

V

Shusui  
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Illustration: necomi

My **Magical Career** at  
**Court** ✧

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



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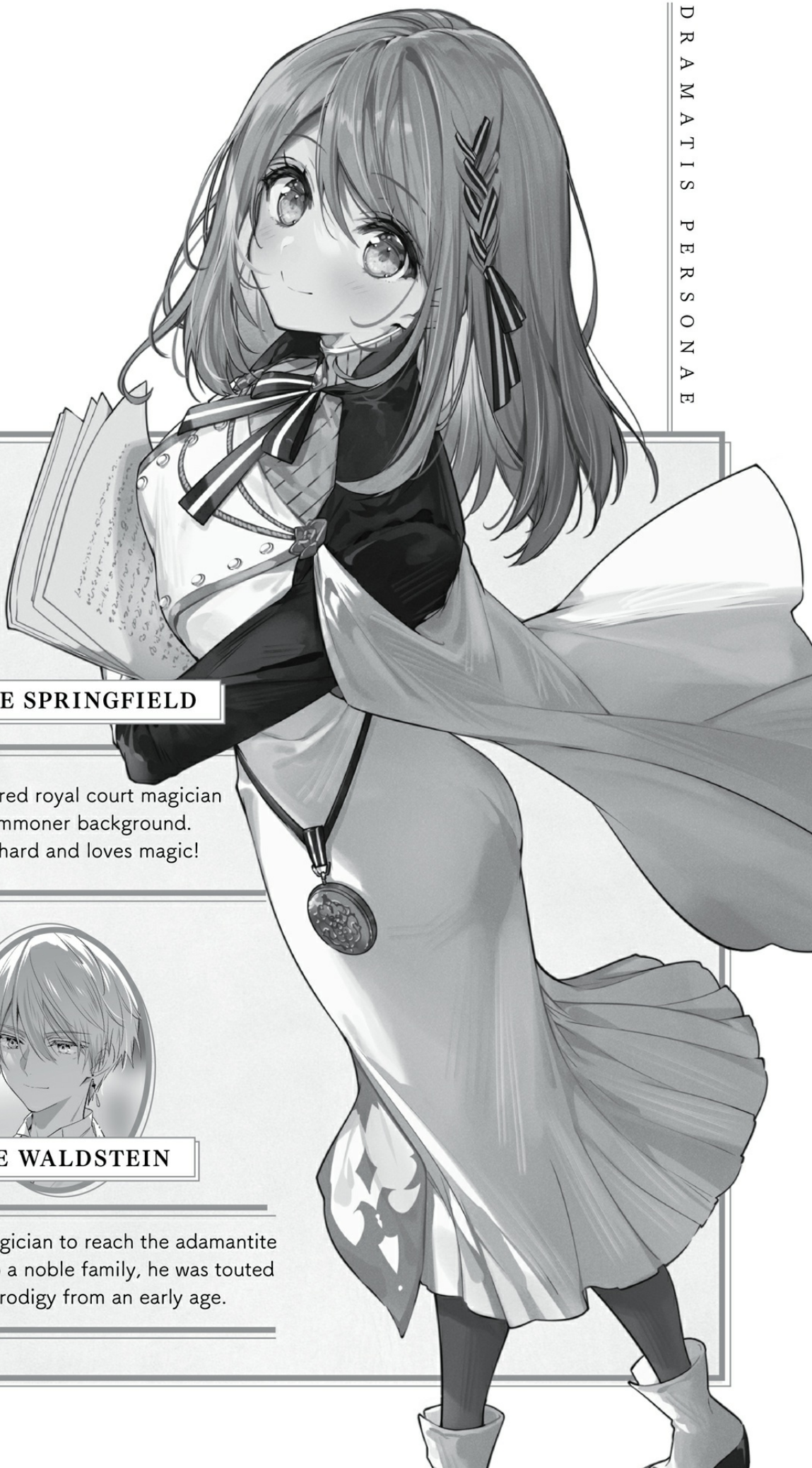
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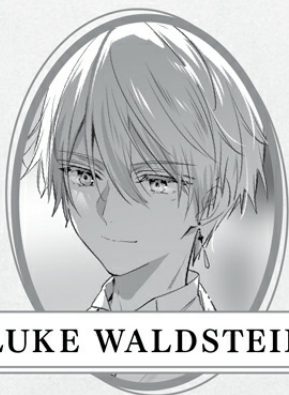
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## NOELLE SPRINGFIELD

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



## LUKE WALDSTEIN

The youngest magician to reach the adamantite class. The 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 who helps Gawain. Noelle admires her mature personality.



**MASTER SWORDSMAN**

**SIR ERIC RASHFORD**

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



**MICHAEL ARDENFELD**

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



## Volume 4 Synopsis

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

After graduating from a prestigious academy of magic, Noelle was working at a mages’ guild in her hometown so that she could take care of her mother. Fortunately, her mother recovered, but Noelle still needed to put up with the mean, prejudiced guild chief, who finally fired her.

Just when Noelle was devastated after having her career in magic seemingly cut short, an old school friend appeared. Luke, Noelle’s erstwhile rival, had risen through the ranks as a royal court magician and reached the adamantite class faster than anybody else in history. He told Noelle that he wanted to nominate her as his mentee in the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division.

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

She made it through every hardship with her own talent and hard work, her bonds with her coworkers, and her devotion to magic! These two young magicians—Noelle, the magic-loving commoner, and Luke, the heir to a noble household—have begun to usher in a new era in the kingdom!

Now, Luke has been tasked with starting up a brand-new Seventh Unit, and he wants Noelle to work as his first lieutenant. Entirely new challenges await the both of them!



*I couldn't help but dream. Even if that dream meant burning everything to the ground.*

## **Prologue: Before We Begin**

The seasons went by in the blink of an eye. After a month, I was swamped with work surrounding the launch of the new Seventh Unit. It was an experimental unit, established in response to evolving global challenges and magic-related crime. Magic was a serious matter in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld, and that meant any updates on the new unit made daily headlines. The kingdom's neighbors were apparently reporting on it too. Many people had their eyes glued to the Seventh Unit, watching for the slightest hint of what role they might play.

And yet, for all the hubbub in the news, preparations for the unit's launch were by no means going smoothly.

A magician from the general affairs section of the First Unit's Central Administration Bureau sighed in exasperation. "See, Captain Ernest decided on his own to fast-track the establishment of the Seventh Unit. And that means we're now up to our eyes in all the work that wasn't ready ahead of time."

Ernest Maeterlinck, captain of the First Unit, was the de facto leader of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. As the secretary-general of the division, Chronos Casablanco outranked Ernest, but Chronos had been off researching time manipulation magic for over a decade. Captain Ernest was thus extremely powerful and influential, and it was his approval that had set the wheels in motion for the establishment of the Seventh Unit.

"I was hoping we could prepare a proper office for you too, Noelle," the First Unit magician said.

"Come on, don't tease me," I replied. "I'm not important enough to have an office!"

"Yes, you are. You're the lieutenant of this unit."



“Oh, I guess you’re right...”

It was incredible how little the reality of the situation was sinking in. The fact that Luke had nominated me to be the Seventh Unit’s lieutenant was a big deