities, each with a different name and face. He had recently completed an undercover operation in a drug smuggling ring, and now he had entered the Kingdom of Ardenfeld unseen.

His mission was to investigate the wyvern incident in the kingdom's western border region and return to Clares with his gathered intelligence. In order to accomplish his mission, he was in a border town, looking for details on what had happened with the wyvern.

First, he learned about the adventurers who had been involved in the battle. He pondered a list of names, full of first-rate adventurers. *This is an impressive bunch to call up in such a short time*, he thought. He supposed there must be some big names at the local Adventurers' Guild.

There were three adventurers in this area with an S-rank license. Among those was Raven Albarn, the most famous adventurer in the western region of Ardenfeld.

The guild had responded to the monster's presence by raising the highest alert level possible. The problem, however, was that they'd been dealing with a wyvern, the most dangerous species on the western continent. Those creatures were beyond reason. They could obliterate mountain ranges and reduce towns to ashes. Even at a conservative estimate, they would be expected to have a threat level of at least 10.

Not only that, but the wyvern that had appeared this time had supposedly gone berserk. Regardless of how impressive the adventurers on this team might be, this wasn't an opponent that they could have realistically fought off with such limited numbers. As Riley Graham investigated the forest where the battle



had taken place, that impression only grew stronger.

*Surely not...*

The evidence left behind suggested a battle so extraordinary that even a seasoned professional like Riley was astounded. He saw an enormous hole torn into the earth and the scattered debris of ripped-up trees. It certainly didn't look like something that the adventurers could have dealt with alone.

*Magic attacks were used here... Is this the work of the Royal Court Magicians' Division?* he thought, piecing together the evidence. Perhaps the royal court magicians sent on an expedition to the western region really had come to sort this out. Based on the scale of the damage, they might even have used tactical strikes.

The Royal Court Magicians' Division was the pride of the kingdom. If a few hundred of those specially selected elite magicians had been deployed, it wasn't too hard to imagine that they could have defeated a wyvern.

*Had they expected a wyvern attack?*

Amazed at their apparent ability to predict the future, Riley began gathering information from the adventurers who had been involved in the battle. He used identification papers showing he was qualified in Ardenfeld as an A-rank adventurer but had spent the last few years out of the country. Under this disguise, he approached the skilled adventurers from the battle.

"The wyvern incident?" one said with a wry smile. "That was quite a situation. Seeing Raven get beaten like that was really tough to take. It felt like the very definition of 'next-level.'"

"Raven Albarn was defeated...?" Riley gulped. "Then who stopped the wyvern?"

"A court magician girl. There have been all kinds of rumors about her. Her name's Noelle Springfield."

"Her?" Riley had heard about Noelle Springfield from his investigations. She was a prodigious magician who had helped to prevent an assassination attempt at the Red Rose Ball shortly after joining the organization, had continued producing results at the Magic Potions Research Section and in the Misty

Woods expedition, and was earning promotion after promotion at an almost record-breaking rate.

Riley collected his thoughts. “You mean she defeated the wyvern alongside other royal court magicians, right?”

The adventurer shook his head. “No. Everyone makes that mistake, but that isn’t what happened.”

“So what did?”

“The other court magicians didn’t arrive until the battle was over. The girl fought the wyvern alone.”

“Alone...?” Riley was perplexed. “Are you saying she used massive magic attacks and stopped the wyvern all by herself?”

“That’s not all. She even drew it away to avoid causing damage to the surroundings. She drove it back to Dragon Mountain.”

“You’re pulling my leg, right? We’re talking about a berserk wyvern here.”

“Believe what you want, but it’s true,” the adventurer said. “She was nothing like any other magician I’ve ever seen. Mark my words, that girl is going to go down in history as one of the all-time greats. I’m sure she’s got more in store for us too.”

Riley had nothing more to say. Could one human really beat a berserk wyvern? He’d seen for himself the signs of a tactical strike and the preposterous number of summoning circles. The idea that somebody had done all that alone could surely be written off as impossible. Nevertheless, he didn’t suspect the adventurer of lying.

Riley’s breath caught in his throat as he imagined somebody so extraordinary that they could demonstrate this outrageous degree of magic power and deploy magic sequences at such speed.

*Lord Mercurius was correct in his prediction. This kingdom has begun to unleash something unthinkable.*

## Chapter 2: A Day at the Theater, and a Covert Operation

Luke Waldstein was sitting alone in his dimly lit room after sundown. He breathed a heavy sigh.

“Why couldn’t I say it?” he asked himself. He still had the theater ticket that he’d failed to give to Noelle. He told himself he wasn’t afraid of rejection—there was just something terribly embarrassing about formally asking her to go to the theater with him.

*No*, he thought, burying his face in his hands. *I am afraid. Afraid of what might happen if our relationship changes. What if she can’t see me as a friend anymore?*

Nothing was more important to Luke than having Noelle by his side. He was *terrified*, unable to bear the thought of losing what they already had. He wondered if it might be better to simply continue as before.

He was so ashamed of his cowardice that he couldn’t look at himself in the mirror. *I haven’t changed one bit.*

Laughing bitterly at himself, Luke pulled a box out from the back of his wardrobe. Inside the box lay small parcels enclosed in decorative wrapping paper. He gazed at them fondly. They were birthday presents he’d prepared for her back when they’d studied together at the academy of magic. Year after year, he had fired himself up to give her a present after failing previously, but in the end, he could never do it. The memories were painful and sad, but a little comforting at the same time.

Those parcels weren’t all that was in the box. There also were some poems he’d scribbled down with her in mind, and there was the set list he’d prepared for a scenario where he would put on a concert for her. As he happened upon a page full of his and her names written with the same surname, he agitatedly shut the notebook.

*What the hell was I thinking back then?* There was something quite pathetic about the contents of that box. *I guess that's just how much I loved her.*

His feelings hadn't changed whatsoever. If anything, they had intensified after all that time.

*I want...to try and push ahead a little further.*

As the eldest son of a duke, he knew he was forbidden from expressing these feelings. Even so, he wanted the two of them to remain close, and he wanted to get to know her better.

"Hey, someone gave me these tickets. Wanna come along?"

Before too long, he worked up the courage to ask her—as a friend. Nothing more. Luke had thought his words over carefully to avoid leaving any room for misinterpretation.

"Oh! This is what Letitia was talking about!" Noelle exclaimed. "I was thinking I should try going some time. Nice one, Luke!"

She slapped him enthusiastically on the shoulder. Totally oblivious, she accepted the invitation so readily that it was something of an anticlimax.

*Am I really going to take Noelle on a date?*

This was the opportunity of Luke's dreams. His heart pounded with anticipation as he put his utmost effort into drawing up the perfect plan. His usual composure was so rattled that he struggled to sleep properly in the days leading up to the show.

Nevertheless, he was in high spirits as he arrived at their meeting point an hour early. Calming himself, he took a deep breath. *Now I have some time to kill.*

Near the fountain they'd agreed to meet at, he spotted a café. He went in and ordered a royal milk tea. Just as he'd sat down, closed his sleep-deprived eyes and begun to drift off, somebody came along and sat down opposite him.

"I should've guessed I'd find you here, Luke. After all the effort we put in to

find out about the shady deals going on here, I don't know how I could've gathered the information all by myself."

This person was a gold-class royal court magician who worked in the Improper Magic Usage Bureau. Also known as the IMUB, the bureau was part of the Royal Court Magicians' Second Unit, which held responsibility for magical law enforcement. The IMUB was a special security agency tasked with cracking down on criminal activity involving magic within the kingdom. Under the leadership of Chris Sherlock, the so-called Silver Magician, the IMUB was the most celebrated section in the Second Unit.

Noticing the lack of uniform, Luke supposed that the IMUB officer must have been on some kind of covert operation.

"What are you talking about?" Luke asked.

"You don't have to play dumb. I'd really appreciate your help. My boss is worried another section will get the scoop and take all the credit, so I was sort of hoping somebody would help me out and pretend they just happened to be here."

"No, I really am here on private business."

The two of them weren't on the same page at all. The IMUB agent's eyes flitted around before they pulled a little hourglass out from their breast pocket and placed it on the table.

"I see," they said. "You need me to fill you in on what I know. I get it."

The hourglass was a level-4 relic used by the IMUB to prevent outsiders from listening in. It was filled with finely ground magicite, which cast a glittering blue light as it fell in a narrow stream.

"I assume you know that the theater is being used for the illegal trade of banned grimoires. We still don't know why they're doing this at the theater, but the chief apparently suspects that the syndicate carrying out the deals has a hideout nearby."

*Why would this happen at a theater of all places...?* Luke thought. For a moment, he considered whether Letitia might have known about this when she gave him the tickets, but then he remembered that the IMUB had put all their



resources into gathering this intelligence. It had to be a coincidence.

Under normal circumstances, he would've seen this as a good opportunity, but not today. He was here for his dream date with Noelle. For once, he didn't want people from other units dragging him into their operations.

"Well, I definitely won't be helping you with that," he said.

"Right. That's just how we want it to look. I'll see you later." The IMUB agent turned their back and left.

Watching them leave, Luke made a decision: he would absolutely not be getting involved. Today, he was off duty. In an emergency like this, he had the option of helping and then taking a compensatory holiday later, but Noelle was more important to him than work.

However, his plan quickly fell apart in a manner he could never have predicted.

"Luke! Hey, Luke!" Noelle sang as she arrived at their meeting point. "You'll never guess what I just heard from an IMUB agent! There are people selling black market grimoires here. Isn't that so exciting?"

Luke was speechless. *Damn it... Why did that agent have to go and do that?!*

Hearing Noelle's unrestrained excitement stressed him out to no end. This was supposed to be the first date he'd dreamed of. He couldn't allow IMUB agents, black market traders, or anyone else to stand in his way.

The battle for Luke Waldstein's ordinary life had begun.



The famous Teatro Ardenfeld was the largest theater in the kingdom. The tickets Letitia had given to me were for today's performance, written by a national playwright of international renown. Outside the theater, throngs of people were looking for tickets to this grand adaptation of an epic poem about a dragon-slaying hero.

"Ugh, I can't see..." Noelle grumbled after repeatedly trying and failing to crane her neck far enough to see what was going on. She pouted as I chuckled. "Hey, Luke, are you making fun of me?"

“Not at all. You just amuse me sometimes.”

She glared. “Don’t treat me like a child.”

She was an odd one. I wondered how she would react if I were to tell her I’d never once treated her like a child. I couldn’t do that, but the thought of it made me smile a little to myself. I then cleared my throat and calmed down.

Over the past several days, I had put all my effort into researching different activities so that I could produce the perfect plan for our date. We had entered the first phase of implementing this plan.

*The show doesn’t start for a while, I would say next. Shall we get something to eat?*

She loved food. She was bound to jump at the opportunity. I had confirmed that one of the capital’s trendiest gelato parlors was near here, and according to my investigations, it should be a little quieter than usual right now.

In spite of all my careful planning, though, I couldn’t seem to produce the words to make it happen. Why not?

*What are you doing, Luke? You fool! Get yourself together!*

I managed to drag the words out kicking and screaming. “Th-The show doesn’t start for a while. Sh-Shall we get something to eat?”

My voice came out a little strained and I was looking away nervously, but I thought I’d succeeded in feigning calmness. But how would she respond? I looked back down again to where she had been.

“Where did she go...?”

I seemed to have lost her. Had she been swept away by the crowd? *I don’t think we moved...* I thought, looking around everywhere in confusion.

She reappeared shortly, pushing her way back through the crowd toward me. Her hands were full of food.

“It looked good,” she explained. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“We don’t have to stick together constantly, but say something when you go off somewhere, okay? I wasn’t expecting you to disappear.”

“My bad.”

As it turned out, she had bought two sticks of fried chicken and some black pepper fries from a nearby stall. It looked like she had even procured enough for me.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll pay you back.”

“I wasn’t offering. This is all for me.”

I had nothing to say to that.

*What’s with her?*

“I thought you’d probably eaten breakfast before coming,” she said. “And you don’t eat snacks, so I figured you wouldn’t want any of this.”

“Oh, so you didn’t eat breakfast. That’s unusual.”

“Who, me? I did eat breakfast.”

“O-Oh. I see.”

“I have an extra stomach for fried food,” she said, happily humming to herself. “Mmm, fried chicken, you’re so fresh! How did you get this delicious?”

She beamed broadly as she shoved more food into her mouth. I sighed as I saw her happy expression. *Even if all my plans go wrong, you’ve got this sneaky habit of making all the irritation melt away with a single smile.*

“Oh, hey!” she cried out, spotting something. “Fried kraken! I wanna eat that too!”

“You want more...?”

“Squid gets another extra stomach. Come and see this, Luke!”

“Hold on. I’ll lose you again.” I had difficulty trying to follow her as she glided effortlessly between the many people.

“Yeah, you won’t be happy if we get separated again,” she said and grabbed hold of my hand. “Honestly! You’re so much taller than me, but you’re like a little kid.”

*If anyone’s a little kid, it’s the one who keeps disappearing on her own, I*

thought defensively, but I couldn't say it aloud. I was distracted by the warm sensation of her dainty hand pulling mine along. Walking together like this made me even happier than I'd imagined.

The plan I'd devised wasn't working out at all. I was just being dragged around willy-nilly. And yet, I was having much more fun than I'd expected. It just made me want to be by her side even more.

*You really are sneaky, aren't you?*



Luke and I spent the time leading up to the performance wandering around the shops near the theater and eating. I was full of fried chicken, fries, squid, and good vibes as we explored the streets.

"What about this one?" Luke suggested, pointing out a popular clothing shop. "Want to take a look?"

I was intrigued to see what might be inside, but then I found my eye drawn to a little shop down an alleyway running behind the flashy main street—an antique bookshop.

"I want to check that one out!" I said. "Come on!"

The wonderful smell of books instantly brought a smile to my face as I entered the dim, cavernous shop. Dust twinkled in the sunshine cascading down from the skylight. I couldn't contain the joy in my heart as I came across the brimming grimoire section.

*This is great! It all sounds so interesting!* I thought, noticing that most of the books appeared to be unusual, out-of-print volumes. *Ooh, look at this one! I don't think this magician's books are all that popular, and they sell for next to nothing, but I love them.*

Even if it was totally unfashionable, I felt like books like this showed off a true love of magic.

*I'm buying it!* I decided, grabbing one book and then another. But just as I was about to reach for another grimoire, a slender hand crossed my line of sight and pulled out the book I was looking at.

“Is this the one you want?” Luke asked.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I replied. “I’m glad to be around somebody with such good taste.”

Luke handed the book back to me and went outside while I brought the three books over to the old shopkeeper to pay. It was an unplanned expense, but I felt I deserved a reward for all my hard work.

I happily clutched the paper bag containing the books as I left the antique bookshop. I noticed Luke looking around, seemingly waiting for me to emerge, when a young lady walked up to him.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Would you like to get a drink together?”

*Wow, she sure is forward!* As something of a romance fan, it was hard for me not to get excited at this fairy-tale turn of events. *She’s cute and fashionable too... That doesn’t sound so bad! Hey, never mind this workaholic loser! Take me somewhere instead!*

“Sorry, I have something important to attend to,” Luke responded, quickly shutting her down before coming closer and addressing me. “Want to move on?”

*He really is a good guy, huh? Always putting friends first.*

He’d gone with me into the antique bookshop just now, even though I was pretty sure it wasn’t his thing. During the wyvern incident, he’d been the first one to come for me. And most importantly, back when I’d been fired from the Mages’ Guild in my rural hometown and had nowhere left to turn, he had come to my rescue.

Luke cared about me so much, despite me being nothing more than a friend. I couldn’t help but think he was a way better person than me. He’d given me so much, and that was why I wanted to be helpful to him in return.

I remembered the words of the IMUB agent: “*Ms. Noelle, maybe you’ve heard. The theater is being used for the illegal trade of banned grimoires...*”

I wanted to help Luke realize his dream of becoming the kingdom’s greatest magician, and I wanted to become a friend and rival who could proudly stand by



his side and come to his aid. Not only that, but preventing a shady deal sounded so exciting, like something out of an adventure novel!

As I headed toward the theater with Luke, deep down I told myself I would make sure to solve this case.



Two people were making their way through the dazzling entrance to the theater, while another two pursued them at a distance.

“Well, well, isn’t this nice?” Gawain Stark exclaimed with twinkling eyes, prompting a weary sigh from Letitia Lisette-Stone. “How very cozy!”

How had it come to this? It all began with an offhand comment Noelle had made to Gawain one day: *“The weekend, as in this weekend? I’m already planning to go to the theater with Luke.”* That had piqued Gawain’s interest. He didn’t care all that much about dates, but this was clearly a special event.

Ever since Luke Waldstein had joined the unit, he’d had the cool, emotionless expression of a machine, but this explained why he now looked like a different person entirely. He’d pined for Noelle since the two were students. In all this time, that fool had gone to bizarre lengths to protect her without ever expressing his feelings, but now he had finally taken the next step and asked her out. To Gawain, this development was fascinating.

To make matters worse, the vice chief of the Improper Magic Usage Bureau had enlisted Gawain’s help in uncovering black market trading and given him theater tickets. Since he was here for work anyway, Gawain had decided he would check in on Luke and Noelle’s little date.

Letitia was exasperated, knowing what her utterly tactless mentor had in store. Even if they were to make it seem like they’d run into Luke and Noelle by coincidence, that would render the “date” null and void. No matter how hard Letitia and Luke might try to reestablish the mood, both Gawain and Noelle would be too distracted by the change. At that point, there would be no bringing it back.

*I have to make sure he doesn’t do anything weird,* Letitia thought. She had helped make this date happen. She had a responsibility to them to keep it as a

date. As a result, she'd offered to accompany Gawain, and so the pair of them had ended up here together, following Luke and Noelle at a distance.

*What am I doing here...?* she thought, massaging her temples.

"Hey, they look like they're getting along better than I thought!" Gawain said excitedly.

Letitia sighed again. "That's just what they're always like."

"I see. So their mutual obliviousness brought them closer."

"Please refrain from pointing out the sad reality of the situation."

Surrounded by the huge crowd, they followed their two subordinates. Luke was treating Noelle in the same familiar manner he normally would.

"He's really working hard to keep up appearances!" Gawain observed, as if it was too remarkable not to mention.

*Good grief*, Letitia thought, looking up at Gawain with an incredulous shrug.

Ever since the two of them had joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division at the same time, Letitia and Gawain had been outstanding magicians with plenty of opportunity to work together. After Gawain reached the adamantite class, Letitia had become his mentee, leading quite a number of people to make assumptions about her. They imagined her throwing herself at Gawain, crying out, *"Pick me! Pick me!"*

Of course, Letitia knew that her much-admired, magnanimous boss was really a hopeless fool who had brought himself to the brink of bankruptcy by being too generous. She had the exact same thought any time her romance-obsessed coworkers tried to insinuate something about the two of them:

*I wouldn't go for him even if he were the last man alive.*

The horseshoe-shaped Teatro Ardenfeld had four different types of seats. I was sitting in one of the most expensive ones, waiting for the show to begin. Next to me was Noelle, looking around with the nervous alertness of a wild animal.

"Hmm, that person over there seems a bit fishy to me," she muttered. "They

seem a bit too relaxed, like they might be a smuggler after all.”

*What does it even mean to be so relaxed that you look like a smuggler?* I thought, side-eyeing Noelle. It seemed that after hearing the IMUB agent’s information, she had entered work mode.

“We’re off duty, you know,” I said. “You don’t have to bother yourself with this stuff. It’s not our job anyway.”

“You say that, but surely you must be thinking about what you could do to help. I mean, come on!” Noelle shrugged and shook her head. “Thanks for thinking of me, but I want you to be able to count on me sometimes. Even if it’s our day off, I want to be useful. I’m doing this for you.”

The last sentence came as a bit of a shock. Of course, I knew that she only saw me as a friend, and even if I was a close friend whom she felt indebted toward, I might not even be close to being a romantic interest. Even so, it made me happy to hear that from her. Our time together was far more important than work, but if that was how she saw it, maybe doing a little work wasn’t such a bad thing.

The show began. It was a four-act opera based on an epic poem about a dragon-slaying hero. First was a beautiful, rousing main theme representing the creation of the world. It opened with a lone bassoon and horn duet, which were soon joined by four of each wind instrument. There were flutes, piccolos, clarinets, trumpets, various oboes and trombones, and contrabass tubas. Together, they provided a magnificent introduction.

A graceful string melody soon followed. There were twelve violists, twelve cellists, and eight double bassists divided into two sections led by the first and second violins.

Sounds flooded the theater and reverberated around the hall, brought forth by the kingdom’s greatest musicians. Sitting beneath the dazzling orange glow of chandeliers and frescoes on the ceiling, the audience was enraptured.

The six harpists were performing an ethereal tune when I happened to look at the seat next to me. Noelle was sitting there with her mouth open, dozing happily.

*That was quick.* The main character hadn't even appeared yet. What was she talking about when she said she'd been wanting to go to the theater? *Typical.*

As I quietly laughed to myself, I felt her petite frame softly bump into me. My heart stopped. Her head was resting on my shoulder, and her hair brushed against the back of my hand.

*I should probably push her away.*

*Well, it can't hurt to wait a little longer.*

My heart raced as I felt the warmth of her body against my shoulder and smelled her soapy fragrance. I could hear her breathing softly, right next to me.



I suddenly came back to my senses and smirked. *Now I'm not paying any attention to the show either.* A performance from the kingdom's national orchestra was of course something to behold, but just seeing her sleeping face made me happier than the show ever could have. *How strange the human heart can be.*

I would've been perfectly happy for time to stop in this moment. I let the beautiful music wash over me as I listened carefully to the sound of her breathing.

I was startled when I realized the entire first act had finished without Noelle opening her eyes once. She was still sound asleep, with her mouth gently hanging open. I couldn't understand why she had wanted to come here.

*Well, it's not like I've been having a bad time or anything...*

In fact, I was extremely satisfied with how it had gone. Even if some incident were to occur and the performance had to be halted, I was sure I'd leave the theater feeling I'd had a wonderful time.

There was a brief intermission before the second act. As I stretched out to breathe a bit of life back into my stiff limbs, I suddenly became aware of somebody looking at me from behind. I looked and saw Gawain cheerfully waving at me, with Letitia by his side shaking her head in despair.

They must have seen everything.

*What are they doing here?!*

I could feel my face burning bright red as I walked toward them.



"Huh...?"

As I opened my eyes, I found myself in a big, flashy hall. For a second, I narrowed my eyes in suspicion as I wondered what this place was, but then I remembered that Luke had invited me to a theater performance.

It looked like this was the intermission. Luke was nowhere to be seen. After stretching out vigorously, I made my way to the restroom. I was still shaking off



some of the tiredness in my legs when I turned a corner and walked right into a member of the theater staff.

“Oops!”

“My apologies,” the staff member said quickly. The man who had just appeared was wearing a tailcoat and seemed flustered. He bowed his head and hurried past me.

*Did something happen?*

A lingering scent caught my attention as he walked away. It was a pleasant smell, but there was something familiar about it too. What was it? I had a feeling I’d encountered it somewhere recently. I searched my memories for an answer.

*Aha! Yeah, I remember this smell from my experiments with magical potions. I was all like, “Here we go! Full speed ahead to my smoking hot new adult body!” and thinking about nothing but shape-shifting—*

*Wait a minute.*

Powdered bicorn horn, witchweed, mandrake root, magicite, bergamot orange—these were the ingredients for a shape-shifting potion. The last time I’d smelled something like this was at the Red Rose Ball. The scent was subtle, and it was mixed together with some kind of perfume, so I had only a hunch, but I thought it would be worth following the man. Perhaps this had some connection to the illegal trading situation.

I looked around frantically for the man and saw that he’d already made his way through the crowd. *Damn. I can’t see through all these people!* I was in danger of losing him, but I tried my best to follow him. I spotted his tailcoat quickly whipping away into a quiet spot at the back of the venue and disappearing around a corner.

Using a concealment spell, I covered myself in a veil to prevent other people from seeing me and went after the man. I followed him past a sign reading “No Unauthorized Persons” and peered around the corner just in time to see him vanish into a wall.

I cautiously moved closer to investigate the situation. There was a

passageway disguised as a plain wall. Creating an illusion like this involved combining a concealing spell with a dungeon relic, and it required a formidable degree of skill and precision. It would have been virtually impossible to discover this passageway without knowing to look for it.

The passageway led underground. I had a strong feeling that this was related to the black market trade in grimoires, and if there was such an elaborate hidden passageway here, that meant that somebody in the theater was probably involved.

I certainly had my suspicions about the manager of the theater. I'd seen files on him when I'd been sorting through paperwork as a new recruit to the Royal Court Magicians' Division. Michel Berclova, the twelfth-generation general manager of the Teatro Ardenfeld, had made his name as a theater producer in a northern empire before coming to Ardenfeld. There had been investigations into possible links between him and major underworld figures.

I carefully made my way down the passageway in pursuit of the man in the tailcoat. Keeping a reasonable distance between us so that he wouldn't notice my presence, I followed him down to what turned out to be a large, elaborate underground facility. It must have been made specially with enchantments used to reinforce and soundproof the walls.

At some kind of storage area on the other side of the facility, he was talking to somebody. I was too far away to catch what they were saying, so I gave up on listening and observed my surroundings.

*What on earth is all this stuff?* Something was covered in cloth near me. Once I was closer, I peeked through a gap in the cloth—the contents underneath took my breath away.

I could smell contraband magical potions and see a huge pile of illegal magical weapons.

*"We still don't know why they're doing this at the theater,"* the IMUB agent had told me, *"but the chief apparently suspects that the syndicate carrying out the deals has a hideout nearby."*

Never mind "nearby"—the hideout was *right here*. I had never expected this discovery!

*I-I have to make sure I go and tell the others what's going on!*

As I turned to try and make my escape, I heard voices as clear as day.

“Now, where’s the rat?”

“Right over there.”

*Uh-oh. They’ve caught me.*

While I racked my brain for a solution, gang members lined up one by one in front of the passageway, illegal weapons in hand, sealing off the exit.

*Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place...*

*Damn it! Looks like I have no other choice!*

I braced myself and deployed a summoning circle. I was right in the middle of the crime syndicate’s secret hideout, and it was time to fight.

I was surrounded by gang members, and from the way they carried themselves, I could tell they were a serious threat. They looked like they might even be the syndicate’s combat specialists. In terms of both battle experience and skills, they were from an entirely different world from the one that I knew from my first year as a royal court magician. Besides that, they were each armed with an illegal magical weapon popular within organized crime: the Tempest Scepter. It was a serious crime just to possess one, and I’d read claims that they were significantly more powerful than even the magic that magicians used.

Considering their numbers, their experience, and their equipment, I was at a clear disadvantage.

“Huh? It’s just a kid,” one of them said, laughing derisively.

Objectively speaking, perhaps it was obvious that they were in a position to mock me. However, something was welling up deep inside me. I loved magic more than anything else. I knew the passion that a magician had for magic, as well as the blood, sweat, and tears it took to master it. As long as I had that knowledge, I had nothing to fear.

*Don’t go thinking your power is greater than a magician’s.*

I established my magic sequence and rapidly deployed a series of summoning circles, then put all my effort into casting a wind spell.

“Wind Blast!”

A roaring sound rocked the crime syndicate’s underground facility.



In the shadows of the Kingdom of Ardenfeld lurked the crime syndicate Nightfall, named after a piece from a much-loved opera. Nightfall’s roots spread throughout the kingdom, and the syndicate’s influence reached even beyond its borders.

Their operations extended to the illicit drug trade, kidnapping, human trafficking, smuggling, and murder, just to name a few, but their specialty was the manufacture of highly dangerous and strictly prohibited magical potions and weapons. The potions they sold caused irreparable harm to half of the people who used them, and the weapons corrupted their owners in both body and spirit.

Nightfall’s massive power was plain to see in the outstanding fighting ability of the Ten Arms, their organization’s combat division. The Ten Arms was a band of berserkers with inhuman strength and combat skills, honed through an absurd degree of training and the use of illicit substances.

Over the last one hundred fights, the Ten Arms’ commander hadn’t known defeat, and he could count the number of times he’d been injured in battle on a single hand.

“Go,” he barked.

Responding to the commander’s order, one of the Ten Arms raised his weapon. What he was holding was a Tempest Scepter, the most dangerous of all the illegal magical weapons trafficked by the syndicate. Its tremendous power was far beyond what a magician could muster.

The stick emitted a harsh flash of light that scorched his face as it released wind magic of astounding intensity. Even for members of the Ten Arms, known for their extraordinary physical strength, it was impossible to hold on to a Tempest Scepter with just one hand. The magical concentration was so great

that it could send its user flying if they lost focus for even a second.

A huge noise assaulted his eardrums. A weighty shock wave slammed into his body as a devastating cannonball of wind sprang forth. He and the other Ten Arms were working as fast as they could to completely obliterate the intruder, but in that moment, he realized they were facing a level of magical power he'd never experienced.

A chill ran down his spine. His intuition, trained through intense battle experience, told him this was someone out of the ordinary.

He brandished the Tempest Scepter again, partly out of pure instinct. The other Ten Arms were surely responding in the same way, instinctively unleashing the most powerful attacks they could manage to protect themselves against this mysterious threat. The destructive might of their ridiculously high-power contraband weapons was more than a human being could handle. However, before them was someone that transcended all this man's notions of common sense.

*So fast!* he thought, seeing how quickly the opposition was deploying summoning circles. The volley of wind attacks came at what seemed like a greater speed than physically possible. That tiny little magician was holding her own against an onslaught of ten illegal magical weapons.

*It's not possible. There's just no way...* He stared at her, shocked into silence. *What the hell is this...?*

The leader of Nightfall was an old man, widely known as a serious heavyweight in the criminal underworld. He would use any means necessary to expand the organization.

Even to his experienced eyes, this was a truly unanticipated sight. His men had phenomenal weapons that were far beyond what anybody could cope with. Only a monster could match the extreme power of ten Tempest Scepters.

As he watched the battle unfold, he was reminded of a rumor. A veteran assassin who knew all there was to know about people in the underworld had appeared at the Red Rose Ball in the royal palace, and that same veteran had tasted defeat for the first time in his career. He'd even possessed a supreme

relic, yet a little royal court magician had neutralized it.

*Is this the one they call Noelle Springfield?* the old man thought. She was a rising star, said to have suppressed a high-level mutant goblin emperor and produced outstanding results during the wyvern incident on the western frontier. All eyes were on her.

The old man determined that this girl was the worst kind of danger to their organization. He was in no position to hesitate in deciding how to deal with her.

“We will use it,” he commanded.

“Yes, sir.” The leader’s aide produced a cup that shone with a violet light. They had their own supreme relic. It took entire cities, or even entire countries, to afford such rare dungeon relics.

This one was the Cruel God’s Goblet, an item with the ability to invigorate all the magicite in a fixed area, doubling the output of magical weapons—at the cost of half of the user’s remaining life span. It was the secret weapon the old man had prepared in case he needed to do battle with royal court magicians. He had used it many times to defeat skilled magicians.

*I’m sure she’s undergone an unimaginable amount of training as a magician,* he thought. *But in this world, success is about being smart. It’s perfectly easy to bring down the powerful. They believed the dragon-slaying hero was unbeatable, but even he died an early death thanks to a clever plot.*

His aide activated the Cruel God’s Goblet. Its ominous violet light flooded the room.

The little magician had managed to stand up to ten of their illegally produced Tempest Scepters, but the power of the goblet would mercilessly undo everything she had achieved. It doubled the output of their weapons, allowing them to release even stronger wind magic.

She tried to resist, but there was no fighting this. There was no way to keep up. She was forced back by a power so much stronger than hers that it was cruel. It was like a giant fighting a mouse. A human facing magical weapons and a supreme relic would be crushed beyond recognition. This was no fight; this was an absolute annihilation.

With an earsplitting roar, the battle was brought to an early conclusion.

“Our work here is done. Let’s go.” The old man turned his back and began walking toward the exit. After a few steps, he paused, noticing that his aide was not with him. “Come. What are you doing?”

“I’m s-sorry, sir. It’s just...” the aide replied, his voice quivering.

Once the old man turned to see what the aide was looking at, he was lost for words.

*Impossible...* He saw the little magician, just barely holding her own against the Tempest Scepters’ barrage. *It can’t be. There’s just no way. Not with double the magical power against her...*

The Cruel God’s Goblet had certainly been activated—and that was what made this so unbelievable. The Nightfall leader couldn’t understand what he was seeing. He kept closing his eyes and then looking again, but the reality of the situation didn’t change.

*What the hell is this...?*

He stared at her in shock and suddenly realized something. There had been a change in the magician following the use of the goblet: all of her movements had adjusted to become perfectly optimized and efficient.

*How could she possibly adapt to a situation like this...?*

It wasn’t a mere matter of increasing her speed; she was also focusing her innumerable wind attacks on a single point with surgical precision and a fine sense of balance. Even more formidable was the way in which she instantly grasped what was going on and knew exactly how to respond.

The old man was astounded at how she had reacted in a split second to what should have been a dire situation. *The worse the circumstances get, the more power she displays...*

The way she adapted didn’t even seem to be conscious to her. She had reacted instinctively, without thought, and optimized her movements in response to a changing situation. He didn’t understand how she had done it, or what had made her so strong, but even if he had, he wouldn’t have been able to



explain what he was witnessing.

*What is she?*

His mouth turned dry as he stared at this unfathomable sight.



The floodgates opened, and the row of magic staffs released a barrage of intense wind. I did all that I could to stand up to the calamitous power of the attack, but the more magical and physical power I used, the closer I got to my limit.

This was the real difference between humans and magical weapons. Continuous use didn't diminish the efficacy or accuracy of magical weapons, whereas one person was restricted in how much magic they could use at one time.

My mind was in turmoil, and my body was getting worn out. Panic, anxiety, fear, and doubt affected me mentally and physically, which had a major impact on my magic ability. Slowly but surely, I was being driven back. I couldn't keep their attacks at bay much longer. My concentration was breaking down and I could tell that I was at the end of my rope.

*No.*

I composed myself and shook off all my feelings of doubt. Now was no time for thinking that I would lose or that I couldn't keep up. I needed to do one thing: fight back against their magic attacks with everything I had.

I knew that my back was against the wall, but I had to try and give myself even just a second longer. There was a ridiculous amount of magic on display at the end of this hidden passageway. Even if the facility was protected by concealment spells and magical soundproofing, a powerful magician was sure to notice the changing flow of magic.

I knew that an obnoxiously talented magician was up there, and he wasn't going to miss an opportunity like this. I could leave the rest to him. I just had to arrange the situation into a good position for others to take over.

*I have to do this so I can live up to the expectations of the people who have*

*helped me so much. I have to pay him back at least a little after he rescued me. Failure is not an option.*

*I just need to try a little bit harder!*

I went on casting spells with all my might. I was dripping with sweat. My eyesight blurred as I began to feel lightheaded. The effort was sapping all my physical and magical energy.

“Ngh!” I cried out as one attack that I couldn’t quite deflect struck me in the left arm. My sleeve burst open.

Oncoming knives of wind filled my vision like an avalanche. Right at the edge of my hazy field of view, I saw two intense explosions of magic.

A devastating surge of lightning and fire magic mowed everything down.

The shock wave crashed into me. The knives of wind that had been flooding around me just moments earlier dissipated in an instant. The floor of the underground facility was ripped up into the air.

Everyone in that place surely understood what had happened immediately. The two newcomers had brought a whole new level of power to the situation, and the battle was now as good as over. It was the magus Gawain Stark, accompanied by my annoyingly skilled rival and friend—Luke Waldstein.

The gang members faced the two royal court magicians, raised their illegal weapons and commenced fire, but their attacks couldn’t even get close. They were totally overrun. Their numerical advantage and equipment meant nothing in the face of those two. Gawain and Luke’s incredible power totally reversed the battle situation.

A group of Improper Magic Usage Bureau magicians entered the facility, headed by Letitia, and began restraining the members of the syndicate.

*Phew. I kept them here long enough for reinforcements to come.*

Breathing a sigh of relief, I crumpled to the floor.

“Noelle?!” Luke shouted out. I felt guilty for how agitated he sounded as he

rushed over to me.

“I’m fine, Luke,” I said hurriedly. “You need to focus on work...”

Even though the battle was practically over by now, this was a huge opportunity to secure an even more impressive outcome. Personally apprehending big names in the crime syndicate would surely be rewarded handsomely.

There was no need to help me out until afterward, and yet Luke was leaning over to establish a healing magic sequence.

“Seriously, don’t worry about me,” I muttered.

“Well, I’m going to.”

“Come on, this is your big chance.”

“I said what I said.” Luke wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“But...” It was clear to me that he should be prioritizing work.

“You’re more important, Noelle.” His sapphire eyes shined at me, his face in profile. He exhaled, heavy worry leaving his body, as the healing magic began to work on my wounds. “I’m glad I made it in time.”

I felt the need to hide my face when I saw Luke’s expression. I remembered what he had said when he came to my town and took me under his wing: *“I never did really beat you, so I want your aid in helping me in becoming this country’s greatest magician.”*

But how could he achieve his goals if he was putting me first? He was normally so coolheaded and driven, but in moments like this, he seemed discomposed. I knew it was because he was truly a good person. It filled me with warm feelings, but I was too embarrassed to voice them. I hesitated.

*Come on, I really ought to be honest and say something.*

Even though I told myself that, I still felt somehow awkward as I murmured into his ear, “Thank you.”

He looked anxious and turned away. “It’s not a big deal...”

I saw the elegant curve of his ear turn a gentle shade of red, and smiled.

*You're a shrinking violet all of a sudden, huh?*



*I made it*, he thought. That knowledge brought peace to Luke Waldstein's heart. The image of her out cold after the wyvern incident on the western frontier was still burned into his memory. He never wanted to feel that way again.

No matter what happened, she was too important to lose. However, at the same time, Luke was acutely aware of the fact that this would all come to an end one day. Nothing could remain the same forever, and it would take so little to bring their time together to an end. He understood this all too well.

*She may like me, but it's not the same way I like her*, Luke thought. *To her, I'm just a friend. It would take far too long for her to begin seeing me as a potential romantic partner. Maybe my feelings will never be returned.*

*But it's okay as long as you're here, Noelle. That's enough to make me happier than anything else ever could. I want to be by your side.*

"Thank you," she murmured.

*I'm dishonest and hopeless, and yet hearing you say that makes me want to be even closer to you.*

Luke wanted their time together to last at least a little longer. As much as he feared the day when it would all be over, he held on tightly to such childish dreams.



In a room in the Crimson Palace, Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld was reading over the dossier he'd asked his servants to prepare.

The dossier collated information about Noelle Springfield, the royal court magician who had produced outstanding results upon joining the organization and earned herself the second-fastest promotion to the silver class in history. Everything about her was in these documents: details on her day-to-day life, her training records, investigations into the incidents she'd been involved in—even the books she'd borrowed from the library and what she'd eaten for lunch. All

the most specific information about Noelle Springfield was carefully recorded by a top secret team of experts recruited by Prince Michael himself.

Lord Benedict, the leader of the team, also found the little magician intriguing. He'd seen how she would go to cafeterias frequented by some of the biggest eaters, wolf down the largest items on the menu, pull a face and say, "I've got another stomach just for fried chicken." He'd seen how she would borrow an inscrutable classic novel from the library based purely on its intellectual or exciting title, only to give up after a page and return it. He'd seen how she would swoon and foam at the mouth in despair when she measured herself and found that she was shorter than ever. Just from observing, he could tell that she was a strange, mystifying creature.

However, her magical power was on an entirely different level from the average magician.

*To think that she could display so much power so casually...* Lord Benedict thought.

Her attitude to training was totally unlike everyone else's too. Both her level of concentration and the amount of studying she did were extraordinary. While taking on more work than all of her peers, she would use magic to accelerate time and channel her increased vigor into doing ever more complex work.

What was even more impressive was the fact that in the field, she seemed to be considerably more capable than she was in training. She had thwarted the assassination attempt at the Red Rose Ball, defeated a mutant goblin emperor in the Misty Woods, and driven away a berserk wyvern threatening the western frontier. Most recently, she had done battle in a hideout used by the crime syndicate Nightfall. In each of these incidents, she had performed significantly better than she ever had during regular training.

What made her so impressive? According to the dossier, it wasn't enough to simply say that she worked well under pressure.

"I have a theory," Prince Michael said.

"A theory, Your Highness?"

"Yes, about the nature of her abilities. I wonder if her true talent lies in her

capacity for adapting to the environment. She was given a ludicrous workload at the Mages' Guild. The more she worked, the harsher the environment became. She had no choice but to adapt; had she not, she wouldn't have survived that job." The crown prince's voice resonated in his quiet office. "That experience caused her adaptability to improve endlessly. The circumstances she's faced have been more than she could handle, but she has proved unusually good at adapting to such situations. Looking back, that must have been the case from the very beginning."

"Well, I never!" Lord Benedict gasped softly.

During the Sixty Seconds of Blood, Gawain Stark's initiation test, she'd been up against a magus who boasted the most impressive firepower in the kingdom. Could she really have instantly adapted to his attacks? It was only a mock battle designed to test out new recruits, but it was still an extremely short space of time for her to have to deal with a much higher-ranked opponent.

"Surely not," Lord Benedict said. "How could she have possibly...?"

"I had the very same thought. But the information you've gathered for me only supports my theory." Prince Michael smiled. "It was the same in her other battles. She responds to each new challenge by optimizing her own abilities. The stronger the enemy, the more she increases her own power. Her adaptability is on par with that of monsters."

Lord Benedict could hardly believe what he was hearing. The dossier might indeed have supported this theory, but that just made it even more incredible. He couldn't accept it.

The girl had faced a wyvern, the most dangerous creature in the entire western continent. They'd been known to obliterate mountain ranges and reduce towns to ashes. It seemed absurd to think that she had shifted to match such a fearsome monster's attacks right in the heat of battle. That was surely far beyond the kind of ability that any human should have.

"She has an exceptional talent—monstrous, even," Prince Michael went on. "I wish to see its full extent for myself."

"How do you intend to do that, Your Highness?"

“Very soon, *he* will be back.”

“When you say ‘he,’ do you mean...?” Lord Benedict, incredulous, stared at the crown prince.

“I mean the man who has never lost in over seven hundred duels. Our kingdom’s greatest swordsman—Eric Rashford.”

Eric Rashford was the highest-ranking member of the Order of Royal Knights. His outstanding exploits had led some to call him the One-Man Army, while others knew him as the Undefeated Master of the Blade. He was one of the kingdom’s greatest fighters, with skill rivaling that of the magi. Indeed, this living legend’s strength was so astounding that some argued he was the greatest knight the kingdom had ever produced.

“Surely not!” Lord Benedict exclaimed. “How could she have a fair fight against Sir Rashford?”

“Don’t worry, Lord Benedict. I will apply a handicap. However, there is something I’m hoping for.” Prince Michael smiled again. “I’m hoping to see evidence that that girl is even more special than we thought.”



“Wow, Ms. Noelle!” the IMUB agent said to me in the crime syndicate’s hideout after the battle. “I can’t believe you found this place all by yourself when I couldn’t find it for years!”

I gave an embarrassed laugh and smiled. “Nah, it wasn’t really such a big deal.”

I’d found the hideout by simple happenstance, so it genuinely wasn’t thanks to my investigative skills or anything—not that I mentioned that part, though. After all, this was a good opportunity. I had to enjoy the praise while it lasted.

“All right, let me get you dinner,” Gawain proposed once the cleanup operation was over. “Come with me, everyone.”

We happily accepted his offer and followed him to his favorite tavern for a celebration of a job well done.

“Not again...” Letitia muttered, sighing and rubbing her temples once again.



Once we were sitting down at the tavern, I began placing my order. “A cheese platter and some fried kraken, please! Oh, also, let me add beef skewers, and pork skewers, and...tripe stew! Thank you!”

“Ah, thanks for ordering for everybody,” Gawain said.

“That’s just for me!” I replied, paying little heed to his stony expression.

I was extremely pleased to have a nice big portion all to myself. It was also the first time in a while I’d consumed much of any alcohol. No one at my old job had ever hung out together. In fact, I got a little carried away this time and had more alcohol than I really should have.

“Noelle, maybe you should take it easy. You’re not used to drinking like this,” Luke said, but I brushed him off.

“Come on, it’s no big deal! Starting today, I’m a cosmopolitan lady who can handle her drink! Another round, thank you!”

Soon enough, I was ordering another refill.

“I’ve still got room for more! The night is young!”

Ignoring the bewilderment of my older coworkers, I went on getting merrier and merrier.

“All rrrriight, time for a ssssong from Nuuelle Sprungfieeeeld! And a one, and a two, and a—”

Everything after I started singing ended up being pretty hazy. According to what I was told after the fact, I crashed into a bush outside the tavern and would’ve just slept there had it not been for Luke helping me back home. Actually, I could vaguely picture him diligently looking after me. “Here, I have some water,” I remembered him saying.

The next morning at home, my mother congratulated me with, “Smart move!” She completely misunderstood the situation. “Deliberately exposing your vulnerability to see if he really likes you, huh? So that’s what an expert in the ways of love is like...”

I didn’t really know what she was talking about. I just concentrated on waking myself up with some cold water and getting ready for work. As I attempted to

fix my bed hair, I remembered something the gold-class magician from the IMUB had told me at the party.

“Don’t tell anybody about this, okay? What I’m about to tell you stays here,” the agent had said, looking serious. “You see, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince has supposedly been keeping tabs on you.”

I didn’t quite get it. As the leading figure in the Crimson Palace, Michael Ardenfeld was at the very pinnacle of society. He was known for his brilliant mind and dashing looks. He’d skipped years at the kingdom’s most prestigious university and still graduated top of his class. He’d defeated a chess grandmaster purported to be the most skilled in all the surrounding nations.

I had some recollection that he’d selected me for the expedition to the western region, so he must have rated me pretty highly, but even then, it didn’t seem plausible that somebody so important would still be investigating a novice like me.

“It’s true,” the IMUB agent had replied when I said this. “I don’t know the whole story, but he’s recruited quite a few people to get information on you. I’ve heard that there are spies from other countries investigating you too. You should be careful, or you might get involved in something serious. I think you have the potential to go down in history as a great magician.”

I appreciated the concern, but I felt like the agent must have been making some mistake. There was no way that people like the crown prince or foreign spies would be interested in me—though it was flattering that people thought highly enough of me to get that impression.

Those thoughts were bouncing around my head as I arrived at work and noticed some kind of commotion in the barracks. A crowd of my coworkers was making a lot of noise. I tried to lean in to find out what was going on, but I was too short to see properly.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“Noelle!” one of them responded. “Oh, it’s serious! You won’t believe this!”

“Huh?” I said blankly, looking up as they all gathered around me.

“I’m going to tell you, but don’t freak out, okay? Once a year, there’s this

special tournament put on for the royal family to watch. And Noelle... You've been chosen as a contestant."

## Chapter 3: The Royal Invitational Tournament

The Royal Invitational Tournament was among the most anticipated events in the palace's calendar. It consisted of a series of five bouts between top members of the Order of Royal Knights and the Royal Court Magicians' Division. The king himself would be in attendance, and the results could impact the statuses and reputations of the participating teams. Both organizations saw it as an event of great importance.

"B-But wh-why me?" I stammered.

"You've been selected on the recommendation of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince," my superior explained.

"But there are plenty of magicians who are better than me."

"Among the higher ranks, there are a lot of people who would prefer to focus on their own work. And besides, it can be dangerous to enter the strongest people into the tournament."

"Oh, I see."

I thought about what I'd witnessed in the crime syndicate's hideout when Gawain and Luke appeared. I could see how having people like them fight it out in front of the king could be troubling from a practical standpoint.

"Also, you kind of drew the short straw," she went on. "Your match is the one nobody wants to be part of."

"Why is that?"

"It's the decisive final match. But more importantly, you're up against Sir Rashford, the Undefeated Master of the Blade."

I knew that name well. To be precise, I was sure everyone in the kingdom knew of him; Eric Rashford was the highest-ranking of all the royal knights. He had gone seven hundred duels without a single loss. He was the greatest knight in history, ranked alongside the magi in terms of fighting strength.

While I boasted my own four-hundred-fight winning streak against playground bullies, I'd only achieved that as a kid thanks to my desire to match Sir Rashford's record.

"No way!" I blurted out. "How could that be a fair fight?!"

"Don't worry. The organizers know that there's a big gap in ability, so they're applying a handicap."

"Well, that's a relief. I was thinking I wouldn't make it out alive."

"They've made a special rule that if you hold out for five minutes, you win."

"Um... You just happened to leave out the bit about a handicap that actually limits his power, right?"

"It's fine," she said, smiling sweetly and clapping me on the shoulder. "You'll live, I think."

*"I think"?! So I might not live?!*

"Can't you go instead?" I pleaded. "You're a gold-class magician! You outrank me!"

"No way! I have a cat at home who needs me. I can't afford to die!"

"But I don't want to die either!"

"This is the last thing I'll ever ask of you! Sacrifice yourself for all of us!"

"I don't wanna!"

I continued putting on a show of stubborn refusal, but ultimately, I'd been called up by the crown prince. There was nothing a lowly magician like me could do about it. Knowing that, I resigned myself to patiently taking up my place in the Royal Invitational Tournament like a lamb to the slaughter.

"Why...?" I whimpered. "How did I get in this mess?"

The difference between us was ridiculous. There was no way this could be a fair fight. How was I supposed to make it out of such a desperate situation in one piece? As the days went by, I racked my brains to come up with a solution, but I couldn't think of anything.

"Noelle," my superior said to me one day. "You have a briefing ahead of the

tournament.”

I was called to a sumptuous reception room in the palace to attend my briefing session. The snowy white sofa and marble table were bathed in orange candlelight from slender candlesticks in the shape of birds.

“Please wait here for a moment,” an attendant said before elegantly bowing and silently leaving the room in a graceful catlike manner. I was waiting while the attendant called for the aristocrat in charge of organizing the tournament. As I sat there, unable to settle down, the room was as quiet as the bottom of a lake. I’d lost track of how long I’d been there when somebody finally appeared.

“Sorry for the wait,” the refined, middle-aged man said upon entering the room. “I was having a chat with Lord Mathers and it got a little out of hand.”

I wasn’t knowledgeable about high society, but I could tell intuitively that I was speaking to a very distinguished gentleman.

“You must be the rookie magician I’ve been hearing about,” the man continued. “His Royal Highness the Crown Prince has had his eye on you. I even heard he was considering hiring you for the King’s Guard.”

“Oh, th-thank you, sir.” It sounded like I was really held in high regard, but I still felt like the prince was somebody impossibly beyond reach whom I barely deserved to speak to. It didn’t seem real.

“You must be pleased. This is unprecedented, after all. Nobody else has ever been selected as a contestant in the Royal Invitational Tournament within their first year of joining the Royal Court Magicians’ Division. But I must say, I did have my doubts, knowing about your unique position.”

“My unique position, sir?”

“Indeed. Your position as a commoner from a plain old border town in the west. As I understand it, you come from a poor, lower-class background and grew up in a single-parent household. You’re also a girl—and a girl as puny as a child, to boot. It made me question whether you really had the magical power necessary. Of course, you’ve been hard at work, but I wasn’t sure it would be appropriate for you to appear at the Royal Invitational Tournament. However, I changed my mind when I thought about the difference in level between you

and your opponent.” I continued listening as he went on.

“You see, you’ll be facing the swordsman Sir Rashford. I know well that unless a magus participates, there’s nobody who could really compete with him. And it simply wouldn’t do to see somebody of noble upbringing face him and suffer a crushing defeat. In that respect, you’re a fine choice. Nobody would mind seeing a commoner getting beaten to a pulp.” The aristocrat grinned. “Everyone knows that you’re no match for Sir Rashford. All you need to do is show up. It’ll all be fine.”

Hearing this reminded me of my days as a student. It wasn’t like there had been many other lower-class students at the academy. My classmates from noble families had sometimes hurled insults at me. I remembered one shouting, “What on earth have you done? To think that a commoner like you could best me!”

Now that I thought about it, that fancy student had been Luke. Of course, I always gave as good as I got.

*“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!”*

Obviously, I was an adult now. I wasn’t going to pick fights the way I had back then.

“I hope you enjoy the match,” was all I said.

As soon as the briefing was over, I made a beeline for Luke’s office. I swung the door open and saw him drinking tea.

“I want to win this match, and I need your help.”



Luke Waldstein had his own information network in the royal palace. He knew about all kinds of corruption and scandals among the aristocracy, and he used this knowledge as leverage to recruit other nobles as his informants.

As a result, he was already aware of the meeting going on that morning



between His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld and Gawain Stark, captain of the Third Unit. They had three main orders of business: First, a silver-class royal court magician in the Third Unit by the name of Noelle Springfield had been selected as a contestant for the Royal Invitational Tournament. Second, the crown prince had high hopes for Noelle Springfield and wanted to ensure that she was trained in the best environment for her professional growth. And finally, the crown prince was of the belief that her future success lay in gaining experience not in the Royal Court Magicians' Division but in the King's Guard.

Soon after the meeting, Luke was told that "a number of people are already working on Noelle Springfield's transfer to the King's Guard. Once the tournament is over, it may even be unofficially announced within a month's time."

Sitting in his office, Luke sighed deeply upon hearing this news. *The crown prince is moving even faster than I expected*, he thought. This was exactly what Luke had been fearing. If Noelle was transferred to the King's Guard—the special task force assigned as personal security for royals—she would no longer be a royal court magician, meaning she would no longer be Luke's mentee.

"Sorry," Gawain said to Luke after he returned. "I couldn't stop him."

"It's all right. Thank you for your concern."

"It's not you I'm concerned about, you know. She's been getting a lot of attention as a magician, but it isn't all positive attention. She's still young, and she's a commoner too—a lot of conservatives in the court aren't too happy about that. If she joins the King's Guard, she'll have to interact much more closely with those types of people. It's too soon for her when she's only in her first year. It's as simple as that. Unfortunately, it looks like the transfer is practically set in stone already. It's the will of His Royal Highness. There's nothing that we magicians can do about it." Gawain glanced at Luke. "But I bet you still haven't given up."

"Indeed. I think I still have something up my sleeve."

"What do you have planned?"

"His Royal Highness's actions suggest to me that what he wants is to provide

Noelle with the best environment for her development,” Luke explained. “In that case, I need to prove to him that the best environment is with me. I’m going to help Noelle put on a performance at the Royal Invitational Tournament that exceeds His Royal Highness’s expectations. I think there’s a chance that that will enable us to turn this situation on its head.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad you’re still keeping things aboveboard.”

“What were you expecting?”

“I figured you might whisk her away and ride off into the sunset.”

“I wouldn’t do that. All I wish for is Noelle’s happiness.” Luke shrugged. “Then again, this plan might ruffle a few feathers.”

“I hope this doesn’t end in tears.”

“Well, I was told I should work toward what makes me happy, and I’m making an effort to do that. I want to be near her. Not even the crown prince can make me give up on her.”

“Good.” Gawain smiled. “Do what you want. No regrets, okay?”

Luke nodded, but he knew he wasn’t being fully honest. If he lost Noelle, he’d never move forward without regrets. However hard he might try, he surely wouldn’t feel any sense of accomplishment or satisfaction.

For that reason, he was putting all his effort into this. Nothing mattered more than his irreplaceable time with Noelle. He wouldn’t give that away for anything, regardless of whoever might stand in his way.

*Now, where to begin?* he thought. Noelle would be bound to make waves if she won her match at the Royal Invitational Tournament. Her opponent was the master swordsman touted as the greatest knight in the kingdom’s history, so the disparity in their ability was obvious. With such an unbelievable difference in level, it would have been natural to lose hope before the battle had even begun.

However, there was no way she could match her opponent if she let herself feel overwhelmed now. She wouldn’t be able to put up a fight at all. The question was how to overcome that hurdle.

Just as Luke was contemplating that matter, the door to his office opened and Noelle came in.

“I want to win this match,” Noelle announced, “and I need your help.”

Both her determined gaze and the unexpected request caught him off guard. *Surely you couldn't...?* he thought. He stifled a smile and set his teacup down on the table.

“You can count on me,” he said.

The challenge was enormous. Nobody believed that she could win, and Luke himself recognized that it would be a serious struggle. Nevertheless, he had no intention of giving up.

He wasn't going to surrender without fighting for what mattered most to him: being with Noelle. He would take on whoever stood in his way, whether they be a master swordsman, a crown prince, or anybody.

There wasn't an inkling of hesitation in Luke Waldstein's eyes.



That was when Luke and I began work on a strategy to win my match at the Royal Invitational Tournament.

“Have you really read all of this...?” I asked, amazed by the mountainous volume of materials lining Luke's office.

“We wouldn't even make it to the starting line if I hadn't. Not against this kind of opposition.” He explained how he had scrutinized Eric Rashford's existing battle records.

I'd always known that Luke was a competent guy, but right now I was really struck by his work ethic. Born into the prestigious Waldstein family, he was a hardworking prodigy who had put in an extraordinary amount of effort ever since he was a child. Once he knew what he wanted and how to accomplish it, his single-minded focus was second to none.

“He's one of the kingdom's strongest fighters, on par with the magi,” he said. “He's gone over seven hundred duels without defeat, and he's already made it into the history books as the greatest knight that ever lived. His ability and

experience are far beyond yours when it comes to one-on-one contests. Most would expect an instant knockout before you have a chance to make a move, and that's exactly what will happen if you don't come prepared."

"Yeah, I figured."

We were talking about one of the kingdom's greatest heroes. All manner of distinguished soldiers and swordsmen had challenged him only to suffer defeat. I was confronted with the overwhelming impression that I didn't have a hope in hell.

"But Luke, you have a plan, right? You must."

"Naturally."

He made it seem so obvious. On top of his brilliant talent, Luke was more diligent and prepared than anyone else. In terms of his tactical acumen, he was probably unmatched in the Royal Court Magicians' Division. He would carefully research his opponent, perfectly target their weak points, and bring them to a standstill without ever having to reveal his true power.

If he had to fight dirty, he could scheme better than anyone. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd fallen victim to his shady methods myself. I could remember how much I'd hated some of his methods, but when I was faced with an opponent too powerful for me to match, nobody was a more reliable partner than Luke.

"So what should I do?" I asked.

"Maintain your distance, and keep fending off his attacks. This time around, they've imposed a rule where you'll win the match as long as you survive for five minutes. Your only option is to concentrate on getting away from him and try to run out the clock," he elaborated. "The other important thing is to make sure you're strong enough to handle his attacks, especially at the beginning. It might seem hopeless, but as long as you can make it through his opening move, you'll have a shot. I think you can do that, Noelle. I believe in you."

Hearing that from him really filled me with encouragement. In my previous job, I'd constantly been treated like I was worthless, so being told that I was capable—that somebody *believed* in me—made me feel immensely grateful.

“Now, to make sure that you can survive his attacks, let’s work on training to fight a stronger opponent.” Luke pulled out a bracelet shining with a distinctive glow. “This is an Antispell Bracelet. It’s a level-2 relic that halves the wearer’s magical power. I want you to wear this during training.”

“Limiting my power in training to improve my magic, huh? I’ve always wanted to give this a shot!”

It was a form of high-intensity training that had been gaining popularity in recent years. I’d quietly dreamed of using this method myself, but because of the rarity and high price of magic-limiting relics, I’d thought it was beyond my means. *I can’t believe I finally get to try this!*

“Whoa! My power really is half of what it was!” I exclaimed as I tried it on for the first time. My heart was pounding with excitement. “All right! What kind of training are we gonna do?”

*I guess we’ll be taking baby steps to begin with. I’ve never done high-intensity training before, so I’ll have to start with the basics and then gradually—*

“I’ll be blowing you away the same way he will on the day of the tournament,” Luke said. “Do your best to last for five minutes.”

For a moment, I said nothing at all. When I did open my mouth, all I could sputter was, “Huh...?”

And then Luke really did blow me away. As an unprecedented prodigy, he was an incredible opponent at the best of times, so how was I supposed to fight him with half of my normal power? It was no contest whatsoever; I was swept clean off my feet. If I were training to get better at running away or enduring attacks from a much higher-level opponent, then I could see how this was a pretty effective method. Even though I couldn’t do anything at all initially, over time I would start to get a feel for how I should respond.

There was one problem, though: I couldn’t get over the aggravating feeling of losing to Luke. I got so irritated that at the end of the session, I made him wear the bracelet so that I could give him a thrashing in return. That made me feel much better.

“How about that, huh?” I gloated afterward. “Witness my true power! Bwa ha ha!”

“You really don’t let up, do you?”

“Well, I was angry! How would you like losing so many times in a row?”

“And I told you, you’re not really losing. You’re just competing with a handicap.”

“I mean, sure, but when it’s you, I guess I just can’t bear to lose.”

“When it’s...me?” Luke fell silent for a moment, before speaking up again.

“Well, in that case, maybe I don’t mind.”

*Huh? You don’t “mind” getting beaten up like that? This isn’t, like, your thing, is it? I-I don’t know how to respond to this revelation!*

Then again, we all have our preferences. As his friend, I was prepared to accept Luke for who he was.

Anyway, we continued our special training sessions for the tournament over the following days. When we spent time together working toward a shared goal like this, I was reminded of when we were students.

*“Hey, look at this! How do you solve it?”*

*“Why don’t you think about it yourself for more than a second? Ugh. Well, first, you use this sequence to...”*

We would study together in the library.

*“Now you’ve made me mad! Let’s take this outside! Today’s the day I grind you into the dirt!”*

*“I think we both know it’s the other way around! Soon you’ll see just how out of your depth you really are!”*

Any time we argued, we’d start a magic duel at the drop of a hat.

Those memories, tinted in my mind the color of a bright blue sky, always brought a smile to my face. Being together like this now made me feel, just a little, like I had been transported back to those days.

Perhaps it was silly to behave like this now that we were adults, but this time around, we weren't dealing with a simple little class test. We were preparing for a match against history's greatest knight—a master swordsman. This was a challenge that nobody could imagine me surmounting.

Even so, I was strangely unafraid. Our past selves were with us, telling us that there was nothing we couldn't do. We could fly. We were unstoppable.

"Let's do this, Luke."

"Sure. Let's go."

With that determination in our hearts, we prepared for the day of the tournament.



"You didn't tell her?" Letitia exclaimed. "She doesn't know that if she loses the match, she won't be your mentee any longer?"

"I couldn't do it," Luke replied. "I wanted her to be able to fight without distractions."

"Honestly..." Letitia sighed, but she also knew that this was typical of Luke. He was both pure and devious, sweet and deluded. When she saw him hover between those poles, she both sympathized and gritted her teeth in frustration.

It looked like a tragic end might be on its way. The crown prince and the master swordsman represented an impenetrable wall standing in front of him, threatening to separate him from what he most held dear. His attempt to resist had basically no chance of success, but he still refused to give up.

He was truly a hopeless fool. However, as pitiful as he was, Letitia couldn't just sit by and watch.

"It'll be a tough battle," she warned.

Luke nodded. "I know."

He'd looked through every file on Eric Rashford that he could get his hands on, and developed a strategy. Anyone could see that the swordsman was staggeringly strong. Only a magus—or a magician close to becoming one—could even hope to be a match for him.

“However,” Luke said suddenly, “there’s something I noticed about her during training today.”

“And what was that?”

“She got used to fighting with limited magical power unusually fast. In a few days, she did what most magicians would take over a month to do. I wouldn’t have thought it possible.” He paused. “She may have something within her that we cannot comprehend.”



On the day of the Royal Invitational Tournament, the Order of Royal Knights’ primary training ground was bustling with people from both teams and the nobles who had come to spectate.

*Why are there so many people here...?* I could now truly see that this tournament was one of the palace’s major events. *How will I survive if I choke?*

I’d never imagined I would have so many eyes on me. The intensity of the situation was beginning to make my stomach ache.

“It’ll be fine!” one of my coworkers assured me. “Loosen up.”

This tournament was made up of five bouts between some of the best the Order of Royal Knights and Royal Court Magicians’ Division had to offer. The big, tough magician who had just spoken was one of the four other court magicians selected to participate.

“You shouldn’t worry too much about being the last one up,” he said to me. “Trust me, we’ll make sure it’s in the bag before you even have to fight.”

“Wow...” I breathed, moved by his positivity, and watched him march toward the ring.

The Royal Invitational Tournament was important to the Royal Court Magicians’ Division in terms of the organization’s prestige too. If my bout at the end of the tournament turned out to be the deciding match, it would be too much pressure for me to handle.

*Phew.* Now that I was reassured that my teammates would win, I could focus better on my own preparations. As the others took part in their own fights, I



looked on with a cup of tea in one hand and stomach medicine in the other.

They won two and lost two.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I went into a daze.

"No!" one of my teammates cried out. "I don't want to be responsible for us losing! Noelle, we need you!"

"Please, Noelle!" Another came over to grab me by the shoulders and shake me. "It's all in your hands now! You have to win!"

My eyes were wide in astonishment. I'd thought the others were so dashing and impressive; I wanted to take it all back now.

I was dizzy from the enormous pressure weighing down on my shoulders as I was guided toward the contestants' entrance. I heard a voice calling out to me.

"You must be nervous." It was Luke.

"I think I'm beyond 'nervous' at this point. See how many people are watching? And I never expected to be the tiebreaker match!"

If I were to lose, that would mean the Royal Court Magicians' Division lost the tournament. With the crown prince in attendance, the impact would be huge. If I didn't at least put up a fight, it could harm the image of magicians all around the country. I couldn't afford to lose.

"Don't worry," Luke said. "Nobody is expecting anything from you. Even if it's an instant knockout, it's not going to affect the standing of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. It'll just be the result everyone predicted."

"Wait a minute! How can you say that? I mean, you're not wrong, but come on!"

I had been hoping for a little bit of encouragement.

*You really are the worst! You're just as mean as you always were!*

"Most of the people watching are aristocrats without a clue about how magic works," Luke went on. "They think you'll be blown to smithereens the moment you enter the ring—that you'll be clearly, decisively and brutally crushed."

"Grrr..."

“But what if it isn’t an instant knockout? You’re up against *the* master swordsman. Just imagine the reaction if you make it through the opening seconds. That’s exactly what we’ve been preparing for,” he continued. “So, how about it? Can you feel the excitement?”

My heart was pounding violently in my chest.

“It’s possible,” Luke said. “If anyone can do this, it’s you.”

*Damn, you really know how to get me pumped up.*

One of the organizers prompted me, and I stepped out into the ring. Innumerable eyes were fixed on me, but at that moment, they meant nothing to me. I didn’t need people to expect big things from me. I didn’t need anything.

*I’ll show them.* I steeled myself and set my gaze on the incredible challenge before me.

Luke had told me all about what to do when confronting Eric Rashford, the master swordsman said to be the kingdom’s all-time greatest knight.

*“Don’t overhype your opponent. Try to just think of him as an ordinary knight—a strong one, but somebody you might come across anywhere.”*

*An ordinary knight*, I repeated in my head. *An ordinary knight. An ordinary knight.*

*“Next, it’s crucial that you don’t let him land a decisive blow at the start.”*

Luke had explained that he wanted me to approach the opening moments with total vigilance.

*“I expect Sir Rashford’s opening move to be faster than any attack you’ve faced so far. Most of his opponents lose right at the beginning, without even being able to react to his first attack. You need to go for broke in that moment.”*

I sharpened all my senses. Rather than concentrating on one focal point, I tried to dimly take in everything at once, so that my body could remain loose. I hopped lightly as I stepped, preparing myself to respond to the knight’s attack.

The call to begin echoed around the arena.

I was sure I'd prepared as well as I possibly could have. I was focused, but I wasn't too worked up. I managed to cast Spell Boost without a hitch and began to feel like it was going more smoothly than expected. We were only an instant into the bout, but it already seemed too good to be true.

Regardless, I couldn't even begin to react to his opening move.

"Ngh!" I grunted in surprise. I hadn't seen a thing. I basically had no idea of what had even happened. I felt the stone walls surrounding the training ground crashing in on me with such force that I thought for a moment that my spine had shattered. The sound of smashing rang in my ears as dust and rubble danced before my eyes. My body finally came to a standstill, lodged in a section of the wall that had been sent flying.

Had it not been for Luke's tactics and teaching, that single attack would surely have knocked me senseless. I'd known that Eric Rashford was an amazing individual, but that knowledge couldn't have prepared me for the unimaginable reality of facing him. He was, of course, the history-making great swordsman, undefeated in seven hundred duels.

I spat out a mouthful of gravel and panted heavily. This was the real deal. I could finally see the huge difference between us. He had struck me with such astonishing force that it seemed absurd to imagine that someone like me could even try to pick a fight with him. The hurdle I needed to jump over was so high that you could have looked up and never seen the sky.

I used healing magic to recover the physical strength that had been knocked out of me. Hidden in a cloud of dust, I smirked.

*The tougher the challenge, the better it'll feel if I can overcome it.*

Nobody in the audience thought I could win, but I didn't care. I was ready to pull off history's greatest upset.

*Now, let's get this started.*



"Is that the end of it?"

Lord Heidfeld, the man given responsibility for organizing the Royal Invitational Tournament, breathed a sigh of relief. He was sitting in the special seating area arranged for the king, watching the tournament held in the Order of Royal Knights' primary training ground.

It appeared that he had successfully fulfilled all his duties as the organizer. Each of the five bouts had produced the desired degree of excitement. Court nobles were preoccupied with anxieties of who might overthrow them should they show any weakness, so Lord Heidfeld needed to make sure nothing controversial occurred. In that respect, this year's tournament hadn't necessarily been a resounding success, but it wasn't a failure either. In his eyes, this was exactly how he had wanted it to pan out. His only remaining worry had been about the lower-class magician girl, but she seemed to have performed her role just the way he'd hoped.

*"Everyone knows that you're no match for Sir Rashford. All you need to do is show up. It'll all be fine."*

Lord Heidfeld had been fully honest in everything he'd said to the girl. The final match of this tournament was to be the Eric Rashford Show. That common magician would be helpless in the face of his tremendous power. She would be obliterated.

Everything had gone according to plan. This outcome was exactly what all the spectators would have imagined. *What a relief that nothing went wrong*, Lord Heidfeld thought.

"Well, I ought to make my way back to the management office." He rose from his seat, only to stop as somebody else spoke.

"Wait..." the king said. "It looks like the battle isn't over yet."

Lord Heidfeld was confused for a moment before quickly realizing something: the master swordsman had yet to relax his stance.

*She couldn't possibly have endured that attack, could she...?* He couldn't understand. The idea was unthinkable. As soon as the possibility crossed his mind, he rejected it with a shake of his head. There was no chance that that childlike magician had survived Eric Rashford's opening move.

However, the call for the end of the match still hadn't come. The knight refereeing the bout was simply gazing forward in shock.

*What on earth...?*



Still enveloped in dust, I replayed the master swordsman's previous attack in my mind. Why had I been unable to respond? Why had I failed to see it?

*"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."*

I had to assess all the details one step at a time and come up with a countermeasure. In terms of raw speed, I surely had the upper hand. Thanks to meeting all the ridiculous quotas at my old job, I was confident that with Spell Boost, my speed was more than a match, even for a magus like Gawain. Besides, I'd prepared for this bout. When I'd practiced against Luke, despite using half of my magical power, I had been plenty fast.

In that case, why did Eric Rashford seem to have disappeared entirely? After reviewing the situation, the theory I arrived at was that I'd had nothing to react to. I suspected the reason for that lay in his initial stance.

As a master swordsman, his movements were fundamentally unlike a normal person's. Before starting, he moved in a manner that was specially trained to deny the opponent a chance to respond. Each and every little adjustment in his posture was optimized for cutting down the person in front of him, and he would repeat these adjustments countless times.

It all led to a merciless and totally refined divine strike. It was absolutely beyond the realm of what I could deal with.

*That means that I have to make sure he never lands a perfect blow.*

"Air Raid Storm!"

In the same moment that the dust cleared, I established my magic sequence

and rapidly deployed summoning circles. Innumerable blades of wind whirled like a flurry of flower petals.

However, Eric Rashford's expression remained unmoved. He dispersed the wind attack with a single swipe of his sword, and now that he could see me again, he advanced.

This time, though, he was ever so slightly slower, as the knives of wind had worn down the ground beneath his feet. No matter how skilled he was as a swordsman, he couldn't exhibit his full power on unstable footing. I'd also prepared an invisible wall of wind while he couldn't see. I had a twofold defensive setup.

Nevertheless, it wasn't enough to stop him—not with his abnormal speed and his impossible-to-read stance. He instantly closed the distance between us and unleashed another light-speed strike from directly in front of me.

I narrowly avoided the violent swing of his sword. As I felt it brush the tip of my nose in accelerated time, the precision of the attack made my heart jump. Even with my ideal defensive measures, he'd managed to get this close to landing a hit. The person I was dealing with was so powerful, it was hard to believe he was really human.

*But I dodged it. I'm still in this fight. The plan is working.*

Even against a master swordsman, my magic still worked.

I couldn't help but smile. Once upon a time, I'd thought I was useless because of that nobody of a guild chief. He'd fired me, leaving me with nowhere else to work. During those dark times, I'd truly wondered if I had no talent at all. My life had felt pointless.

*Everything is all right. I'm not worthless. I've made it. I'm here.*

*Now go, my beloved magic.*

I funneled all my passion into my magic sequence. I'd demonstrate everything I'd learned up to this moment.



What emerged from the dust cloud was unbelievable. The rapid deployment of myriad magic sequences stunned Lord Heidfeld into silence.

*What is going on...?* he thought, unable to comprehend what he was witnessing. It was all taking place at an otherworldly speed that blew everything else out of the water. *Is this...magic?*

This incredible display bewildered Lord Heidfeld. As he watched the two fighters trade blows, he could barely even see the individual attacks.

Even then, however, Eric Rashford had something special: while the little magician couldn't be beaten for raw speed, his movements were perfectly optimized to cut down his opponent. His approach was diligent and polished. He went on adjusting his position constantly—to an extent that resembled madness. It was beyond human. Lord Heidfeld had little technical knowledge of swordsmanship, but it was plain even to him that this was quite unlike the Eric Rashford he'd seen in the past.

*Could it be...? Could it be that he hasn't shown his true strength until now?* Like it or not, he could see the truth. In over seven hundred duels without defeat, the master swordsman's seemingly unstoppable technique had been mere child's play to the man himself. *Then what is he truly capable of...?*

Lord Heidfeld shuddered at the thought of such unfathomable power. Here was a man who had become like a god, having devoted his entire life to swordsmanship. He was the very embodiment of the blade. However quick that little magician might be, she was unqualified to face him.

However, that assumption too was wrong. In front of the rapt audience, the magician was going toe-to-toe with Eric Rashford's true power without missing a beat.

*What is this...? What is happening...?*

His mind went blank. All he could do was stare disbelievingly at this battle. He could barely breathe.



An unimaginable battle was going on, with the two contestants exchanging attacks faster than the eye could see. Intense shock waves hammered the special magical barrier constructed to protect the audience. The Order of Royal Knights' primary training ground shook.

Among the viewers enraptured by this extraordinary face-off, Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld was watching for the tiniest signs of change in Noelle Springfield.

*She's changed again*, he thought. It was subtle. There couldn't have been many people who would notice her transformation amid this electrifying match. It was likely that only a small handful could see it, and of those, only the crown prince recognized the true significance of her exceptional ability.

*Once again, she's different from before.*

Prince Michael's golden eyes sparkled as her behavior evolved in the heat of battle, changing and rapidly improving to match her opponent. Eric Rashford was the master swordsman regarded by many as the greatest knight in the kingdom's history, and he was *still* shocking everyone with how he surpassed the already breathtaking power he'd shown in the past. The fact that Noelle Springfield could already keep up with him seemed utterly absurd.

*Wonderful... Noelle Springfield, you've exceeded my expectations!*

Witnessing this was a rare and precious experience. The incredibly astute Michael Ardenfeld had such a knack for predicting the outcome of any event that people whispered he had the power to see into the future. Nevertheless, despite being lauded for his intellect, the crown prince's internal world was decidedly one of dissatisfaction and tedium. The days went by with nothing ever surprising him.

For such a man, Noelle Springfield was a source of extreme interest. She had seemingly endless talent and potential, the likes of which the prince had yet to fully calculate.

*I must thank Luke Waldstein too. Were it not for him, she wouldn't be able to withstand Sir Rashford's attacks like this.*



As he was the youngest-ever adamantite-class magician—and the fastest to achieve that rank—most people would have had even greater expectations for that young prodigy than for the girl. The high-intensity training he had arranged had surely contributed hugely to her current performance.

*Be proud. You've fought well. But even now, that girl can't beat the master swordsman.*



Luke Waldstein was staring fixedly at the battle from the spectators' seats. The audience members could do nothing more than hold their breaths as the fighters became a blur.

"It must be tough," Gawain Stark muttered next to him. "I don't know how well *I'd* cope against Eric Rashford in that kind of state, and at such close quarters. Even with her amazing adaptability, it might not be possible to hold out for the five minutes required to win."

"So you've realized what she's capable of," Luke responded.

"I *was* the first to face her. Still, I never would've imagined she'd get this far against a master swordsman. I can see why His Royal Highness holds her in such high regard. If she'd had another ten years to prepare, she might've even stood a chance."

At first glance, the two appeared evenly matched, but they were separated by a subtle difference in precision that amounted to an unbridgeable gap in ability. At this stage, her chances of victory were desperately slim. Luke Waldstein had been aware of this since before the match.

"The five-minute rule was unreasonable in the first place," Luke said. "There's no way she can cope for so long at that pace. Magicians struggle more as time passes."

In a protracted battle, magicians could easily end up at a disadvantage compared with knights because they had to expend magical energy. Assuming their physical energy depleted at the same rate, magicians would be working with a lower power level as the contest went on. Luke had taken that into account when he put Noelle through high-intensity training using the Antispell

Bracelet, but this opponent was just far too strong.

Eric Rashford's attacks only became sharper as time passed in the match. Noelle had practically no chance of holding out for five minutes against that. Even if she was physically up to the challenge now, she couldn't make up for the magical power that she was losing during the fight.

"I never thought I'd be able to make her win," Luke continued. "She just needs to show the ability to fight against a master swordsman. The goal of this match is to prove that she's good enough to be picked for the King's Guard, is it not?"

"His Royal Highness apparently regards a gallant defeat as the ideal outcome."

"Exactly. Beating somebody who has never lost in seven hundred attempts is just too much to ask. I know the natural expectation is that she can't win. But I never know when to give up, and neither does she."

Gawain smiled. "Do you have a plan?"

"If holding out for the time limit isn't an option, the only remaining option is to beat him face-to-face. She has to use all of her power and all of mine, and pin everything on a single opportunity. This is where the real challenge begins."



Our attacks were flying in too fast to even hear. As time passed, his precision only increased. At the same time, I was getting closer to my own limit. This situation reminded me of the day I started work at the Royal Court Magicians' Division, when I'd faced off against Gawain in the Sixty Seconds of Blood.

"It was just a test for new recruits," Luke had said later, when we were training for this tournament. "All you had to do was make it to the end of the time limit, but you actually tried to beat him. You wanted to win, didn't you?"

*Oh, the excesses of my youth...* I'd thought when he reminded me of the duel with Gawain, avoiding his gaze.

I'd told him, "Maybe that was beyond me. But I always try to put all my power into winning, no matter how much stronger my opponent is. I guess it's just my

fighting spirit.”

“That’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Really?”

“I’ll create an opportunity for you. In that moment, I want you to give it your all and go for the victory.” Once Luke was done explaining the plan, he’d said one last thing. “Noelle, you can win. Let’s do this together.”

In the past, we’d been at each other’s throats like natural enemies. Considering how much we had despised each other, it was pretty moving to hear him speak like that now.

*That’s right; I’m not alone. My own power might not be enough to handle an opponent like this, but I bet we can do it if we work together.*

The knight’s intense attacks were driving me back. My magical and physical energy were running low and I had nowhere left to run—or at least, that’s how I wanted it to seem.

I was luring him into the area on the edge of the ring where I’d been launched by his opening move. The ground was strewn with upturned earth and fragments of the outer wall. Fortunately, the magical barrier could handle such unbridled power without sustaining any damage. It allowed me to cast the strongest spells I knew without worrying about the consequences.

The ground was more unstable than ever. Just keeping my balance was difficult, but Eric Rashford’s attacks didn’t waver in the slightest. Physically, he was frighteningly tough, and he had put himself through uncompromising training.

*He’s the real deal, I thought happily. He’s given absolutely everything to the pursuit of perfect swordsmanship. That’s a beautiful thing.*

His every movement captivated me. It took my breath away. I wanted to get closer to what he had. I wanted to catch up to him. I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to devote myself purely to what I loved most—to become the kind of magician that could dazzle people.

*Maybe for a failed mage from the middle of nowhere, it’s too much to ask, but*

*still...*

“Windy!”

Using low-grade wind-type magic, I summoned a strong gust of wind. It wasn't powerful enough to register as a real attack, but according to Luke's strategy, the goal was to obstruct Eric Rashford's view. As soon as the wind blew debris up into the air to get in the way of his eyes, I established a new magic sequence.

“Gravity Storm!”

This was a high-grade spell. It called up a wind that blew down heavily, crushing everything before it. The powerful wind pushed down on the knight. This spell was too powerful for the average person to withstand, but Eric Rashford was no ordinary person.

As expected, he remained steady. The battered ground beneath him, however, was a different matter. His body began to sink, and his front foot became lodged in the dirt.

I intuitively knew that this was my time to shine. It was my one-in-a-million chance to defeat the greatest knight who had ever lived. I put everything into my response.

Even with his foot stuck, Eric Rashford's attacks were incredibly fast. He was as quick as a flash. He swung his sword even faster than he had before now, but by this point, I'd seen his moves enough times. Under these circumstances, I had a means of reacting to even the most relentless of attacks. I could evade them now.

After his strike came within a hair's breadth of me, I moved behind him and established a magic sequence. I powered myself up sevenfold, ready to devote all my energy and the full extent of my firepower to my next move.

This was the opportunity Luke had created for me. There was no way I could defeat the master swordsman myself, but I believed that two people together could do it. The time had come to truly give it my all.

“Wind Blast!”

An enormous cannonball of wind ripped through the air, tearing up the paving stones. Everything was illuminated by a violent flash of light, and I felt the recoil slam against me. Finally, a vast crater could be seen beyond the rubble.

I'd done everything I could. This was an accomplishment I could be proud of. But then the dust cleared.

The master swordsman was still standing, right in the middle of the huge hole in the ground.

*I guess it wasn't enough...*

He'd reacted to my attack from behind and deflected it with a light-speed strike of his own. He looked worse for wear, but as long as he could still fight, it meant he had won.

I'd given everything for this one and only chance, but it hadn't quite been enough. I had barely any magical power remaining. What was left would never be enough for me to keep fighting him. I heaved a sigh and accepted defeat.

"Remarkable," a voice from the audience said, breaking the silence.

The next moment, the field was flooded with a mixture of cheers and screams.

"Hey! There are cracks in the magical barrier!" one of the organizers shouted.

"Surely not..." another responded. "Top mages in the King's Guard specially constructed this barrier!"

"Stop!" The staff were now bustling around, making considerable noise. "You have to stop the match right now!"

*Huh? Seriously? Could my magic have damaged a barrier like that...?*

I stood silently, unable to comprehend what was going on as the crowd reacted raucously to this shocking turn of events. I saw flustered organizers running back and forth in a frenzy. When I noticed that the aristocrat planning the tournament was among them, I couldn't quite suppress a smile.

*"Everyone knows that you're no match for Sir Rashford. All you need to do is*

*show up. It'll all be fine."*

It seemed that I'd wiped the smirk from his face now. I hadn't managed to beat the Undefeated Master of the Blade, but famously, nobody else had either. It was just too soon for me. When I really thought about it, it seemed obvious. After all, I was only a novice magician in her first year in the Royal Court Magicians' Division. Even with help, it was ridiculous to think that I would have what it took to defeat the kingdom's number one fighter.

*But one day, I'll get there. Mark my words.*

Maybe I had no good reason to feel that way, but in that moment, I was certain of it.

"Incredible! Nice work, Noelle!"

My fellow magicians who had fought all crowded me after the match was over.

"You rescued me! Now I don't have to take the blame for losing!"

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

The tournament had ended in a draw, but they were so excited it was as if we had won. It was just so unexpected that I'd managed to avoid defeat against Eric Rashford.

The fact that I'd damaged the training ground's magical barrier had caused the organizers a lot of stress, but even that was being seen positively, as the kind of memorable incident that spectators had seen very little of in recent years.

"I want to thank you for saving me from the shame of making our team lose," one of my teammates said afterward. "I'll treat you to any meal you want."

"Really?!"

He later brought me to one of the capital's celebrated steak restaurants, where I happily filled up on expensive beef. I had a great time eating to my heart's content.

*Ooh, look at that marbling! This rare steak looks like snow! How is it sooo*

*good?*

I could feel the taste and texture of the tender meat permeate throughout my worn-out body.

“More, please!” I called.

“Y-You aren’t done yet...?”

“Huh? I’m still not even halfway full.”

He didn’t have any more to say on the matter.

What made me happiest of all was the knowledge that my magic was effective even against a master swordsman. He was somebody who seemed impossibly out of reach. Ever since I was a little kid, I’d known him as a magnificent, awe-inspiring knight who kept making history. Looking back on my childhood, it seemed so far away that I wondered if it might all have been a dream.

*Nah, what just happened is the real dream.*

“You have weirdly low self-esteem sometimes, you know,” my teammate said, chuckling in exasperation when I told him what I was thinking. “During training, I could see that you were talented, but what you did today was genuinely amazing. You were up against the strongest knight in the kingdom, but you never backed down, and you were still going for the victory right up until the end. I’ve spent a big chunk of my life becoming a magician myself, so I could tell how much time you’ve devoted to magic. Don’t be so hard on yourself. At the very least, I think you’re amazing.”

Strangely enough, even after being told that, it was hard for me to believe. Before joining the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, I’d constantly been told I was a talentless waste of space. More people had been complimenting me since then, but I wasn’t used to it yet. On some level, I still couldn’t quite believe that it was me they were talking about.

On the other hand, that made me especially glad. I was thankful from the bottom of my heart that I had become a royal court magician. If I hadn’t been picked up that day at the Big Belly Cafeteria, I might never have had the chance to feel this way. I needed to show my gratitude toward the person who had

made this possible.

I thought about the fact that Luke wasn't at the restaurant with us. I'd invited him along, insisting that we'd achieved the draw together, but he'd said he had something else to attend to. I'd thought it was a shame to pass up a chance for a free meal. And for that matter, what was he so busy with? When I thought about it more, I realized that it was unusual for Luke to turn down an invitation from me.

I was still having a great time, but that was one thing I just couldn't get my head around.



Meanwhile, Luke Waldstein was adjusting his collar in the mirror, having just changed into his uniform. He was about to head toward the palace, looking ready for war.

As he crossed the palace garden, he remembered dancing with Noelle. That night, it had felt like they were the only two people in the entire world. He thought of her dainty hands, the jubilant sound of her voice, the feeling of her breath and the warmth of her body. It was a moment of happiness that he wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

He truly felt that he would do anything as long as they could be together. That was how important she was.

*I recognize what a risk I'm taking, he thought, but I don't know any other way to feel. I can't afford to fail.*

"Master Luke, we've been expecting you," an attendant said, respectfully bowing his head.

Luke had planned all of this himself. He'd contacted nobles in his network to secretly arrange a meeting that nobody outside would know about. Everything was coming together even more smoothly than Luke had expected. He'd come up with various alternatives in case of complications, but he hadn't ended up needing any of them. It was just as he'd wanted.

However, something about it seemed somehow intentional. Perhaps the other party in the meeting had also been expecting this to happen. Had he



figured out what Luke was planning and decided to confront him head-on? After all, he was a mighty individual that a mere magician was in no position to contend with—none other than the crown prince himself, Michael Ardenfeld.

“Now, shall we begin?” the prince said upon Luke’s arrival.

Luke wasn’t scared in the slightest. All this time, he’d stood beside somebody who would never hesitate to take on a stronger opponent. He was a pragmatic type who would rather work with the powerful than try to oppose them, so he’d had to learn from her how to be brave and reckless.

The only thing that scared him was no longer having her by his side. He was willing to take on anyone to be near her.

It was time for the meeting to begin.

## Interlude: The Queen's Gambit

I first saw him at a royal medal awarding ceremony.

I was a child then, and he too was not yet old enough to be called an adult. Nevertheless, he perfectly played the role of somebody whose presence demands that adults shrink back and remain silent around him. In his elegant and minutely arranged demeanor, there was an element of the unreal, as if he were not a human but something greater. Perhaps he was a god, or an angel—or even a devil. His flawlessness and precision were too great—we lost all sense of reality around him.

“That man represents your ultimate form,” my father told me that day. “You must become like him. If you can’t achieve that, there is no sense in existing.”



The crown prince’s private chamber was lit by a chandelier of silver crystal. Sitting opposite Prince Michael, Luke forgot for a moment how to breathe. As he took in the unworldly beauty of the prince’s movements and his air of great superiority, Luke found himself picturing the day when his own father had said the prince was his ultimate form.

“Now, then.” Michael Ardenfeld gestured to the marble chess set on the table between them. “What do you say we play a little game while we talk?”

Luke agreed. He was here with the goal of blocking the crown prince’s plan to transfer Noelle to the King’s Guard. In that case, it couldn’t hurt to make a good impression.

“This is a hobby of mine,” the prince said. “I played against a grandmaster in the past. Do you know how many moves ahead he can see during a game?”

He started with the quintessential closed opening: the Queen’s Gambit. He pushed a pawn of sculpted onyx forward as he spoke.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Luke replied, moving his white knight to keep the opposition pieces under pressure. “Perhaps around twenty moves?”

“The correct answer is that he can’t see even three moves ahead.” The prince moved a black knight and continued. “When two masters play one another, the gameplay is complex and difficult to understand. Neither truly knows the best way forward, but they persevere. They struggle through an unfathomable, pitch-black morass. He told me himself that he still understands only six percent of chess.”

They continued taking turns to maneuver their pieces, following the pattern of moves that had been in vogue some years in the past.

“Do you think he was speaking out of humility?” Luke asked.

“No, he was being honest. Chess goes deeper than even the human mind. I can’t understand it, and that’s why it fascinates me.” Prince Michael moved his queen forward to take a white bishop. “I feel the same way about that girl.” His queen kept advancing, dominating the center of the board and holding sway of the entire game from that position. “Under my supervision, she could reach new heights.”

In chess, the queen was the strongest piece, boasting power far surpassing the king. In an effort to contain the prince’s queen, Luke responded using four of his own pieces.

“A nice counter, but I’m afraid I saw it coming.” The prince smiled, having predicted Luke’s moves. He went on. “You intend to bait me? Well, perhaps this will turn out the same way as the Royal Invitational Tournament.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Her final move. Your target wasn’t Eric Rashford; it was the barrier around the training ground. By damaging the barrier, you wanted to force a draw. It was quite remarkable. I suspect I was the only one there who realized.”

“I think you’re reading too much into it. It was just happenstance.”

Strenuously studying the board, Luke sighed deeply. The crown prince was taking no time at all to make his moves. The difference in their ability was plain to see. He appeared to be reading Luke like a book.

*Are you even human?* Luke thought.

Prince Michael was the final version of himself, perfect and complete. Where Luke was flawed, the crown prince was naturally gifted.

The prince's queen took the rook that had been protecting the white king. "Check," he declared.

It was as if he'd known the solution from the beginning—but Luke had already understood that. The crown prince had a vast experience of the game, and in all the years he had played, there were instances where he had overwhelmed opponents using the very same moves. Therefore, looking at the right of the board, Luke knew that there was no way to stop the prince's queen.

However, that was Luke's plan. From poring through Prince Michael's playing records, he'd worked out a potential strategy.

"I see," the prince murmured. "This is what you were looking for."

With one move, Luke was able to transform what looked like certain defeat and turn the clock back five minutes.

"If a pawn reaches the final rank, it can become a queen," Luke said. "She has turned from a promising commoner into an exceptional magician, and I've observed her development more closely than anybody else. Naturally, Your Royal Highness is a more skilled leader than I am, but nobody understands her ability like I do. When it comes to drawing out and guiding her power, I can say with confidence that nobody else can do it better."

Of course, Luke wasn't a match for the crown prince in terms of talent, but Luke knew exactly how to play against talent. After eleven more turns of this complicated game, Luke's newly promoted queen and his rook were wreaking havoc in the top right corner. On the board, Luke was presenting his vision of the future.

"I want to ask for a chance to provide more evidence," he said. "I promise to shatter your expectations."



"May I ask how it went?" the attendant asked the crown prince after the meeting.

“It was all very interesting,” the prince replied, scrutinizing the chess board. “He was like a different person.”

“Like a different person, Your Royal Highness?”

“I had thought he was somebody much like myself. He was promoted to the adamantite class faster than anybody before because he put his feelings to one side and always made the most pragmatic choices. People know him for his icy attitude. He was regarded as the Waldstein family’s finest son.” Prince Michael let out a chuckle. “Now where is that man? Tonight, he seemed entirely different. He was uncompromising. He was determined not to lose. Vitality exuded from every pore. People can be changed utterly by their position and circumstances. And then when it came to the end of our game...that was even more remarkable.” He was looking at the board once again. “He came not for my king, but for my queen. He must truly not want to lose the girl. Is it simply that he cannot accept defeat?”

“Indeed, it sounds quite unlike what I have heard of his personality,” the attendant said.

“I’d originally thought that bringing the girl into the Royal Court Magicians’ Division was yet another attempt to rack up points for his own career advancement, but it seems that I was wrong. It was the girl herself that mattered.” The crown prince smiled. “Maybe it will be interesting to grant him this opportunity.”

“Are you sure, Your Royal Highness? I thought you wanted to recruit her posthaste.”

“I still intend to bring her to the King’s Guard, but there’s no great rush. Then again, he seems intent on changing that.” He stretched out a delicate finger to stroke one of the rooks on the board. “Now, what will we see next? Show me what you’ve got, Luke Waldstein.”



## Chapter 4: The Most Dangerous Dungeon, and the King of the Dead

Gawain Stark, captain of the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division, called Luke Waldstein to his office the day after Luke's clandestine meeting with the crown prince.

"I hear you confronted His Royal Highness the Crown Prince," Gawain said.

Luke hadn't told Gawain about the meeting. Recognizing his own crafty nature, he nodded quietly. "I'm sorry for acting without authorization, Captain."

"It's fine. You should do what you want to do. I can see how determined you are." Gawain was speaking as if Luke's actions were of little concern to him, but then his tone hardened. "Is there still a chance?"

Luke was unsure of how to respond. He didn't like relying on others. If he could do something, he would sort it out by himself, and if he couldn't do it alone, he would work until he could. That was the way he lived his life.

*"There's no sense in living if you can't be the best."*

His father's harsh advice remained deeply embedded in him—like a curse. However, that was why Luke felt that he needed to change. For so long, he had depended only on himself, but then somebody important had appeared before him—somebody he was determined to do whatever it took to be with.

He wouldn't be able to do that if he allowed the memory of his father to shackle him. Even if he only changed a little at a time, he wanted to become the type of person who could rely on others.

*"Hey, Luke! Can you explain this for me?"*

He wanted to be more like her.

“Can I... Can I ask you for some advice?” Luke asked.

Gawain nodded. He could see that Luke wasn’t used to asking this kind of question.

Luke carefully outlined his thoughts. He explained that he knew more than anyone that his existing plan was flawed. As imperfect as it was, he didn’t want to give up. It was all for the sake of being near her. He would stop at nothing as long as there was a chance of making that a reality.

“The WMC, huh?” Gawain responded, once Luke had explained his idea. “The World Magic Championships. An international tournament of magic contested by national representatives. You’re right that there’s no better place for a magician to show off what they can do...*if* they can qualify.” He glanced at Luke and went on. “It’s a nonstarter. As a commoner, the only way she’ll be picked as our national representative is if she outshines all the other candidates. Sure, she’s advancing through the ranks at an almost unprecedented pace, but it’s only her first year. The Royalists would be sure to put a stop to it.”

“I know. Her record so far isn’t enough to push past the opposition and get her into the WMC.”

“You’d need a way to prove her ability as quickly as possible.” Gawain stopped and began whispering into Luke’s ear. “What I’m about to tell you is a big secret. Only a few people in the palace know about it. I’m going to trust you, okay?”

It was immediately obvious to Luke that Gawain was trying to tell him something of great importance. He nodded.

“Ever since the Royal Invitational Tournament, she’s been getting even more attention,” Gawain continued. “There are aristocrats within the Reformist faction who rate Noelle Springfield very highly indeed. And I hear that even His Majesty the King has taken an interest.”

“His Majesty...?” Luke was taken aback for a second, but he understood. After Noelle had shown such a strong performance against a master swordsman, it was only natural that the king would be intrigued. Even at the time of the



tournament, Luke had considered that this might happen.

“If the two of you raise your profile within the kingdom any further, Prince Michael himself may have difficulty in getting what he wants. You need to prove that because of your mentor-mentee relationship, your combined power is greater than just the sum of its parts. And I have an idea for how you might show that and use it to secure a place for Noelle at the WMC.” Gawain looked his subordinate directly in the eye. “You must know about the Weissrosa Abyss, one of the most dangerous dungeons of all. The seventy-ninth level has been captured.”

The Weissrosa Abyss: just hearing the name sent shivers down Luke’s spine. It was a dungeon in the wild frontier inhabited by monsters. The countries surrounding the area categorized it as one of the most treacherous dungeons.

In the one thousand seven hundred years since its discovery, there were still areas unexplored and unconquered within the dungeon. The seventy-ninth level was particularly notorious: its Gatekeeper to the next level was so outrageously powerful that it had held all adventurers at bay for the past twenty years—until now.

“The eightieth level and beyond are counted among the Seven Great Uncharted Dungeons,” Gawain explained. “This is the first time in human history that anyone has set foot there. Other countries have already begun sending their top officers to survey the caves. It sounds like adventurers are gathering from all over the world too. And now, there’s talk among the top brass about drawing up a list of which magicians would be the most promising candidates for a mission there.”

“I take it you’re planning to choose us?”

“No, not at all.”

“What?”

“Because of the ineptitude of our aristocracy, we were too slow to respond, and now other countries have a head start on us. They’ll get even further ahead if we follow formal procedures. What you need to do is go there *unofficially* and succeed *by yourselves*. I’ll come up with some way to cover for you.”

“Are you sure about this?” Luke replied, his eyes wide with shock.

“Just buy me a meal if you get a pay raise.”

“I’ll get you anything you want.”

Luke bowed deeply and quickly vacated the office. To prove that he and Noelle were an unstoppable team, they were going to explore uncharted territory in the most dangerous of dungeons—a mission that was already attracting experts from far and wide.

It was time for Luke Waldstein to start preparing for battle.



“This is a top secret mission,” Luke said. “We’re going to investigate the unexplored areas of the Weissrosa Abyss.”

I couldn’t help but gulp when I heard this. Everyone knew that the Weissrosa Abyss was one of the most dangerous dungeons. Its unexplored parts would surely be even more incredible. In over a millennium, nobody had reached the eightieth level, and now that it was accessible, people the world over were taking notice. But besides the danger, there was one other possibility that set my heart racing.

“So...” I replied slowly, “we might find dungeon relics worth so much money that we’d never have to work another day in our lives, right?”

“Yes, we might.”

“I could be filthy rich... I’d get to eat steak for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and maybe still have money left over for fried chicken and meatloaf!”

“I think you’re the only person I know who would get excited over that.”

“Let’s do it, Luke! We’ll be laughing all the way to the bank!”

My imagination was running wild with dreams of drama and derring-do. *This is a huge adventure! I can’t stop the pounding of my heart! How could I not get enthusiastic about this?*

I raced back home to start packing my bags. I told my mother I was being sent on an expedition for work.

“Really?” she responded, her mouth hanging open in shock. “With *him*? Just the two of you?”

“I mean, yeah, but...”

“Wow... So this is the power of the irresistible expert in the ways of love!” she exclaimed, seeming very impressed. “You need to wear your nicest underwear. Don’t just throw on whatever the way you normally do. Make sure it all matches. But of course, a veteran like you must know that already.”

*I told you—it isn’t like that.*

All I could do was shrug in exasperation and get on with packing some comfortable clothes. The tricky part was choosing what to wear for exploring the dungeon. A Royal Court Magicians’ Division uniform would draw too much attention and make me stand out among all the adventurers. As the saying goes, go with the flow—if I wanted to fit in with adventurers, the obvious solution was to wear adventurers’ clothes.

*Hmm, maybe this is a bit too grown-up for me,* I thought as I examined my unworn adventuring outfit. I’d bought it so that I could visit a dungeon with Nina one day, but after getting paid I’d been overexcited and totally lost all perspective.

*Wow! I’d thought when I saw the outfit in the shop. That’s just the kind of adventurers’ clothes a real adult like Letitia would wear!*

I’d bought the outfit without trying it on, hoping it would bring me closer to being the kind of grown-up I’d always dreamed of becoming, only to be distraught when I returned home and looked in the mirror.

*If I dress like this on the mission, it’ll look like I’m trying too hard...* The idea of wearing it out was deeply embarrassing—but then again so was wearing what I’d had back when I was a student. More importantly, it would be a waste to buy expensive clothes for this very purpose and never wear them. They were practical, and they were enchanted to be durable, fireproof, and resistant to anomalies.

I told myself it would only be embarrassing the first time. If I wore this outfit with confidence, I would get used to wearing it, and people would get used to

seeing me wearing it.

The next morning, I plucked up the courage to wear my grown-up adventuring clothes and made my way to the meetup point. As soon as Luke saw me, though, I totally lost heart.

“You don’t have to say anything!” I blurted. “I already know! I know how it looks, so you just keep your mouth shut and leave me alone!”

*Ugh... This is so embarrassing!* The fact that I’d known Luke forever just made it all the more unbearable. *He definitely thinks I look like a try-hard. Kill me! If there’s anyone up there, please strike me down!*

Doing my best to suppress my urge to run away, I somehow managed to join Luke in the horse-drawn carriage.



The chartered carriage left in the direction of Weissrosa District. Inside the swaying carriage, Luke Waldstein sighed and massaged his temples. He and Noelle were sitting in silence, and he realized that he’d caused this. In order to be with Noelle, he’d agreed to go with her to investigate the Weissrosa Abyss, but it was only when he’d been organizing the carriage that one particular aspect of the plan became apparent to him.

*Wait... he’d thought. Does this mean that I’ll be traveling alone with Noelle?*

In his desperation to confront the challenge in front of him, there was a possibility that Luke had completely overlooked. By the time he realized, it was already much too late to turn things around.

*It’s no wonder he had that look on his face.* Luke remembered the amused smirk that had appeared on Gawain’s face after their discussion. *He was using work as an excuse to give us time alone together...*

Once he was done wringing his hands over the choices he’d inadvertently made, Luke had devised a set of rules for the trip. Number one: this was strictly for work, and he would maintain an appropriate distance as Noelle’s coworker. Number two: in order to avoid breaking her trust, he would maintain an appropriate distance as Noelle’s friend. Number three: in any case, he would just maintain an appropriate distance at all times.

While he had decided to take better care of his own wants and needs, Noelle's happiness remained the most important thing to him. He didn't want to cause her any pain or inconvenience, so he would make sure to act mindfully.

*We're just friends, we're just friends, we're just friends...* He'd been repeating this mantra in his head when he arrived at their meetup point. Then, the moment he saw her, he froze.

"You don't have to say anything!" she'd spluttered, totally losing her composure. "I already know! I know how it looks, so you just keep your mouth shut and leave me alone!"

Luke had felt truly relieved that she was too focused on her own anxieties to pay much attention to his reaction. If she'd realized that he thought she looked more beautiful than ever in her unusually grown-up outfit, all of his careful planning would have fallen apart.

*It's too much*, he thought, sighing to himself in the carriage. *Even I can't believe how much I love her.*



Heading northwest, the carriage crossed the Kingdom of Ardenfeld's border into the wild frontier land. It was a long way to the Weissrosa Abyss, but it was quite nice to have a lot of free time to myself. It gave me a chance to read a grimoire I hadn't had time to look at until now. I happily spent the rest of the journey reading.

Eventually, we arrived at Weissrosa City, a walled city surrounded by gigantic fortifications. Built over many years to protect the citizens from the monsters that lurked in the frontier, the stone walls gave the city a distinctive character.

Weissrosa City was shared between the many adventurers who tried to conquer the famous dungeon and the locals who lived off the money the adventurers brought in. To some extent, it was inevitable that a city like this would exist near the entrance to a large dungeon, but there was nothing typical about the situation in Weissrosa. The city was prosperous and full of people. Of course, one of the Seven Great Uncharted Dungeons of the western continent was here, so it had its own special qualities.

According to the old innkeeper, now that the eightieth level of this extremely dangerous dungeon was being explored for the first time in human history, there were nearly three times the normal number of adventurers here.

“All we’ve got left is one double room,” the innkeeper said. “Is that all right with you?”

Luke was keen to remind the innkeeper that we needed separate rooms, but if there were none available, there was nothing we could do about it. Once we were checked in, I went out into the streets with a checklist in my hand. Luke and I had divided tasks between us so that we could prepare for the dungeon as quickly as possible.

My job was to find a second room and to buy some essentials, but I quickly found that shopping was a tougher task than I’d anticipated. With nearly three times the normal number of adventurers around, the local magical item shops were absolutely packed. Wherever I went, I saw unbelievably long lines. Thinking there must be some little place tucked away somewhere without so many customers, I kept looking around, but I lost motivation once I’d tried seven different shops.

*It is what it is. I’ll just have to get in line.*

As I hunted for the back of the line, something occurred to me: even though this shop was small, it had more people lining up than at any of the others.

“Hurry up!” somebody shouted. “This is a request from the Dungeon Coalition, you know? Don’t you understand how long we’ve been waiting?”

“Sorry! It won’t be long!” a petite girl squeaked, bowing repeatedly with tears in her eyes. “Please wait just a little longer!”

It looked like she was new to the job. She couldn’t keep up with the rush, and it was making her flustered.

“Oh, this is an old model,” I heard her grumbling. “The magic mechanism is two generations out of date... I was never taught how to use this.”

Where was everyone else? It seemed absurd to me that this girl had been left to deal single-handedly with such extraordinary customer volume. I got up close to the tearful girl and leaned in.

“It looks like the power apparatus is busted,” I told her. “Do you know the Flaubert Magic Method?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I haven’t studied that yet...”

“I know it’s tough for a rookie. Let me have a look.”

I took the magical item, removed the worn-out power mechanism and fixed it up with a new magic mechanism.

“Huh?!” The girl gasped with surprise.

Her reaction pleased me. I’d worked hard at my old job to build up these skills, and I liked to think I could get things done relatively fast.

“Is nobody else here?” I asked.

“My boss and supervisor have both been under the weather all day...”

*Ah, that’s why you’re stuck doing all this by yourself.* It was the kind of situation that came up frequently at small magical item shops, but the timing was particularly unfortunate. No matter how you looked at it, there was no way this girl could be expected to run the shop alone during such a busy period.

“Well, since all I’m doing is waiting in line, let me help you out,” I offered.

The little rookie seemed startled. “A-Are you sure?”

“Yep. I bet you’d do the same for me.”

“Thank you! Let me just go and check with my boss!” she said, and rushed off into the back of the shop.

I figured that the owner must understand the circumstances, so it would probably be fine for me to help out. I also thought that working at a magical item shop in the city would help me gather information.

*All right, here we go!* I thought, enthusiastically rolling up my sleeves.



It was a nightmarish day at work for novice mage Mia Links. People had reached the eightieth level of the Weissrosa Abyss for the first time in human history. With so many adventurers coming to explore and investigate the newly discovered area, the city’s population had nearly tripled.

It was during this busy activity when Mia's supervisor at the magical item shop fell ill.

"I've got a bad fever and I can't stop coughing. I thought I could come into work, but I don't know..."

Mia had been suffering from feelings of inadequacy lately. Everything was totally new to her and she'd been needing help from her already busy supervisor. She wanted to at least do something in return for all the help she'd received so far.

"Please don't force yourself!" she said. "It's okay. I'll give it my best shot."

It was quite a serious blow to be without her supervisor, but if he worked while he was sick, he might just worsen his condition, and then the situation at work could really take a serious turn. Mia thought it was a reasonable decision to take on his workload just for one day.

But she wasn't prepared for what happened when she told her boss about her supervisor calling in sick.

"He says he has a fever and can't come in today."

"Sorry," her boss replied. "See, I've got a fever too..."

"Uh..."

"It'll only take me a day to recover. Tomorrow I'll make sure I can work. Mia, just for today, can I ask you to hold down the fort?"

"Huh?!"

As a result, Mia ended up having to run the shop alone while they had record-breaking numbers of customers. All the jobs the customers requested were beyond what Mia could realistically handle at her skill level. She worked as hard as she could, but the line at the front of the shop just got longer and longer.

Taking time for a lunch break was out of the question. She had to keep on working without food, and things gradually became even worse.

"Hurry up!" somebody shouted. "This is a request from the Dungeon Coalition, you know? Don't you understand how long we've been waiting?"



“Sorry! It won’t be long! Please wait just a little longer!”

Tearfully, Mia found herself apologetically bowing over and over. She felt guilty for keeping people waiting, but she didn’t have the power to do anything about it. She was beginning to think that she might get some peace if she were to have a breakdown...

At that moment, a customer leaned in. She was so small that she looked like a child at first glance.

“It looks like the power apparatus is busted,” the customer said. “Do you know the Flaubert Magic Method?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I haven’t studied that yet...”

“I know it’s tough for a rookie. Let me have a look.”

Mia was astounded by how skillfully this person managed to repair the magic mechanism.

*How did she handle something so complicated so fast...?* Mia thought. That kind of mechanism required the specialist knowledge of a magician, making it the kind of task that was a challenge even for an experienced artisan.

As Mia stared speechlessly, the customer flashed her a cheerful smile. “Well, since all I’m doing is waiting in line, let me help you out.”

The customer then worked at a rate that was on another level compared to the average mage. It was like she was operating faster than real life.

*No way... Could she be using magic to accelerate time?*

As far as Mia knew, magic that manipulated time was something that only a tiny proportion of magicians were capable of. Despite that, all of her most minute movements and actions were perfectly efficient. It was the kind of ability that could only be developed through a huge volume of work and painstaking repetition.

There was no way she could have become so skilled if it had only been a temporary job for her. She surely had to be a mage. However, her abilities as a magician were far above average too.

*Who on earth is she...?* Mia pondered. Only one thing was clear to her: *It looks*

*like I'm working with somebody really special.*



“Thank you so much!” Mia the rookie mage bowed deeply once I was done helping her at the magical item shop. “This was wonderful. I learned so many new things from you!”

I hadn't expected her to be that thankful, but it really warmed my heart. I was glad I'd decided to come to her aid, even though I didn't feel like it was such a big deal. Compared to my old job, the volume of work hadn't even been all that bad.

“Please come again!” Mia called, waving goodbye as I left the shop.

*I hope she turns into a great mage.*

I thought back on my own experience as a fledgling mage. Every minute had been awful, and I'd barely had time to go home at the end of the day. But even that dizzying amount of work was something I could now look back on with some fondness. I felt like my experience of pushing myself past my limits at the Mages' Guild had enabled my progress as a magician.

Still, those working conditions were inexcusable.

I was still thinking about the old days when I met back up with Luke to eat dinner at a cafeteria next to the local Adventurers' Guild.

“Another helping, please!” I called out.

“You aren't done?” Luke interjected wearily.

“I have a separate stomach for tripe stew!”

After having fully satisfied my need for a big meal in preparation for the next day's dungeon exploration, I headed back to my room at the inn.

“Nice room,” Luke remarked as he looked around at the furnishings in the double bedroom. “So, what did you find for me?”

Luke was apparently assuming that I'd succeeded in finding somewhere else for him to stay.

“Oh, yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “It turned out there's only one available

room in the whole city.”

“Huh?” He looked very uncomfortable.

“So you’ll just have to stay here too.”



This was a catastrophic development. Though he affected an air of composure, Luke Waldstein had found himself in unprecedented turmoil. Since childhood, he had spent hour after hour studying magic, but he had never before shared a room with a friend. Not only that, but the friend in question was the long-standing target of his deepest affection. Telling him not to panic in this situation was a lost cause.

*Relax, Luke*, he thought, turning his back to Noelle and pretending to deal with his bags as he attempted to calm down. *You’re just friends. Try to be normal.*

“It’s been years since I last had a sleepover!” he heard her comment cheerfully. All she had to do was remove the ribbon from her hair to make him so flustered that he began cursing himself for being so weak. “How long has it been for you, Luke?”

“I don’t remember,” he replied, being careful not to let his agitation show in his voice. “I’m not sure I’ve had one.”

“Right, your parents seemed pretty strict. I guess the rich and famous don’t let their kids have fun.” She flopped onto the bed. “Well, there’s nothing else for it. As a sleepover expert, let me show you the ropes.”

“What do you mean?” Luke asked, turning around. He didn’t understand what there could be to learn about sleepovers. Were there rules of etiquette?

“It’s time...for a magic quiz!”

“A quiz?”

“Yep! The right way to have a sleepover with friends is to play a magic quiz until you can’t stay awake anymore.”

“I think that’s just what *you* want to do.”

“Could it be...that you’re too chicken?”

Now that she’d made Luke angry, he was determined to win. He knew that even though she had extensive knowledge of her areas of interest, she also had gaps—and there was nobody else in the world who knew her weaknesses better than he did. He had been watching carefully for so long.

“No way...” she spluttered later. “How could you...?”

“Looks like I win. Good night.”

“Hold on! Let’s have one more round!”

Being such a sore loser, she wasn’t going to give up until she won. Luke made a show of reluctantly agreeing, but deep down, he was glad she wanted to keep going.

*Just seeing myself in your eyes and hearing you call my name makes me so happy that I need nothing else in the world.*

As happy as he was right now, however, at some point Luke had begun to realize that these days would come to an end soon enough. Noelle’s exploits at the Royal Invitational Tournament had earned her even more attention. Now her name was being discussed at the very top echelons of society; even the king was interested in her skills.

*Now that your talent is beginning to blossom, it’s threatening to tear us apart. But regardless, I mustn’t give up. I have to do whatever it takes. Nothing could be more important than this.*

“Good night, Noelle.” He laid a blanket over her where she had fallen asleep from exhaustion, and turned out the magical lights.

*I will prove myself worthy of being a part of your world. There is no doubt in my mind. I was always prepared for this. I knew from the very start that I’d do anything to be with you.*



From our gathering of intel in Weissrosa City, we’d learned about the existence of a big team known as the Dungeon Coalition.

*“It’s a request from the Dungeon Coalition.”*

*“We have someone coming from the Dungeon Coalition today.”*

*“That’s the Dungeon Coalition’s...”*

It was a name I heard constantly all over the city.

“What’s the Dungeon Coalition?” I finally asked Luke.

“It’s a united team composed of the highest-ranking adventurers in the city. It was founded to defeat the Gatekeeper on the seventy-ninth level that had been defeating every adventuring party for the last twenty years.”

For twenty years, adventurers’ dreams of progress had been dashed repeatedly by an impassable obstacle. To defeat such a powerful enemy, the Dungeon Coalition had approached the task by using various experimental methods. Its members had established base camps on the thirty-eighth, fifty-ninth and seventy-fifth levels so that they could take breaks and replenish their supplies inside the dungeon. They had shared information between team members to work out the best route to avoid wearing themselves out. They had collected data on the monsters that appeared on each level, and thus they prepared the most effective equipment to match each monster’s characteristics. Their careful preparation and thorough efficiency knew no bounds.

As a result, they had finally succeeded in doing what nobody had managed in two decades: defeating the Gatekeeper blocking the path beyond the seventy-ninth level. The newly discovered area of the eightieth level was too treacherous for small parties to tackle alone. Therefore, in practice, one had to be a member of the Dungeon Coalition to be able to investigate the dungeon.

“So, what do we need to do to join the Dungeon Coalition?” I asked Luke.

“If you can pass the selection test and prove your ability, you’ll be accepted as a member. It’s a really tough test, though.”

“How tough?”

“Just the other day, another country’s best knight and the leader of their court magicians’ division both took the test and failed.”

“Seriously...?”

*If people with that level of ability failed, then it's basically impossible.*

"It seems that they want people who aren't just good at fighting or magic, but who also have adventuring skills," Luke explained. "You need to be extremely good when it comes to things that happen during dungeon exploration, like dealing with traps or reacting to unexpected situations."

"Oh, I get it. That kind of stuff would be hard for anyone who isn't an adventurer." Since those skills were difficult to gain outside of dungeons, the barrier to entry would be hard even for experienced individuals who were impressive at a national or institutional level. "But we have to join the Dungeon Coalition if we want to investigate the eightieth level, right? So, what do we do?"

"We have to face this difficulty head-on."

"Huh?"

"All we can do is pass the test fair and square, and get into the Dungeon Coalition. The test involves successfully getting through a training dungeon. The tricky part is that it's full of sneaky traps that challenge even the best adventurers. Fewer than one percent pass the test. It's not an easy thing to overcome." A courageous smile appeared on Luke's face. "But still, we can do it. Am I right?"

*More wild expectations, huh...?*

On the inside, I was tearing my hair out. Maybe a record-breaking prodigy like Luke could pass that test, but I wasn't on that kind of—

*No. I already told myself I wouldn't get left behind. My friend is always moving forward, and I have to keep up so we can stand together as rivals like we used to. If Luke passes, I need to pass too.*

"No problem," I said. "Just watch me. I'm gonna pass with flying colors."

The best of the best had descended upon this city to explore uncharted regions of the most dangerous dungeon—and even out of those, only a fraction could make it through this test. It was clear that I lacked the required adventuring experience and knowledge, but quitting was not an option. If the person I wanted to compete with said he would pass the test, I couldn't afford

to stand around and wait for my chance.

The Dungeon Coalition's selection test took place in a training dungeon below their base. It was on the first level of the Weissrosa Abyss, which sprawled out underneath the city center.

The training dungeon they'd constructed there was unlike any dungeon I'd ever encountered. Even at a glance, it was a bizarre and extraordinary place. I was astonished by the obviously strange flow of magical energy. I could see why fewer than one percent of applicants passed this test. Just from peeking in the entrance, I could tell that there was a ludicrous number of deviously laid traps. They'd been particularly sneaky in designing the traps to lead people into a false sense of security. And I suspected there were probably plenty more traps than the ones that I knew how to spot.

I waited at the entrance for my turn to come. All the other participants boasted a wealth of experience and impressive track records. Seeing all these beefy, skilled, self-assured adventurers enter the dungeon only to come back out looking utterly miserable rattled me. It made me want to give up and go home.

*There's gotta be some scary stuff in there...*

After all, it wasn't somewhere for humans to go. I probably would've lost hope before even starting if I'd been here alone, but I had a good reason to take on this challenge.

I heard the adventurers gathered near me all making a lot of noise.

"Hey, that guy just passed," I heard one say.

"But he's so young!" another responded.

"Who the hell is he...?"

Even with my eyes closed, I knew exactly who they were gaping at. There was only one person who was that infuriatingly talented *and* so peerlessly hardworking. Nevertheless, that was the same person I couldn't allow to get the better of me.

An announcer called out. “You’re next, number two-seventy-nine.”

“Got it,” I replied, approaching the entrance. I tried to calm down and steel myself.

*I can’t let myself be afraid. I can’t worry about failure. I just have to concentrate on what I need to do. He’s the last person I want beating me. Even if I’m scared to take on such a big challenge, nothing could be worse than letting him leave me in the dust.*

I stepped forward to begin the selection test.



From behind one-way glass in the first chamber of the training dungeon, the adventurers tasked with overseeing the test observed the applicants one by one.

“Number eighty-five. Test failed.”

“Number one-twenty-six. Test failed.”

“Number two-sixty-eight. Has potential.”

By assessing their skills and talents as adventurers, they were judging whether the applicants were worthy of joining the team. They were inspecting exactly how each participant handled the elaborate traps set up in the dungeon.

“More high-quality applicants today, I see,” a one-armed man commented as he entered.

The examiners all bowed. “Good morning, Lord Darlington.”

Lord Darlington was the chief of the Dungeon Coalition’s logistics office, and he was a central figure within the organization. Unusual for an adventurer, he was also a distinguished nobleman. As an important financial backer, his patronage and acquisition of vital resources boosted the team’s military strength. Indeed, that could be said to have been his primary goal in life ever since suffering a severe injury on the front lines three years earlier. In the depths of his despair, he’d discovered that his ultimate dream was to explore the entire Weissrosa Abyss. Though his physical condition had prevented him from achieving it, he was newly determined to realize his dream using his



wealth and influence.

“There are more notable candidates than usual,” he said. “What a shame for them. If we were recruiting for a mission on the sixtieth level, maybe they’d stand a chance.”

“The traps we’ve laid this time are based on the difficulty of the seventy-fifth level,” one of the examiners responded. “Succeeding at the first attempt is a near impossible task even for first-rate adventurers.”

“Well, we can count ourselves lucky if even a single person passes.”

This was an extra hard test designed to select for applicants with outstanding skill and adaptability to unknown scenarios. Of all the veteran adventurers who had applied, only a handful could pass this test. They had probably never even dreamed that they might miss out.

Lord Darlington watched on with a sigh as a nation’s leading sorcerer lost his cool in the training dungeon. He knew all too well that this was a brutal task, but the Dungeon Coalition needed people who were ready for action. If they were to send anyone without the necessary strength to the front line, it would surely result in irreversible injuries for those individuals.

He looked down at where his right arm had once been and spoke again. “You must reject anybody who isn’t strong enough. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the examiners replied.

One applicant made it through the enormous challenge they had set.

“An impressive performance,” one of the examiners remarked.

“I suspect he will prove to be today’s only successful candidate,” Lord Darlington said, examining the document in his hand.

It looked as if the rumors surrounding Luke Waldstein, the record-breaking prodigy, were more than just idle gossip. Put another way, it was a sign of how tough this test was that if a participant lacked experience in adventuring, they would be unable to pass the test unless they were as talented as Luke Waldstein.

The next applicant, now stumbling in through the entrance, was Noelle

Springfield, the rookie magician Luke Waldstein had discovered and selected as his mentee. Compared with her mentor, this girl was lacking in one fundamental area: experience. Unlike Luke Waldstein, who had achieved results in a wide variety of areas, Noelle Springfield had only been on the job for a matter of months. With experience came wisdom—in one’s ability to respond to new situations. Regardless of how strong or talented she might have been, she simply needed more experience before taking on the challenge of the Weissrosa Abyss.

Lord Darlington’s expectations were swiftly answered when the tiny girl failed to protect herself and crashed face-first into the floor.

“Ouchie,” she muttered, wiping tears from her eyes like a foolish child. It was a pathetic sight. Was this all she was capable of?

At first, Lord Darlington was unimpressed, but then he suddenly realized something. “Isn’t that patch of floor where one of the traps is set?”

“Indeed, sir,” a nearby examiner replied, seeming equally perplexed. “The summoning circle written on the underside of the floor is supposed to put the target to sleep instantly.”

It appeared that the trap had failed to activate. However, the same kind of thing continued to happen. For some reason, no spells were having any effect on her. They wondered if something was broken, but the traps were all functioning correctly. As they continued to carefully observe her every move, they began to understand that there was something unusual about her.

“Is it possible that she’s disabling the summoning circles before they have time to take effect...?”

“Preposterous. No human could do such a thing.”

“True, but the magical energy definitely shows that they are being disabled.”

In principle, it was conceivable, but what didn’t make sense was that she could be doing it at that kind of speed. She had to be accelerating time to react and cast spells at such an incredible rate. Though she was getting caught in the majority of the countless traps laid in the training dungeon, she disabled them all and continued to move forward.

As everyone watched this in astonished silence, one examiner spoke up. “Is it just me, or is she improving?”

Her reactions to all the absurdly powerful traps were rapidly becoming more polished. She was accurately determining each trap’s weak point and neutralizing it faster than the eye could see.

“She’s like an entirely different person now...”

“Come on now, this isn’t something you can just get used to!”

There were copious traps, but they could do nothing to stop her relentless progress. The examiners were stunned.

One quiet voice echoed around that deathly silent room. “What is happening in there...?”

They were bearing witness to somebody with such extraordinary adaptability that they couldn’t even begin to fathom it.



“Today’s successful applicants are as follows: Number two-seventy-eight. Number two-seventy-nine. That is all.”

*Sweet!* I clenched my fist in triumph, having safely passed the test. I’d been really nervous about slipping up, and it had been a real struggle before I found my rhythm, but in the end, I felt confident that I’d managed to show them what I was made of.

“Heh. See what happens when you count on me?” I declared smugly.

Even though I acted all upbeat, it was actually a serious weight off my mind. After all, when I’d run into that simple trap right at the start, I’d thought I was already done for. Luckily, once I’d sifted through the magical energy in the air and worked out that I was dealing with summoning circles designed to impair my physical state, I immediately disabled the trap and got through without issue.

Together with adventurers in charge of supplies and an adventurer from the Holy Nation of Clares—the only successful candidate from the previous day—we were promptly sent to the Dungeon Coalition’s front line: the base camp on

the seventy-fifth level, where we listened to an explanation of our mission.

In over one thousand years since the discovery of the Weissrosa Abyss, generations of adventurers had gradually developed a route through the dungeon. Using dungeon exploration technology, teleport points had been established at the three base camps on the thirty-eighth, fifty-ninth, and seventy-fifth levels. That meant that the journey to the seventy-fifth level—which would once have taken a month—could be completed in less than a day.

“This is amazing!” I exclaimed, impressed by the base camp. “Who would’ve thought somewhere like this could exist in the depths of a dungeon? It’s like a town!”

The other adventurer with us smiled. “It’s really something. I’ve never seen anything like it either.”

There were three of us joining the team that day. Three was a tricky number: if two people were talking, one would inevitably get left out, and considering two of us were already good friends, I could see it being pretty miserable for the third person. Being such a mature and conscientious lady, I kept that in mind and made a special effort to talk to the adventurer from Clares.

“Um...I think your companion might be feeling left out,” the adventurer said with an embarrassed grin.

When I looked around, I saw Luke avert his gaze like he was pretending not to care.

*Oh, I see. So now you’re all lonely.*

“Oh dear,” I said, poking him lightly in the shoulder. “Luke may look grown-up, but he’s just a big kid really.”

“Please. She’s making that up,” he said, trying to act cool.

While we kept up this childish back-and-forth, it was time for us to join the Dungeon Coalition on the front line. We were already being called upon to take part in serious exploration. The adventurer from Clares was tough enough as it was, but this place was full of adventurers with S-rank licenses. The greatest knights and court magicians from other countries were present too. Considering how incredibly hard the test had been, it was no surprise that the successful

candidates were tough themselves. I felt really out of place next to them, but it was so reassuring to have them as teammates. After all, we were about to explore the eightieth level of the Weissrosa Abyss, an uncharted region of a dungeon so dangerous that the whole world was taking notice.

*What adventure and treasure will await us there?! I can just smell the riches! I'm ready to live the dream of eating steak for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and still having money left over for fried chicken, meatloaf, and cheese croquettes!*

I was feeling triumphant and full of anticipation.



“Three new recruits today, huh?” Jake Belleresto murmured. He was an S-rank adventurer and the general commanding officer of the Dungeon Coalition.

Second Squad Leader Crewell, who had received the information from the logistics office, nodded. “Two of the three joining us today are royal court magicians from the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, sir. They are Luke Waldstein, who has broken records for being promoted to each new rank at a younger age than anybody previously, and his mentee, Noelle Springfield.”

Crewell went on to explain the skills the two magicians had demonstrated during the selection test.

“I see,” Jake Belleresto said. “They sound like they’ll be of some use to us.”

He scanned the letter and documents he’d just received. Once he’d taken in all the information, he was ready to begin preparations for their next investigatory mission.

However, Second Squad Leader Crewell had other ideas. “I believe we already have enough strength within our ranks to defeat the Gatekeeper on the eightieth level. It may be wise to launch our offensive before another group begins advancing in earnest.”

“We can’t. How many times must I say this?”

“From our seven investigations so far, we’ve determined that this Gatekeeper is about ten percent stronger than the one on the seventy-ninth level. Meanwhile, we’ve increased our own power by thirty percent since fighting the

previous Gatekeeper. Furthermore, very few injuries have been sustained among our vanguard unit in the meantime.”

“There are Gatekeepers that take on new forms in response to severe circumstances. We don’t know what might happen, and that’s why we must investigate first. The best policy is to take all possible precautions.”

“But we’ve already confirmed that even in its third and final form, it doesn’t pose a serious threat. We are ready to attack!”

“What makes you so insistent?” Belleresto interjected.

Crewell came to his senses and fell silent for a moment, bowing his head. “My apologies, sir.”

Belleresto gazed at him intently. “Is this about your mother?”

For some time, Crewell said nothing, but eventually he spoke. “I’ve been told time is running out.” He was still looking down at the floor.

Belleresto was well aware of the worries burdening his subordinate. Crewell was exploring the depths of this perilous dungeon so that he might afford his mother’s medical bills. To keep his sole blood relative alive, he needed to pay for an operation that cost far more than a commoner could reasonably amass. Belleresto had known all along that this was weighing on his comrade’s mind.

After a while, Belleresto broke the silence that had fallen upon the room. “Very well. We will launch the offensive.”

“Are you sure, sir?”

“Make no mistake, this isn’t for your sake. I’ve merely judged that we have already reached a position where we can safely begin.”

“Thank you, sir!” Crewell bowed over and over.

Belleresto waved him away and started making his final checks before commanding a full-scale attack. This wasn’t what he had planned, but he didn’t believe they were underprepared. Objectively speaking, what Crewell had told him was correct, and many others in the Dungeon Coalition agreed. They had a very good chance of pulling off a successful offensive without suffering much in the way of damages.

Nevertheless, the general commanding officer couldn't quite shake off a lingering hint of apprehension. There was something about the Gatekeeper on the eightieth level that he just couldn't put his finger on. Their battle plan was likely to succeed, and yet he felt as if somehow, the dungeon itself was luring them in.



Once we'd made our preparations, it was time for us to embark on our mission on the eightieth level. We departed the base camp on the seventy-fifth level and began our descent.

For somebody like me with zero experience of seriously exploring the depths of such a dangerous dungeon, it seemed like a wild, unbelievable place. Everywhere there were insidious traps that would ultimately put an end to any mission if somebody were to get caught. Not only that, but it was full of monsters that would surely place highly on the disaster ranking system if they were ever found outside.

However, the adventurers in the Dungeon Coalition were even stronger. With their precise judgment and methods, they neutralized any threat that came our way in the blink of an eye. Their experience and training were mind-blowing. They came down here every day to build up an encyclopedic knowledge of the paths beaten by previous adventurers. They knew exactly where we would be safe, and where we would be in danger. They had the expertise to understand quickly and accurately which obstacles should take top priority and which could be safely left until later. Just as I'd heard, they were history's greatest adventuring team.

I *oohed* and *aahed* in genuine amazement as I followed the adventurers through the caves. Apart from casting some basic support and healing magic, I hardly needed to do anything from the seventy-fifth level to our destination on the eightieth level.

"We'll take a short rest here," one of the adventurers announced when we reached the deepest part of the seventy-ninth level. "Everyone, make sure you're ready before we move on."

The Gatekeeper's last twenty years repelling wave upon wave of adventurers

had taken its toll on the space, scarring this open area. There were huge holes gouged out of the walls. What kind of monster could have blown such vast holes in solid rock?

I was still looking around at the traces of past devastation when somebody passed me some nuts for nourishment. I'd heard that the energy in nuts was better for physical endurance than the energy from starch. They were also supposed to be good for preventing drowsiness and maintaining alertness. That made nuts a favorite among adventurers. They weren't the most flavorful thing I'd ever eaten, but they were decent. Once I was done, though, I was in for an unpleasant surprise.

"Is this it...?" Apparently, this was as much as adventurers normally ate, but it didn't seem like enough to somebody like me who was used to eating more than most people.

*There's nothing that gets me through the day quite like the promise of three big meals... This is terrible. I can't believe this is all I'm getting...*

Seeing me in despair, Luke shook his head wearily and pulled something from his bag. "Hey, I brought some food, just in case. Want some?"

"There is a god!" I exclaimed, my eyes gleaming the moment he handed me a piece of bread. Even so, I found myself sitting with it in my hands, unable to move.

"Is something wrong?"

"I just feel a bit bad about eating your emergency rations. I can't imagine a worse thing than taking away somebody's food."

"I don't think it's quite that bad. Don't worry about it. Besides, I brought it because I had a feeling this would happen."

"From now on, I'll face toward you and pray three times every day."

"That won't be necessary." The Almighty Luke shot me an indifferent glance as I stuffed my face with fragrant bread.

Looking back, I felt like Luke was always there to get me out of a bad spot. First of all, he'd found me and brought me to the Royal Court Magicians'



Division, but recently he'd also helped me out at the crime syndicate's secret hideout and when I was preparing for the Royal Invitational Tournament. Every time, he'd come running to lend me a helping hand.

He was really such a kind and caring friend to me, even though I was a commoner and he was an aristocrat's son. He didn't just come from any noble family either—his father was a duke, and I was sure all kinds of responsibilities came with his position. There were probably people out there who didn't approve of him being friends with a commoner like me, so I doubted that our friendship could last in this form forever. At some point, we would surely follow separate paths. I was sure we would remain friends, but there was no way we could continue to be so close.

*In that case, I have to make the most of the time we have together. All right, time for me to prove what I'm capable of—not just for me, but for Luke the Giver of Bread too!*

With that thought in mind, I eagerly faced the task presented by the eightieth level, but somehow, I didn't quite feel myself that day.

"I haven't been able to do anything..." I muttered, even as I stood in amazement before the gateway to the eightieth level. The Dungeon Coalition's adventurers were just so impressive. They'd already explored here so many times that they could casually handle every trap and monster we came across. What was there for me to even do?

"Some days are just like that," Luke reassured me. "It's all right."

I nodded. The morale and overall mood of the team were high. I couldn't deny that the fact they were doing so well without needing my help was a positive sign. There was no indication that anything might go wrong. The adventurers seemed almost too capable as we progressed through the depths of the dungeon.

But why was it going so smoothly? I couldn't relax as long as I had this feeling something was out there waiting for us.

The Weissrosa Abyss was among the most dangerous dungeons in the western continent. Within its depths, in the farthest part of the eightieth level,

lurked the Throne of the King of the Dead, a sprawling chamber resembling the ruins of a once-great castle where a gargantuan monster lay in wait. That monster was the eightieth floor's Gatekeeper: a Dead Devourer.

After detailed advance surveys, the Dungeon Coalition had concluded that this was most likely the strongest undead monster ever observed. It could summon a deluge of the undead, absorb them into its own body and unleash a magic attack that would vaporize mithril armor in an instant. If this monster were to appear on the surface, the disaster ranking system would designate it as a level-12 threat at the very least. Its sheer menace eclipsed even that of the wyvern, the most powerful creature in the western continent.

Even against a monster that transcended life itself, though, the Dungeon Coalition had a plan. They had studied this enemy in minute detail and analyzed its attack patterns. They had worked out the best formations and countermeasures to respond to every one of its attacks. As hopeless as it might have seemed at first, by gathering all this information, they had made this monster beatable.

While the King of the Dead was in its unarmed first form, the team would use support magic and set up their battle formation so that their members would be in the best position to unleash their full power. When the monster summoned undead hordes in its second form, the adventurers would use the ruinous terrain to help them fight back without ending up at a numerical disadvantage. In its third and final form, the Dead Devourer would wield a golden staff with unimaginable magical power; one direct hit at full force would spell utter annihilation. Still, it was possible to stand up against even its third form by timing one's movements correctly, casting Magic Barrier, and using dungeon relics.

The battle proceeded according to the original plan. The King of the Dead had little physical strength remaining. It would take only a few minutes longer for the mission to be complete and become a new entry in the history books.

There really were no ill omens, but for some reason, I still had a bad feeling in the back of my mind. Maybe it was just the animal instincts I'd developed back when I'd played around in the wild as a kid. It just felt as if everything was going a little *too* well.

*It's like some cruel master of the dungeon is baiting us...*

“Don’t let your guard down,” the Dungeon Coalition’s commanding officer said. “Everyone, exercise maximum vigilance. Something is coming.”

The man leading the front line of the mission on the eightieth level was said to be the strongest fighter in the entire Weissrosa Abyss. When he indicated that something was worrying him, everyone took notice.

Since we were all on guard already, it wasn’t that we were caught by surprise—if anything, it was lucky timing.

Beams of black light spewed forth as the King of the Dead unsheathed a mighty blade, unveiling such an unfathomable magic force that it warped the very air itself. This was what the adventurers had been so sure didn’t exist: the Dead Devourer’s fourth form.

Next came the first full assault of what became known as the Eightieth Level of Hell.

The destructive light engulfed everything. I immediately cast Magic Barrier, but it wasn’t good enough.

“Noelle!” I heard somebody scream beside me an instant before I lost consciousness.

*How long was I out? It can’t have been long. A few seconds, maybe? Definitely not any longer than a minute.*

I opened my eyes to see complete and utter devastation. Adventurers were sprawled out all over the floor. Even the ones who had managed to avoid being taken out could only stand and stare upward in a daze. They looked like they had just realized their life stories were coming to an end.

As I tried to pull myself up, I noticed something heavy lying on top of me. It seemed lifeless, like a doll.

That lifeless being was my precious friend.

“Huh?! Luke! Hey, Luke, wake up!”

I used healing magic on him, but he wouldn’t regain consciousness. His

injuries weren't life-threatening, but they were certainly severe enough to take him out of action.

*Why?* That question kept bouncing around my head. *The attack was incredibly powerful, sure, but it shouldn't have been more than Luke could stand. If you focus on protecting yourself and casting Magic Barrier, then you should—*

It suddenly dawned on me. I realized what Luke had been doing while I was trying to shield myself.

Instead of looking after himself, he had cast a second Magic Barrier to protect me.

"Why...?" I whispered, my voice shaking. "Why would you...?"



I couldn't forgive myself for being unable to do anything more than let him save me. I'd wanted to repay him for protecting me every time things became serious, but before I'd even known what was going on, he had rescued me again.

I was frustrated with the situation and with myself. I couldn't bear it. I gently laid Luke down on the ground.

"Thank you," I murmured, as a quiet rage began to burn deep inside me.

*I'm supposed to be Luke's rival—his equal. This should've been my turn to protect him.*

*I don't care how powerful the enemy is. Even if it's impossible, I'll look for a way to win. If I'm not good enough, I'll become good enough.*

*I can't let this be the end.*

Determined to make things right, I turned to confront the monster.

Towering over all else before me was the Gatekeeper of the eightieth level, the King of the Dead. I figured the sword it had revealed was the Dead Devourer's final secret weapon. Its power already exceeded that of living things, but with that development, it had taken things to another level.

I understood why the adventurers might lose heart. This enemy was so much stronger than us. Anyone who fought this kind of monster head-on could only suffer instant defeat.

Nevertheless, surrender was not an option. I was used to desperate situations. Even when tasks had seemed objectively unreasonable at my old workplace, I'd kept working harder and getting better until I could do them.

Throughout the battle so far, I'd come to understand the enemy's attack patterns. Even if its fighting power had now increased, I doubted that its underlying characteristics would have changed. I would carefully target its weak points and work to suppress its advantages—the kind of game plan my dear friend specialized in. I would accelerate time and launch my strongest wind attacks. I would read the enemy's movements and concentrate my attacks

where it would be hardest to defend.

However, there was one aspect of the King of the Dead's devastating arsenal that I couldn't handle even with the perfect strategy: its sword.

With just one strike, it instantly catapulted me across the chamber, through three walls and into the stone outer edge of the area. My mouth was full of grit and the taste of earth. It wasn't that I'd failed to see the attack—I would've responded if I could have—but I was unprepared for the sheer velocity of the Dead Devourer's sword.

Just as I'd learned during the battle with Eric Rashford, I fought back by taking early action in preparation for each attack, but I still wasn't quick enough. As a mortal human, there was a limit to what I could physically achieve. The difference between me and an undead monster was just too great.

Even my targeted magic attacks seemed to have no effect whatsoever. The magical concentration was so inconceivably intense that I could barely see straight.

*This isn't right. Nothing about this makes sense. I can't believe there's still nothing I can do...*

I understood deeply that our difference in fighting power was too much for any amount of analysis or tactics to overcome. I had absolutely no way of meaningfully fighting back.

And yet, I got back on my feet. I faced the enemy, kicked off against the ground, and unleashed the strongest wind magic I could muster. To my opponent, the attack probably posed about as much of a threat as a fly hurling itself forward, but that didn't matter to me.

It beat me back down over and over again. Each strike added to a growing pile of failure. The King of the Dead swung its sword again, and I was flung into the outer wall once more, without even having a chance to protect myself.

I spat out yet another mouthful of dirt and smirked. *I'm getting the hang of this. I can keep going.*

Nothing could've given me greater confidence than that feeling. I kicked against the floor again and blasted the monster's right shoulder with another

magic attack—but this time, it was ever so slightly more powerful than my attacks up till now.



The Dungeon Coalition's Fourth Squad Lieutenant Bruce Iglesias's darting eyes couldn't focus. All he could do was gape at the monster towering over him.

It was impossible. How could such a thing occur? The biggest, strongest adventuring team in human history, wiped out with a single strike. Everything had been going so well. Having analyzed the enemy's attack patterns and weak points based on their earlier surveys, they'd followed their plan and made it as far as the monster's most dangerous third form with the majority of their fighters still fit. They'd battled efficiently, without errors.

After all that, this was unacceptable; it was inconceivable. The monster's power was preposterous.

If there was anyone who had a solution, it would be the commanding officer. Surely Jake Belleresto, the Dungeon Coalition's general commanding officer and strongest fighter, would be a match for the King of the Dead.

Despite that expectation, Belleresto had acted to protect the rest of the team from the devastating attack, and was no longer able to fight. With that, the battle was over.

Iglesias stared back at the collapsed entrance to the Throne of the King of the Dead. They no longer had a means of escape.

*Why...? he thought. How did this happen...?*

His comrades lay beaten on the floor all around him. He could barely accept what he was seeing.

At the edge of his vision, he spotted one of the others continuing to battle the Dead Devourer. It was a new recruit—a magician girl no bigger than a child. She seemed like quite a skilled fighter, but the difference in power between her and the enemy was vast. The monster sent her flying before she could even land a hit. Even so, she got back up to attack it again.

What would he have thought if he'd seen such a foolhardy effort under



normal circumstances? Right now, he couldn't think anything at all. All his senses were numb. Here in the depths of despair, all he could do was stare vacantly into space.

But still, the magician wasn't giving up. Time and time again, she came forward to take on the monster. All of a sudden, Iglesias was interrupted in his directionless staring by a realization: little by little, the girl's movements were changing.

*What...? What was that she just did?*

She had begun acting in ways he hadn't seen until now, and the changes kept coming. He was amazed to see that each of these small adjustments optimized her approach to the fight. In the heat of battle, she was molding herself to deal with a far stronger opponent. Such astounding adaptability seemed almost superhuman.

*Impossible. Nobody could possibly do that against this kind of monster.*

But before his eyes, the girl continued to optimize her movements. The Dead Devourer swung its mighty sword with such absurd speed that one couldn't begin to imagine any human managing to respond. And by the skin of her teeth, she dodged it.

*Surely not.*

Iglesias watched, agape, as he struggled to understand what he was witnessing. It seemed impossible. Unimaginable. But sure enough, the unbelievable was a reality at that moment.

As the girl took the fight to this truly formidable monster without a shred of hesitation, Iglesias could only stare at the breathtaking spectacle.

Arnold was an S-rank adventurer. Later, he would recount how, on the day of the Eightieth Level of Hell, he had worked frantically all by himself to help his comrades as the healer of the Dungeon Coalition's Fourth Squad. While he was doing all he could to tend to the injured around him, he bore witness to an amazing sight.

"What is that...?"

A little magician was facing off against that atrocious monster. Arnold was stunned by the outrageous speed with which she launched her attacks. It seemed totally beyond human capability. He simply couldn't fathom how she could achieve such incredible feats.

He was brought back to reality from this inexplicable sight by the wounded adventurers near him. At this moment, he needed to help as many people as he could while she played for time. If only they could revive their fallen vanguard, they might stand a chance of turning the situation around.

*I'm counting on you, Arnold thought. Each second you can hold out is a lifeline for us.*

The next person he treated was a seriously injured magician. Thanks to some emergency healing magic, the young man's condition wasn't critical, but he was clearly in no state to fight. It was Luke Waldstein, the reportedly prodigious royal court magician who had joined the Dungeon Coalition alongside that girl.

Luke stared fearfully at the ongoing battle. "Please give me a healing potion," he whispered, straining to speak.

Arnold nodded. Even if Luke Waldstein was unable to fight due to his injuries, now that he was awake it would be worth healing him to the point where he could at least begin to move by himself.

Once the potion had been applied to Luke's worst injuries on his right thigh and his side, he stood up. However, he was unable to keep going. Devoid of strength, he lost his balance and crumpled to the ground.

"Try not to force yourself. While she buys time for the rest of us, we should make an effort to get as far away as—" Arnold stopped with a gasp. "What are you trying to...?"

"I must join her." The young man's sapphire eyes flashed.

Arnold couldn't believe what he was hearing. "No," he insisted, once he had regained the ability to speak. "You are in no fit state to fight."

A great bead of sweat on Luke's forehead revealed the indescribable pain he was in. It was only natural; he was still bleeding profusely from the wounds on his back and side. Anyone could see from the swelling of his thigh that the bone

was fractured. Judging from his shallow breathing, it seemed likely that he had broken ribs too. With those wounds, there was no way he could move normally.

Unable to stand up, he flopped down again, but he wouldn't give up. He glowered at his disobedient body and established a magic sequence. Electricity surged through his body.

Arnold was concerned the man was going to seriously hurt himself, but then he realized something with a start. *Surely he isn't targeting the wounds with electricity?*

Applying electricity to the surface of his wounds was allowing Luke to stanch the bleeding while he cut off the sensation of pain by numbing his senses. This was a method that went far beyond ordinary treatment and was only possible with absurdly precise use of magic.

"You have to stop," Arnold urged him. "You don't know what it'll do to your body."

"I have something very important to attend to." Luke dragged himself toward the site of the battle. "If I can't fight alongside her right now, my life might as well end today."

"Be reasonable," one adventurer muttered as Luke Waldstein leaned against a ruined wall. "You're walking to your death!"

The other adventurers had all had the same thought. It was strange enough that he could even stand; clearly, he was past his physical limits. He surely wouldn't be able to cast any more spells. What could he possibly do that would have any effect on that monster? What on earth could be driving such a foolish decision? Perhaps he had lost all reason.

Luke Waldstein refused to stop. He continued to haul his battered body in the direction of the horrifying King of the Dead.



One day during the spring of our final year at the magic academy, Noelle had said to me, "Hey, Luke. What are your plans for after graduation?"

I'd been planning to become a royal court magician.

“Oh, you are...?” she’d replied, seeming surprised. “I guess I’d expect that from the teacher’s pet.”

Regardless of what everyone else said, she’d always had trouble recognizing her own worth. When she said that, I firmly insisted that she had what it took to become a court magician too.

“Well, if you say so...” she’d responded timidly. “I guess I might give it a shot.”

It went without saying that I’d been happy to hear that. As I was the son of a duke and she was a commoner, I knew we’d be unable to associate the same way after graduating. But then again, if we could be coworkers in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division...

“It would be nice if we could work together. I bet we’d make a real dynamic duo!” she cheered.

I’d wanted that sort of rose-tinted future more than anyone. Considering the difference in our social positions, the likelihood that we would actually get to be together was frightfully low, but I still wanted to be near her.

I remembered studying for exams with her, competing with each other all the way. We’d been assured that we would be able to pass, and we’d wished each other luck, but on the day of the entrance exam for the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, she was nowhere to be seen.

“My mom’s fallen ill, so...” she’d explained afterward.

I’d sailed through the exam with better marks than anybody else and continued to be the best of the best after joining the court magicians’ division. Nobody had stood in my way by offering any serious challenge.

It was then that I realized that prestige, status and reputation all meant nothing to me. I was prepared to throw it all away.

*I just want to be with you. That’s all my heart longs for. And so, I found a way through force of will, by whatever means necessary. I made sure to secure this chance for us to be together.*

*The way things are between us won’t last forever. It might not end up the way I want. I know that’s true, but that’s why I’m still working to make this last even*

*a second longer.*

*I must think. I must be proactive. I need to do everything in my power to hunt for a path to victory. This is my only chance. All I have is now.*

I summoned all of my strength. The pain that had gripped my entire body was no more than a faint memory.



I was battling a monster that was unlike anything I'd ever faced. I was barely holding on only by exercising the full extent of my power, and I could feel that I was going to run out of energy soon.

Simply put, it was a difference in power. Here I was, in the unexplored regions of the most dangerous dungeon. I couldn't resist laughing when I considered the dizzying heights of the Gatekeeper on the eightieth level and how incredibly strong it was.

It might have seemed like I was managing to go toe-to-toe with this enemy, but in reality, it took all my strength just to avoid letting it land a killing blow so I could buy the others some time. A mere scratch from its sword would cause a mortal injury. I was keeping up by the skin of my teeth, and I couldn't afford to drop my guard for even a second.

In one moment of accelerated time, I narrowly avoided nine consecutive strikes from the King of the Dead's mighty blade and magic abilities. When it made its next move, I gasped—it was breaking with the regular attack patterns I'd come to recognize.

I cast Magic Barrier on reflex and barely managed to escape a direct hit, but that was the last of what I could do. My barrier was smashed to smithereens.

The King of the Dead threw back its skeletal head and laughed. I had no chance of dodging its next attack while I was midair. The end was near, and all I could do was watch—but in that very moment, a vivid flash of lightning came flying into view. Such extraordinary precision could only be achieved through enormous firepower. I didn't need to look to know who was behind it.

"How...?"

Knowing who had launched the attack made this even harder to understand. I'd been by his side when everything took a turn for the worse, so I knew he was in no shape to be fighting. My breath caught in my throat as I spotted him leaning against a crumbling wall.

*In that state, why would he...?*

Normally he was so calm and collected, but now he was in such disarray I could hardly believe my eyes. When I worked out why he was supporting me even in the terrible condition he was in, it took my breath away.

*He believes we can win when we work together. He always has. No matter what, my trusted friend has faith in me.*

I used to feel like nothing, back at the Mages' Guild in my little hometown. My bosses had tossed me aside and left me with nowhere else to work. Luke hadn't cared that I'd failed out in the sticks, though. He always saw the best in me and stood by me.

*I bet he has no idea how happy I am to have his support.*

*Well, that's all right. Let's do this. It's time to work a miracle. I couldn't pull it off against Eric Rashford, but today, together, we'll make it happen. This is gonna be the greatest upset anybody has ever seen.*

*We'll prove that we're an unbeatable team. I may be stubborn. My methods may be stupid and childish. The opponent may be impossibly strong, but that's why I can't contain my passion. Isn't it fun to take on a challenge that seems too great to even contemplate? Together, I believe we can do it.*

Once more, with feeling, I kicked off against the ground. I truly felt like I could fly.



"Whoa, this can't be real..." somebody whispered.

Luke Waldstein had long since exceeded his limits. The fact that he was standing up at all was an utter mystery—so how was he still able to launch such astounding attacks?

Multicast enabled him to run seven different magic sequences at once, and he

unleashed his lightning attacks with a level of precision that went far beyond what the average magician was capable of. His magic sequences were so elegant that one could quite forget that he was so seriously injured.

What was most astonishing was that it was all meant to provide Noelle Springfield with near-perfect support in her battle. The two coordinated with total efficiency, fully understanding one another's intentions instantly as they launched their lightning and wind attacks. They barely needed to exchange a single glance. After all the time they'd spent getting to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, they could work together so well that it seemed miraculous.

Having his support made her approach the battle with even more vigor. Her fighting style adjusted to work more optimally with his.

The air itself appeared to warp from the intensity of their magic power, as her great salvo of wind shook not only the Dead Devourer's massive body, but the entire Throne of the King of the Dead. It was hard to tell which side was really the monster: the immensely powerful Gatekeeper or the two magicians taking it on without hesitation.

*What the hell is this...?* the other adventurers thought as they looked on in disbelief. *Are they...driving it back?*

This once catastrophic situation was beginning to change. The adventurers could hardly breathe as they watched these phenomenal events unfold.



Considering the intensity of the battle I was engaged in, I was strangely calm. I could see everything around me clearly, right down to the deteriorating walls beneath the King of the Dead's feet. That must've been because I had sharpened my focus to the absolute limits.

I no longer needed to think. My body could act entirely on its own, almost as if it were being led by something other than my own mind. On top of that, all the experience I had gained fighting as a royal court magician was pushing me forward.

I had dueled against Captain Gawain, the magus known as the Hellfire

Magician. At the Red Rose Ball, I'd battled an assassin armed with a supreme relic. I'd dealt with a mutant goblin emperor and its goblin hordes in the Misty Woods, plus a berserk dragon at Dragon Mountain. At the theater, I'd taken on the Nightfall crime syndicate. And finally, just days before coming here, I'd participated in the Royal Invitational Tournament, where I'd faced a master swordsman—the strongest and highest-ranking knight in the Order of Royal Knights, the Undefeated Master of the Blade himself.

Every one of those opponents had been too powerful for me, but the experience of taking them on had made me stronger. Most of all, I'd been able to count on the help of my dearest friend.

*"I can't stand you! Why did it have to be you?"*

*"The feeling's mutual, commoner."*

When we first met, we had been at each other's throats constantly, but now we could understand each other perfectly. My heart threatened to leap out from my chest.

*Wow, this is amazing.*

I'd never flown so high alone. I'd never seen anything like this before. This monster was so strong I might have lost all hope, but here I was, feeling determined to continue fighting.

*Let's keep going, Luke,* I thought as I cast more spells.

*Sure thing. As long as you want to,* I could imagine him saying.

I grinned as I kicked off again. This was my sharpest surprise attack yet.

I could tell that the Dead Devourer was shrinking back. It was panicking. The unexpected power displayed by its weak opponents had unsettled it, and now it was afraid. Our onslaught had managed to perplex such a powerful monster. I couldn't help feeling pleased with myself.

*You haven't stopped us yet!*

Together, our magic was a match for a Gatekeeper in the most dangerous of dungeons.

*"You can do it. I know you have what it takes."*



I remembered a day back when we were both students. Luke had tried repeatedly to encourage me when I'd thought that the idea of becoming a royal court magician was beyond my wildest dreams.

*"Well, if you say so... I guess I might give it a shot."*

It was a fleeting dream. As much as I'd thought it was likely to be impossible, the idea of it had appealed to me.

*"It would be nice if we could work together. I bet we'd be a real dynamic duo!"*

I still wanted to make that dream a reality.

I evaded the Gatekeeper's attacks by reading its initial movements. The monster was so much stronger. Just a brush of its attacks could kill—and that made my heart beat passionately.

This was probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If we did have a chance, it would last for only a brief moment while the enemy had yet to adjust to our joint maneuvers. I was nearly at the limit of my magical power too. We had to seize this chance now and think about the rest later.

I mustered all of my strength to unleash a flurry of attacks as rapidly as I possibly could. Without a moment's delay, Luke cast support magic on me: Enhance, Mana Boost, Concentrate, Mana Charge, Cast Chain, Spell Boost. In one accelerated moment, he anticipated my movements and deployed summoning circles to provide backup.

I didn't have to think. As if led forward by some outside force, I slipped between the summoning circles and closed the gap between me and the enemy. I could let Luke think about the complicated stuff; my job was to pummel the monster with every ounce of my power. With a huge number of support spells all stacked on each other between the two of us, we worked together to produce the most powerful attack we could manage.

*"Wind Blast!"*

The dungeon shook, and the din of screeching mithril armor rang in my ears. The King of the Dead had used the flat of its blade to endure my attack. Even

after everything, this monster was not something that my magic alone could defeat.

Knowing that, I called out, “Luke!”

The next moment, an amazing torrent of lightning came rushing in from the Dead Devourer’s blind spot. Luke and I synchronized our breathing and pooled together all our power. I believed we could do this.

*Together, we can defeat a Gatekeeper in the Weissrosa Abyss.*

Dazzling light scorched my retinas. In an instant, our magic had overwhelmed the King of the Dead’s great blade and flooded the area.

To be honest, my memory of what happened next was unclear.

Once I was aware of my surroundings, I was already on the ground, my magic power fully exhausted. Though my vision was clouded, I could see the King of the Dead towering over me.

*I guess we didn’t quite beat it. That’s a shame, but I don’t regret a thing. I did everything I could. It isn’t my fault it still wasn’t enough.*

But the expected finishing blow never came. The Dead Devourer merely stood there looking down on me.

*TO THINK THAT IT SHOULD ALL END WITH SUCH A ROUSING BATTLE... a voice boomed. I THANK YOU, YOUNG MAGICIAN.*

And with that, the gargantuan monster dissolved into light. Our battle must have met the King of the Dead’s expectations. Perhaps the task the Weissrosa Abyss had set for us was not simply to defeat this ludicrously powerful Gatekeeper, but to satisfy its desire to fight.

“Did we...win?” I heard somebody whisper distantly, amid the deathly silence of the Throne of the King of the Dead.

“We’re alive!” someone cried out. “Everyone, we survived!”

*Oh good. I put everything I had into that,* I thought, smiling as I heard the

excited voices of the adventurers. I had this strange feeling inside, like I had the ability to become even better at magic. My heart pounded as I thought of how I'd confronted such an unimaginable enemy with a level of magic power I'd never dreamed I might possess.

*Hey, Luke. We can still keep going. No doubt about it.* That thought filled me with hope.

"You did it," I heard him say from behind me. "Now I can rest easy."

I was shocked when I saw him limping toward me, dragging his battered body along. Finally, his strength ran out and he collapsed.

"What are you doing here? You were hurt so badly!" I hastily caught him in my arms.

"I needed to help you." He handed me his only remaining healing potion. Despite his own dreadful condition, he'd come over to give it to me.

"Come on, you should look after yourself first."

I took the potion and fed it to him. He seemed to lack the energy to resist as he gave in and leaned into me.

*How could you be so reckless as to worry about me when you're so badly injured yourself? You helped me when I was in need and gave me a wonderful place to call home. You always treat me with so much care. Why do you go to such lengths for me?*

My thoughts were interrupted by a sudden confusing feeling.

*Huh? What's going on? That's odd...*

I felt like my heart was beating differently from normal, and for some reason, I didn't want to tell Luke. I had the sense that it would be a bad thing for him to find out. I tried not to think about it and acted like everything was normal.

*What could this feeling be?*

I'd never experienced this before, and I didn't know what I ought to do about it.

## Epilogue: The Feeling I Can't Describe

"Absolutely not," the doctor insisted.

I knew that his refusal was quite reasonable. Of course he took pride in his work and was carrying out his responsibilities to the best of his ability.

However, I had a reason not to give in. There was a wish that I wanted granted, no matter what. I felt like I could lose something important if I gave up on it, so I had to keep trying. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and sharpened my senses. I looked the doctor dead in the eye.

"Can't you do something?!" I pleaded. "Please, *please* get me a second helping!"

"No."

*Hmph.*

I was getting a taste of the true cruelty of existence.

I was lying in an infirmary in Weissrosa City following the spectacular battle against the Gatekeeper, and the portion sizes there were upsettingly small. It made me miserable that the doctor had rejected my request, but my mood quickly bounced back.

I couldn't do anything if I backed down. If you want to change the world, you need the will and determination to never accept defeat.

No matter how long it took, I would keep fighting until I saw the dawn of change.

"Okay..." I acquiesced. "Then can I ask for a snack or some kind of dessert after my meal?!"

"You cannot."

*Hmph. What a formidable enemy he is...*

Operation If I Can't Have Seconds, Then How about Dessert? was the product

of none other than my brilliant mind, but incredibly, it hadn't worked.

"Very well, I shall stand down for now," I announced. "But know this, wise doctor: the battle has just begun. You should expect to face many hundreds of my traps and many thousands of my plots, such that I might receive seconds and dessert come suppertime. Prepare yourself."

"Feel better soon," the doctor said monotonously, exiting the room.

His totally emotionless attitude made me relish this chance to take on a powerful foe. After all, as somebody who hated to lose, I felt that bigger challenges held greater value.

*I'll get you yet!* Just as I was rekindling my animosity toward my new mortal enemy, some more faces appeared, as if changing places with the doctor.

"Hello," one of the adventurers from the Dungeon Coalition greeted me. "How are you finding it here?"

"It's great. I really appreciate all you've done for me."

This infirmary was the best equipped in town, and it was the one the Dungeon Coalition always used. They had apparently arranged things so that my stay here would be as comfortable as possible. I was being treated like an aristocrat. I felt that if they could just bring me a second helping at mealtimes, then I'd have nothing at all to complain about. I needed to come up with a strategy for dealing with that doctor—and quickly.

"That's good to hear," the adventurer replied. "You two really saved us down there. The squad leader told us to get you the best care money can buy. Besides, with the WMC coming up, we wouldn't want this to have a negative impact on that."

"WMC? Oh, right, the World Magic Championships. They're this year, aren't they?"

I had forgotten all about it. The World Magic Championships were a major international event held once every four years, where the countries of the western continent competed with each other. I could remember cheering on the contestants at the previous WMC together with my friends and teachers in my school dormitory. I'd looked forward to it so much in those days, but now

that I was an adult with a job, I was so busy and lost track of what years it occurred.

“You must have a shot at being a national representative, right?” the adventurer went on. “I was under the impression you came to the Weissrosa Abyss so you could improve your resume and get an invitation.”

“What?” I’d never once thought about it.

*A national representative? Do they really think I’m impressive enough to be considered?*

“No, no, not at all. Don’t be silly,” I hastily responded, but I broke into a smile. If I’d been born a dog, my tail would’ve been wagging like crazy. “I’m only a silver-rank magician, you know. You have to be at the mithril rank or higher to be a national representative.”

“You don’t think you could be selected?” The adventurer seemed surprised. “I guess I *have* heard that the world of magic is full of absolute geniuses working in education and research.”

“It’s a really tough field to be in. When I started out, I couldn’t even make it at that little Mages’ Guild in the countryside.” I went into detail about my brutal first year as a working adult.

“Wow, that sounds like hell...” the adventurer said at the end, totally amazed. “You sure had a rough time, huh?”

“Well, I think that’s probably pretty standard in the countryside.”

“It absolutely is not! But in any case, if that experience is what made you who you are today, then we should be thankful.” The adventurer fixed me with a serious gaze. “If you’re ever in trouble, let us know. The Dungeon Coalition will never forget how you two rescued us.”

“Thank you!” The adventurer’s kindness warmed my heart. Suddenly, I had an idea. “Oh, by the way, there is actually something troubling me right now.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’d really like to have seconds and dessert, but they won’t let me.”

The adventurer smiled apologetically. “Nothing we can do about that.”



Evening had fallen over the Crimson Palace, the royal palace of the Kingdom of Ardenfeld. In a room bathed in amber light, a meeting was taking place.

“You people don’t understand how serious this is,” an old man said. He was the kingdom’s most influential royal advisor. “The World Magic Championships are organized by the empire, and they’ve become such a big event that the whole world takes notice. We can no longer take this as lightly as we have in the past. One wrong step, and it could forever stain our kingdom’s reputation.”

“From what you’re saying, a magus should be representing us,” replied Gawain Stark, the so-called Hellfire Magician. “I can assure you that if you send me, I’ll get the results you’re looking for.”

“Out of the question. Now is no time to risk harming our prestige by having one of our magi fail. That would be utterly unacceptable.”

“The empire doesn’t seem to care how it looks when they call up elven magicians. Their magic is more powerful than that of any human. The kingdom will look weak if we face them fearing defeat. Don’t you think that would guarantee a bad result?”

“That’s why we should send the strongest magician possible. We will select the most promising candidates outside of the magi. Luke Waldstein has been chosen. In this contest, we must put pride to one side and aim for victory. Now, I will ask you once more: are you seriously suggesting choosing that girl to represent Ardenfeld? A silver-rank commoner with no notable pedigree, in her first year as a court magician?”

“I am completely serious.”

“I grow tired of your preference for commoners. What good reason—”

“I thought you might say something like that.” Gawain Stark retrieved a sealed envelope from his coat pocket. “This is a letter of recommendation from Sir Eric Rashford. I’m sure you’re aware of their battle at the Royal Invitational Tournament.”





“But that duel was merely for show.”

“Read it for yourself and you’ll understand. Those who have personally competed with her recognize the potential she has. Let me make this explicitly clear: the magus Gawain Stark and the leader of the Order of Royal Knights, Eric Rashford, both recommend Noelle Springfield as a national representative for the World Magic Championships.”



The Holy Empire of Vellmar controlled a vast area in the center of the western continent. The empire’s power was rooted in the abundance of magicite ore mined in its mountainous northern reaches, and it was widely known as one of the most advanced nations in the field of magic. Its magic technology was the greatest in the western continent.

At the World Magic Championships hosted in Vellmar, the empire boasted an especially impressive record that no other nation could match. That success was thanks to the elven magicians called up from their home in the great forest in the northeast. These elves devoted their long lives—said to last for thousands of years—to magic, enabling them to exceed the capabilities of human magicians and dominate the WMC.

Two elves had just arrived at a guest house run by the Imperial Foreign Affairs Bureau. A minister from the senate bowed deeply as they entered the room.

“I thank you both for joining us during such a busy period,” the senator said.

“And so you should,” a green-haired elf replied sharply. “Lady Evangeline is not somebody who should be expected to bother herself with the lowly affairs of mankind. She has chosen to grant you this opportunity entirely out of the kindness of her heart. Never forget Lady Evangeline’s generosity.”

Standing just behind the strict elf, her companion smiled. “Worry not, Esther. I have no problem with these events.”

Hearing that soft voice, the minister gulped. He could sense that the outrageous magic power she possessed was on an entirely different level from human magicians. She was the WMC’s undisputed champion, comfortable winner of successive titles and celebrated as one of the strongest magicians

alive; this was Evangeline Runeforest, the Fairy Queen.

Interacting with her required meticulous care and attention. The minister couldn't bear to think about how he might suffer if he were to offend her with a faux pas.

"And where might Cynthia be?" Evangeline Runeforest asked. "I had heard that she would be here by now."

"I believe Lady Cynthia had business to attend to in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, my lady," the minister replied.

"What kind of business?"

"Apparently, there is a magician there that she needed to investigate. She seemed rather perturbed. We were surprised ourselves, as we've never seen her in such a strange mood."

"May I look at the documents Cynthia saw?"

"Certainly, my lady."

The minister handed her some papers and watched the movement of her eyes as she read the first page. *Who on earth could she be worried about?* he thought.

"I suspect she was overthinking things," the minister said. "There is nobody on that list that would pose a threat to you, my lady."

"I would not be so quick to say so," Evangeline responded, smiling and looking more closely at one point in the documentation.

*On that page?* the minister thought, watching her with growing concern. That section listed information on some of the lowest-ranking, least proven magicians of all. *Who could be of interest there...?* He couldn't wrap his head around this.

"I am glad I came for the championships," Evangeline said finally, with a sweet smile. "This girl seems intriguing. I have not been so excited in a long time."

In a hospital room at dusk, Luke Waldstein was struggling with profound mental anguish. He knew all too well that ruminating would achieve nothing. He

had exceeded his physical and mental limits and he had already done everything within his power, but cruel memories still bounced around his head.

*“I have something very important to attend to.”*

*“If I can’t fight alongside her right now, my life might as well end today.”*

*“I needed to help you.”*

When he looked back on that day, he realized what embarrassing things he had said.

*What was I thinking?* Luke lamented. As somebody of noble birth, who had always been resourceful and almost flawless in his behavior, he was ashamed to remember his words and actions. What must she have thought of him? He could imagine it now:

*Wow, Luke, you were pretty cringey that day.*

Luke just wanted to disappear. He was tormented by thoughts of self-consciousness and growing regret. With this indescribable feeling weighing down on him, he heaved a great sigh.



*“Fantastic work, Noelle! I heard you really gave it your all.”*

My superiors from the Royal Court Magicians’ Division had come to visit me at the infirmary as I was waiting to be discharged. It turned out that because Luke and I had gone ahead and worked with the Dungeon Coalition, it made everything go surprisingly smoothly for the magicians who were later sent on an official mission to Weissrosa. They’d even gotten a chance to make a contract for studying and analyzing dungeon relics from the eightieth level because they were associated with the two of us.

Hearing the joyful tones of my coworker made me glad that I’d put in the effort.

*“It sounds like Luke’s recovery is going well too,”* she continued. *“He’s been really down in the dumps, though.”*

“He has? Did something happen?”

“Hmm, good question. Since he’s such a big deal, maybe he’s like, ‘I should’ve been able to finish that job without getting hospitalized!’”

We both spent a moment thinking about it. Suddenly, I remembered the moment right after that brutal battle with the Gatekeeper. Luke had pulled himself over to me, battered and bruised all over, to bring me his last healing potion.

*“I needed to help you.”*

That was when my heart had started to beat differently and I had felt weirdly unlike myself. I couldn’t understand what that had meant.

“Oh, by the way, I have something important to tell you!” my superior exclaimed. “First of all, you’re getting promoted to the gold class. There was some opposition at court to the idea of promoting you to such a high rank this quickly because of your class background, but in the end, they had to acknowledge what an amazing job you’ve done. It looks like you really shut them up!”

“Ah ha ha, it wasn’t that amazing.” I smiled goofily as she praised me.

*Royal court magicians really are good at flattery, huh?* I was struck yet again by how lucky I was to have such a nice workplace with such friendly coworkers.

“There was another thing too,” she added. “The World Magic Championships are coming up in the Empire of Vellmar.”

“Right, that’s happening this year. I thought it might be fun to go and watch if I have time. I mean, it’s only once every four years! And the top magicians from every country battle each other! You don’t see that every day! I bet seeing that kind of event in person would be an unforgettable memory. Shame that Ardenfeld never tries very hard to win, though.”

My superior chuckled as I prattled on excitedly. *Oops. I can never shut up about the stuff I like. I must seem like I’m way too into it.* I began to hang my head in shame.

“Well, you’ve been invited to be a national representative.”

*Huh...?*

*Did she just say something crazy? Nah, I must be imagining things. There's no way she just said what I think she just said.*

*"Come on, stop messing with me." I laughed. "That can't be true."*

*"Here's the formal invitation."*

*She handed me a letter. I read it over, extremely doubtful.*

*I can't believe this. I really can't believe this.*

*The seal on the letter was imbued with special magic. It was unmistakably the seal used by the Royal Court Magicians' Division for official documents.*

*"They've picked Luke too. I guess they really want to try and win it this time around." She grinned. "You'll be great. Good luck."*

*I was momentarily stunned into silence.*

*AAAAAAHHH!!! I clutched my head, eyes wide in shock.*

*Dear Mother,*

*How is everything at home? It looks like the new career I've embarked on in the Royal Court Magicians' Division is taking another unpredictable turn.*

*To be continued in volume 3*

## Extra Chapter 1: On Dragon Mountain

In the wild lands on the frontier, the place known as Dragon Mountain stood tall. Though the entirety of the frontier was beyond human sovereignty, special fear was reserved for this mountain, for it was home to one of the most powerful creatures in the western continent—a wyvern. Even adventurers regularly avoided the upper reaches of Dragon Mountain.

Due to the lack of human interference, the top of the mountain had a more flourishing ecosystem than that further down. As the winter snows melted into streams, the fresh shoots of spring bristled with vibrant green buds. Below the swaying, speckled gray boughs of trees, lizards poked their heads out from among the thick blanket of leaves to gaze at the sky.

The very summit of the mountain, however, was a solemn place where not a blade of grass grew. Here above the tree line, the rugged rock face was laid bare, and a biting, wintry wind blew the whole year round. The jet-black dragon that ruled over this place looked down at the world beneath the clouds.

“You seem bored again today, my lord,” a rabbit said, using the power of telepathy possessed by only a limited number of monsters. Next to the mountainous wyvern, the rabbit was tiny—even smaller than one of the wyvern’s claws. Its fur was as white as snow, and its lop ears drooped down on either side of its head.

*I AM NOT BORED*, the wyvern responded with telepathy as well. *I AM MERELY WATCHING WHAT IS TO BECOME OF THE WORLD.*

“That’s so cool!”

*DO NOT SAY WHAT YOU DO NOT MEAN.*

“But I do mean it! I come here because I admire you, my lord,” the white rabbit insisted. “I want to become a cool, tough monster just like you. I want to be so strong that everyone on the mountain looks up to me. I know I’ve told you this many times before.”

*YES, AND I HAVE TOLD YOU JUST AS MANY TIMES THAT WITH A BODY LIKE YOURS, SUCH A FEAT IS IMPOSSIBLE.*

“No, it isn’t! I’ll become the strongest on the entire mountain!”

*THEN I SUPPOSE YOU PLAN ON SURPASSING ME?*

“You bet. Dreaming big is how I roll.”

*RABBIT, THERE ARE THINGS IN THIS WORLD WHICH ARE TRULY IMPOSSIBLE.*

“Not fair! Just you watch! Once I take over, everyone’ll be calling this place Rabbit Mountain!”

*THAT SOUNDS LIKE A PEACEFUL PLACE.*

“Heh. Rabbit Mountain... I’ll be the boss...” the rabbit mused, smiling in satisfaction at its own daydreams. Suddenly, it perked up as it thought of something. “A minute ago, you said something like, ‘*I AM MERELY WATCHING WHAT IS TO BECOME OF THE WORLD.*’”

*IS THAT YOUR IMPRESSION OF ME?*

“Yep! Pretty good, right? I’ve been working on it,” the rabbit said smugly. “Anyway, I guess I wondered if ‘watching’ is really good enough. Like, it seemed as if you actually wanted to explore the outside world.”

*WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THAT?*

“You just looked kind of lonely.”

The dragon said nothing. That deep silence left a powerful impression on the rabbit.

The wyvern was the white rabbit’s hero. While the rabbit was small even compared to its siblings, the wyvern was so big that it blotted out the sky.

“I should bring an offering to the lord of the mountain as thanks for protecting everyone.”

All the creatures of Dragon Mountain respected the wyvern, which was stronger than any of them. However, there was one thing that the rabbit couldn’t understand: none of them ever tried to approach the dragon directly.

“We can’t risk offending the lord of the mountain,” they all said, but their excuse rang hollow to the rabbit.

They stayed away from the wyvern because they were scared. The rabbit felt that it wasn’t right for adults to act that way. They should express their gratitude face-to-face. Surely, that would make the lord of the mountain happier too.

In a rebellious mood, the rabbit began making regular visits to the summit. Up close, the jet-black dragon was enormous and impressive. While the wyvern’s attitude was curt, it still listened in its own way. Most importantly, the rabbit figured the huge monster was lonely.

*I need to keep coming here,* the rabbit thought.

On one of those days, the white rabbit spotted other rabbits on the way to the summit—adults acting as sentries. Startled, the rabbit hid in a thicket. Nobody could find out that it had been visiting the wyvern; the sentries would be sure to angrily tell the rabbit not to come again. As it curled up and held its breath, it could hear the sentries talking as they walked by.

“Hey, I heard a group of humans were heading for the top of Dragon Mountain.”

“Are they planning to battle the lord of the mountain?”

“Beats me. But I wonder if...”

“Well, we’d better report back to the chief.”

The white rabbit felt uneasy. As far as it was concerned, nothing was stronger than the wyvern, and there was no chance it could be defeated, but for some reason, the rabbit couldn’t help being nervous.

Once the sentries had moved on, the rabbit raced to the top of the mountain. Keeping careful watch on its surroundings, it headed for where the wyvern was. There was no sign of any humans. Perhaps they’d already failed and left the mountain.

The rabbit was relieved to see the dragon was still looking out from the mountain, uninjured. *Of course the lord of the mountain would never lose.*



“I should’ve known, my lord!” the rabbit called out. “You really are the best!”

The jet-black dragon turned around. Its expression looked nothing like normal. Its eyes were bloodshot and rage was etched into its features. It let out an earthshaking roar, gnashed its teeth, and bared its fangs.

“Is something wrong, my lord...? Are you all right?”

There was no sign of reason in the wyvern’s sharp, darting eyes, only the bloodthirsty ferocity of a predator. It saw the white rabbit as nothing more than prey.

The rabbit needed to escape, but it was too frightened. Its body wouldn’t move. It didn’t want to die, but there was nothing it could do. The huge dragon rushed forward, its jaws coming ever closer.

*Help me, mommy!*

The white rabbit shut its eyes in fear, and a limb as big as a tree lunged toward it. The dragon’s claws grazed past the rabbit and crashed into a rock face. The rock crumbled like sand, showering the rabbit in debris. What was happening?

The rabbit was still in shock when it heard the familiar voice of the wyvern: *THEY TRICKED ME! GET OUT OF HERE NOW! TELL ALL THE OTHERS!*

The wyvern was speaking with urgency as it did everything it could to hold itself back from running wild. The humans had done something, and now it couldn’t control itself, but it was still trying its very best to prevent the creatures of the mountain from coming to harm.

In a haze of confusion, the rabbit turned and ran. *I have to go and tell the grown-ups!*

“You saved us!” the adult rabbits said later. “It’s all thanks to you that we made it out alive.”

A wicked human had caused the wyvern to go berserk and go on a rampage. The incident had rattled the surrounding area, but there were few casualties among the residents of the upper reaches of Dragon Mountain. Because the

white rabbit had warned them in time, they'd managed to find a safe hole to hide in. Of course, it was also important that the wyvern had tried so hard to restrain itself to prevent any creatures from suffering.

The adults were full of praise for the white rabbit. Considering it was used to struggling to keep up with its siblings' achievements, it was happy.

On the other hand, once things had settled down and the dragon had returned, the route to the summit was blocked with a huge boulder.

*It must be because it nearly hurt me. But the humans were the bad guys! The lord of the mountain did nothing wrong.*

*And it's always so lonely... I have to do something,* the white rabbit thought, gazing up at the boulder.



The wyvern was accustomed to being alone. Overwhelming power breeds solitude.

It remembered its younger days, when it had been curious about other, much smaller, monsters. It had been jealous of how they played together. Eventually, it had worked up the courage to speak to them, but it knew that simply saying, *LET ME JOIN IN!* might upset them.

*I know,* it thought. *I'll bring them a present.*

The wyvern looked around for pretty stones like the ones it had seen the monsters playing with, and found a large, amber-colored stone that it thought they would like.

*They'll definitely be happy with this!*

It fired itself up and reached out to the others. *H-HI! C-CAN I PLAY WITH YOU GUYS TOO, P-PLEASE?*

But the plan went disastrously wrong.

"A d-dragon! There's a dragon!"

"Don't eat us! Please have mercy!"

Like baby spiders, they fled in all directions in fear. They never again returned

to that spot to play. The wyvern realized that it had destroyed their meeting place. Just speaking to others was enough to frighten them. That day, it learned that it was a nuisance.

*Then I must live alone.*

Being alone wasn't difficult. Once the all-encompassing loneliness no longer felt new, it would become normal. *It makes sense to be alone. This is fine*, it told itself, over and over, to make the solitude bearable.

*I'm lonely*, a voice whispered, somewhere deep down inside, but the wyvern stifled it.

It couldn't hear that voice. It couldn't hear a thing.

Until the wyvern heard another voice: "What's up, my lord? Want to hang out?"

When the wyvern turned around, it saw the white rabbit sitting there.

*BUT HOW...?* the wyvern asked.

"Hard luck. Rabbits are pretty good at digging tunnels, you know?" The rabbit showed off its dirty front paws. "No matter how big the boulder is, there's always a gap somewhere. I dug into the gap and made my way here. Even the smallest of us have our specialties."

The wyvern fell silent briefly, before speaking up again. *WHY DID YOU COME HERE?*

"Same reason as always. I want to learn how to be strong like you, my lord."

*THERE IS NO NEED TO PRETEND. I UNDERSTAND. I CAME SO CLOSE TO INJURING YOU—TO KILLING YOU. IT IS QUITE NATURAL THAT YOU SHOULD BE AFRAID. YOU NEED NOT GO TO SUCH LENGTHS TO HIDE YOUR FEAR. I AM USED TO SEEING OTHERS FLEE.*

It made sense that the rabbit would want to stay away, considering what the wyvern had done. It knew all too well how this would end, so it was better to take the initiative and address the issue. That way, nobody would need to be

hurt.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” the white rabbit retorted, totally shocking the wyvern. “You were just being used, my lord. I know exactly who was really to blame, and I know that you were doing your best to get away so you wouldn’t hurt the others around you.”

Confused and struggling to take this in, the wyvern responded, *YOU AND I ARE MUCH TOO DIFFERENT. THE SIZE AND STRENGTH OF RABBITS AND WYVERNS ARE NOTHING ALIKE.*

“Right. I look up to you because we’re different.”

*BUT I MAY CAUSE YOU HARM.*

“Then I’ll be angry. Super angry. But then I’d make up with you, and it would be water under the bridge. Hurting each other and causing problems for each other are all part of being friends, right?”

The dragon couldn’t understand. Friends? Nobody had ever considered it such a thing before.

Still in doubt, the wyvern asked, *ARE YOU NOT AFRAID?*

“Not one bit.”

*ARE YOU SURE?*

“Positive.” The rabbit grinned. “After all, I’m the rabbit that’s gonna be stronger than you one day, my lord.”

The wyvern couldn’t believe that the white rabbit was unafraid. Did it really deserve such a miracle? It was lost for words. Warm, happy feelings flooded through its body. It felt like it had truly been saved.

“Once I become stronger than you, I’ll turn this into Rabbit Mountain,” the rabbit went on. “Oh, but that doesn’t mean I’ll be kicking you out, my lord. I’ll be a benevolent queen, and you’ll be my deputy.”

The rabbit had no idea what the wyvern was thinking about, though. After the rabbit spoke, the dragon couldn’t help but laugh.

“Hey! Don’t make fun of me!” the rabbit said indignantly.

The wyvern smiled. *You are far stronger than I am.*



From then on, the wyvern's expression was a little softer than before. The white rabbit felt emboldened by the thought that this change had occurred because it had chosen not to flee. Most of all, the rabbit felt pleased. *I'm glad I made that choice*, it thought.

*I WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS MY THANKS TO THE HUMAN GIRL WHO RESCUED ME*, the wyvern announced one day.

The rabbit did not hesitate to encourage the dragon. "You should. It's always best to tell others exactly how you feel."

*BUT WOULD IT NOT BE TROUBLESOME? IF I GO THERE, IT MAY LEAD TO CHAOS.*

"Just don't let anyone see you. Besides, nobody would complain about somebody coming to thank them in person."

As a result, the wyvern nearly caused a historic incident in the royal capital of Ardenfeld, but the rabbit wasn't to know that.

*I BROUGHT HER A TOKEN OF MY GRATITUDE*, the wyvern reported back. *I TOLD HER I WILL COME IF SHE IS EVER IN NEED.*

"Good job, my lord! I'm glad it went so well!"

*I MUST PREPARE MYSELF TO BE OF HELP. THE GIRL IS STRONG, AFTER ALL.*

"Yeah, she even managed to stop you by herself."

*THEREFORE, I AM SURE THAT IF SHE WERE IN TROUBLE, IT WOULD BE A DIRE SITUATION INDEED. I WOULD NEED TO SHOW MY FULL POWER.*

"That's right! You'll have to prove to everyone that you're the best, my lord!"

The wyvern then spent those days enthusiastically training for such an event, alongside the white rabbit. From the wyvern's perspective, the rabbit seemed tiny and feeble—but it would never call the rabbit weak. It knew the true strength that lay in the rabbit's heart, and how it had been saved by that strength.

“I swear I’ll become stronger than you, my lord!” the rabbit declared fearlessly.

The wyvern chuckled. *YES, I LOOK FORWARD TO THAT DAY.*

## Extra Chapter 2: Before and after the Day at the Theater

Luke Waldstein woke up early. He crossed his immaculate, rosewood-scented bedroom, drew the curtains, and looked out over the dimly lit city streets. Between carefully manicured garden lawns, a dignified bull statue faced the heavens from the middle of a fountain. Renowned gardeners were responsible for looking after the Bartsern-style pots and the surrounding seasonal flowers. Most would recognize the breathtaking beauty of these gardens, but to Luke, it was an everyday sight.

“Good morning, Master Luke,” the head butler said. He gave a reverent bow and poured a cup of tea. The tea was from the purveyor to the royal family, and it was Luke’s favorite too.

However, this morning the tea left no impact on Luke’s distracted heart. He continued to gaze off into the distance and took a sip from the hot teacup.

“I want to be alone,” he said. “Would you mind?”

“Understood, sir.” The butler bowed again and left the room.

For a moment, Luke only stood and stared. The room was as quiet as if time had come to a standstill. The steaming tea slowly cooled down.

Just what had happened to him? Something wasn’t right—or rather, nothing was right. He knew exactly what was so violently affecting his mind. It was something important, something special, something that he wouldn’t dream of trading for anything else. To some extent, he had expected to be agitated, but what surprised him was that his reaction was so much greater than he had foreseen. Unable to come to terms with it, he massaged his temples.

*Am I just too excited about the date with Noelle?* he thought. *Is that why my thoughts refuse to slow down?*

He was acting as if he was a little boy the day before his birthday. He’d become like a stranger to himself. With a touch of exasperation, he sighed

deeply.

*This is all her fault.*

He raised the teacup to his lips again. The cold tea was more bitter than ever, but also strangely sweet.



Noelle Springfield woke up late. It was the first morning of the weekend, and she stubbornly refused to get out of bed. The disheveled sheets and the duvet on the floor revealed the dramatic battle that had occurred during the night. The great monster Noelle Springfield had laid waste to this place with superhuman tossing and turning in her sleep.

She rolled out from the warm sheets and found a cool spot to rub her face against.

“Heh. I can still eat more.”

The fact that she would say such things even in her dreams was surely proof that she was a natural-born warrior on the battlefield of big eaters.

Neither calling birds nor the bright rays of morning sun could stop her on the first morning of the weekend. Noelle was going to go back to sleep.

Indulging her insatiable desire, she allowed herself to drift off again.



Luke’s breakfast was a luxurious spread prepared by his personal chef. A dazzling array of fine food was laid out: toasted sandwiches, muffins, scones, pastries, walnut cake, cured ham, sautéed lamb kidneys, capon stew, omelets, quince salad, corn soup...

Once Luke had elegantly eaten his meal, the head butler presented him with a silver platter piled high with letters. He went through them, checking their contents and giving his replies. Though there was so much for him to do as the heir to a noble household, the work didn’t bother him. He had long since come to view this as just one part of his everyday life.

“I’m going out now,” Luke announced an hour later, after he was finished dealing with the letters.



“For work, sir?”

“No, not today.” He saw the head butler blink in surprise. “Is something wrong?”

“No, sir. It is just unusual to see you leave the house early for reasons other than work.”

“You may be right about that.” Luke smiled wryly. “I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

“Very well. I hope you have a successful outing.”

Luke left and strolled past the gardens. Normally he paid little attention to the flowers, but for some reason, they seemed remarkably vivid that morning.

*This isn’t like me at all.*

Sighing, he gazed around at a world that looked more beautiful than ever.



Noelle’s breakfast typically took place at the kind of time most others would be eating lunch. She headed for her favorite cafeteria in the neighborhood, a place popular with big eaters.

A man hurtled in through the cafeteria entrance, dripping with sweat. His face was pale and his eyes wouldn’t focus.

“That woman...” he gasped. “She’s coming!”

The cafeteria erupted into noise as the customers reacted to his news.

“She’s coming here...?”

A gigantic man known as the Voracious Monster of the East gulped, his spoon stationary in front of his face.

“Scrape together all the food we have!” the owner commanded, breaking into an audacious smile.

The atmosphere in the cafeteria was oddly tense for a peaceful weekend lunchtime.

“Wh-What’s going on?” somebody spluttered.

“You don’t know?” a regular customer responded. “Just watch. You’re about to see the biggest eater in these parts. They call her the Little Witch with the Bottomless Stomach.”



As Luke ran through his plan for the date, everything went smoothly. There were no unpleasant surprises, which made perfect sense. After all, Luke was known as one of the kingdom’s greatest ever prodigies, and he had devoted the full extent of his abilities to planning this out.

This was already his third rehearsal. He was refining the plan down to the tiniest of details. Once the rehearsal concluded—ahead of schedule—he paused in front of the window of a magical item shop.

*Ah, Noelle said she wanted one of those.*

It was a necklace that increased healing ability and the effectiveness of support magic. Glistening with gorgeous red magic gems, it was clearly crafted to an extremely high standard. It was one of the most popular items produced by Oswald and Company, the biggest manufacturing company in the kingdom.

“Oooh, it isn’t easy to cut these!” Noelle had exclaimed as she examined a selection of ornamental magical items brought in by a merchant visiting the court. As she’d rattled off a series of facts, her eyes had sparkled with excitement. “Maintaining the maximum magical conductivity of magic gems requires working on them in incredibly minute detail! I can’t work it out at all, but a skilled artisan can spot mistakes just by touching it! That’s like a whole other type of magic!”

Luke smiled to himself as he remembered her enthusiastic reaction. She adored the kind of work that reflected people’s single-minded passion, and the zeal and experience that went into it. The determination to devote one’s life to something really seemed to inspire her. Of course, it was all because she herself was so in love with magic.

“It’s got a nice design too, hasn’t it?” the merchant had said. “The designers followed the latest fashions, but they tried some new things with this too. I can see why people like it.”

“F-Fashion? R-Right, of course. As a cosmopolitan young lady, I don’t need to be told what’s fashionable. Yeah, it’s very, uh, contemporary. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but altogether it just has that feeling about it.”

When it came to the things she had no interest in it was obvious that she didn’t care. Her attitude impressed Luke. It made him envy her. For him, magic was something he had a professional duty toward. He liked it too, but somewhere along the way, he’d lost that pure passion for it that she had. It was a common thing for people to lose their excitement about something once it became their job, but that made Noelle’s pure enthusiasm even more amazing to Luke.

That was just one of the things he loved about her, but he couldn’t help wishing that she would direct at least some of those feelings his way, though that made him feel selfish.

“I’ll take one of these, please,” Luke said to the shopkeeper, buying a necklace inlaid with red magic gems. As the necklace was beautifully wrapped in front of him, he felt ashamed of the mixed intentions held within that little package.



“Hey there, Mister Cat! Where are you going?”

Noelle was cheerfully making her way home from lunch when she spotted a little black cat and began absentmindedly following it.

“Ah, I love this cool breeze!” she said to herself. “Oh, I know where I wanna go! All right, let’s explore!”

Unfortunately, Noelle’s mental-processing power always plummeted after meals, and before long, she realized she was in an unfamiliar place.

*Huh? Where am I...?*

By the time she’d looked at her surroundings properly, she was completely lost. She had found herself somewhere where the sky was dim and the air was stale. All around her were broken iron railings, ruined wagons, and dirty rags strewn across the ground.

*This must be one of those dangerous areas people tell me to avoid...* She was

frozen still as she became cognizant of what kind of place she'd stumbled upon. *Okay, I just need to retrace my steps.*

Just as she turned around to go back the way she had come, she heard a voice.

"Help! Someone, please help!" a woman's hoarse voice echoed anxiously around the alleyways.

Noelle ran toward her without missing a beat.

"What's going on? Stop right there!" she shouted as she encountered a group of uncouth young men.

There were four men, one of whom had a knife. They stood between Noelle and an elegant old lady, who was clutching a bag and cowering.

"Who's this brat?" one of the men spat. "Shut your mouth, little girl."

*How dare he say that to a stylish mega-babe like me?! He's gonna pay for that!*

As indignant as she felt, Noelle tried to calm herself down so that she could approach the situation maturely, with a cool head.

"Let's relax and talk about this," she said. "It'll all be fine. If we talk it through, I'm sure we'll come to an understanding."

"Talk? Don't be stupid," the man sneered, his cruel voice reverberating around the alley. "Looks like you don't know where you are. Around these parts, nobody's gonna come and save you, no matter how loud you scream. Even if we kill somebody, we'll never get caught. Power is everything here."

Pulling out knives, the men began to surround Noelle.

"Let's make sure you never open your stupid mouth again," the first man snarled, approaching her with a sadistic grin.

However, the men didn't know who they were picking a fight with. Noelle had spent her childhood fighting all the local bullies, never hesitating to use her fists. Fearing her, they'd dubbed her the Deadliest Hands in the West. After going four hundred fights undefeated against bullies, she wasn't the kind of person who would back down under intimidation.

“On your knees!” she yelled, instantly calling up a gust of wind that made standing impossible. The men crumpled to the ground and stared at Noelle in shock. “Never seen magic before, huh? It’s pretty great. A skilled magician can flatten you in a second, as easily as a wagon runs over a frog.”

Noelle had dealt with these kinds of guys countless times before. She knew that carelessness could give the opponent a chance to retaliate. She also knew that the best solution was to terrify the opponent until they lost the will to fight back.

“You said power is everything, right?” she scoffed. “Then I guess you won’t mind if I follow the same rule?”

“Eek!” The moment Noelle relaxed the wind magic pinning them to the ground, the men began climbing over one another to get away.

Case closed.

“Thank you, dear,” the old lady said. “I couldn’t have dealt with them alone. How can I ever repay you?”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” Noelle replied.

“I had money for my grandchildren’s presents in this bag. I’m so relieved I didn’t lose it.”

As it turned out, the lady had been on her way to pick out gifts when she’d ended up in a rough neighborhood. Her voice sounded strained as she thanked Noelle, and her tiny frame was still shaking all over.

*I’m so glad I could help her,* Noelle thought, deeply relieved.

“You were quite something, dear. I’ve never seen such spectacular magic before.”

Noelle laughed bashfully. “Thank you.”

“I can’t imagine what would have happened if you hadn’t appeared. I’m ever so grateful that a magician like you came to my rescue.”

While Noelle walked her back to a safer part of town, the lady praised her over and over, repeatedly saying how glad she was that Noelle had shown up.

*I'm so glad my practice has paid off! Nothing makes me happier than these moments when the heavens reward my hard work. They just make me want to keep challenging myself, and stick with it through thick and thin!*

*Magic is what I believe in. I'm head over heels for it!*



After all of Luke's careful preparations, nothing about the date went according to plan. Unfortunately, they ran into an agent from the Second Unit's Improper Magic Usage Bureau, and once Noelle had discovered the crime syndicate's secret hideout, there was no way it could still be called a date.

"All right, let me get you dinner. Come with me, everyone," Gawain declared after all the excitement was over, and before long, they were in the midst of a raucous celebratory party.

"Come on, it's no big deal! Starting today, I'm a cosmopolitan lady who can handle her drink! Another round, thank you!" Noelle shouted out joyfully. A few drinks later, she wasn't so articulate anymore. "All rrrriight, time for a ssssong from Nuuelle Sprungfieeeeld! And a one, and a two, and a—"

With great enthusiasm and very little musicality, Noelle proceeded to belt out a baffling song dripping with vibrato. After the party ended, she staggered drunkenly outside the tavern, collapsed headlong into a bush, and fell asleep.

*How did it come to this...?* Luke thought. This was not a date in any way, shape, or form. Even Noelle's clothes looked worn out after the poor girl had whipped them about indiscriminately all day.

"Here, I have some water," Luke said. While he was helping his inebriated friend, the other partygoers steadily vanished into the night.

"Can you look after Noelle?" Letitia asked him.

He nodded, knowing that he was probably the only person there who knew where she lived, and he very much did not want to leave her with any of the other men. Putting any other considerations aside, the two had been friends since they were in school, so it made sense to Luke that he should be the one to walk her home.

“All right,” he said to Noelle. “It’s time to go. You can sleep when you get home.”

“Home...? Whassat?”

“Yep, it’s definitely time. Can you stand up?”

“Can’t,” she retorted childishly. “Carry me.”

Luke felt a jolt of panic. He cursed himself for being this affected by something so silly.

“Fine,” he said eventually, drowning out his anxiety and putting on a brave face. He crouched down and helped her onto his back.

“Thankssss...” she murmured, giggling foolishly to herself.

“Don’t mention it,” Luke replied, pretending not to notice her slurred speech.

As soon as he began walking, she fell asleep again. He could hear the gentle sound of her breathing right by his ear.

On this quiet night and on this deserted street, it felt like they were the only two people in the world. It seemed somehow unreal: surrounded by the cool night air, they were in an unusual place, unusually close together. It was as if they’d wandered into another world. The only thing anchoring Luke to reality was Noelle’s warmth against his back.

“Mom...?” she muttered.

Luke couldn’t help but chuckle. “Sure. That’s me.”

“Let me tell you something.” She cleared her throat shyly, making Luke smile again. “‘Thanks for everything.’ I really, really wanna tell Luke that.”

“Oh yeah?” Luke interjected, hearing her voice next to his ear.

“Yeah... He has no idea how much I wanna thank him. But I’m sad too. He always rushes way ahead and solves all his problems by himself. I wish he’d let me help. If he has too much on his plate, I’ll take some from him.” Noelle’s tone changed. “Let me help you! That’s an order!”

Luke struggled to find the words to respond. His chest was tight with emotion. Just feeling the warmth of her against him and knowing she was there filled him

with happiness. She was so precious and dear to him. He loved her deeply. He knew there was nothing he could say that could convey all of those feelings.

“Thank you,” he finally breathed.

He could hear that she had gone back to sleep. What was it about that soft sound that moved him so much?

There was a great difference in their social positions. His love for her was not only unrequited, but it was also forbidden. Regardless, he couldn't stop wishing that somehow, their time together could go on at least a little bit longer.

In the end, Luke never managed to give Noelle the necklace with the red magic gems. He reconsidered constantly, but he settled on deciding the gift might seem too serious, too intense.

The necklace went into Luke's box of memories, where it lay alongside all the other parcels from years gone by.



## Afterword

Back when I used to dream of becoming a writer, I loved books where authors wrote about how they worked. I thought it was so cool and exciting, and I longed to do the same. I would try doing it for myself, only to end up frustrated, feeling like it was impossible.

In those simpler times, there was a particular piece of advice that stayed with me:

“There’s something fascinating about books. If you genuinely write about what you love, you can be sure that people will come and love it with you.”

In all honesty, I didn’t really believe it worked that way. Even so, I began writing about what I loved, but I prepared for it to be the last novel I would ever write. I felt like I would have to give up on my dream of being a writer very soon, but as I worked on making the most of my final novel, it turned out to be only the beginning.

When I think about that time again now, I see how that author was telling the truth.

All the things I love went into this project, and it ended up reaching second place in the annual rankings on Shosetsuka ni Naro. My friend tells me it even hit number one in the weekly rankings. I was amazed that something like this could happen to me. It still doesn’t feel real, but at the same time, I’m extremely grateful.

I thank all the fans of *My Magical Career at Court* from the bottom of my heart. I did nothing; this was all thanks to the readers. At the start, I was all worn out, just like Noelle at the Mages’ Guild. I want to thank those of you who found me at that time and supported me.

I believe in magic. I might not get to be as cool as Noelle, but I believe in it all the same.

I hope that my feelings also come across to you, the reader. It would make me

happy to know that this story does at least something to brighten your day.

Shusui Hazuki

Wringing My Hands over the Embarrassing Things I'm Saying on this Early  
Winter's Day

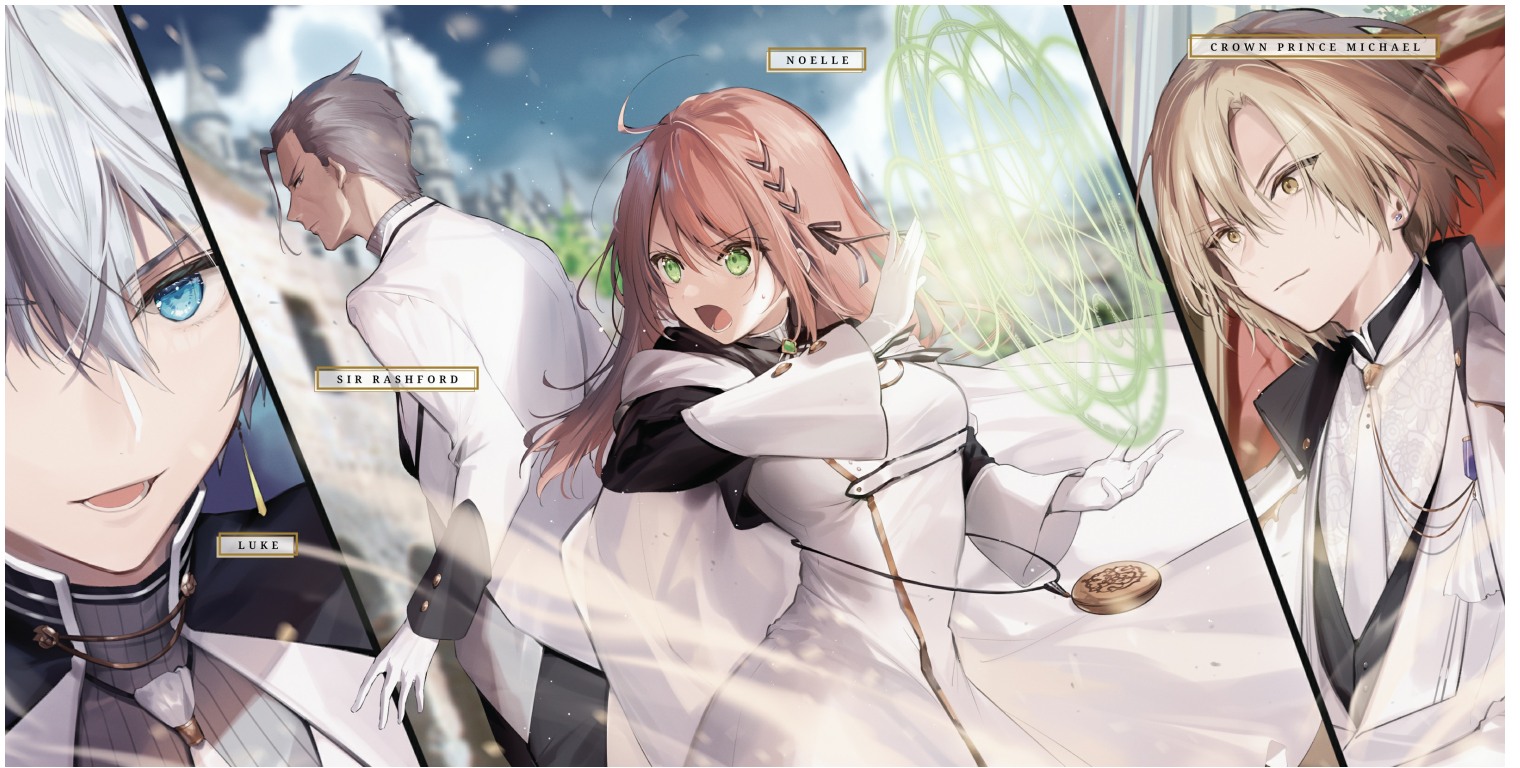






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*My Magical Career at  
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Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild!





II

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My **Magical Career** at  
**Court**☆

Living the Dream After My Nightmare  
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My Magical Career at Court: Living the Dream After My Nightmare Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild! Volume 2

by Shusui Hazuki

Translated by Mari Koch Edited by Carly Smith

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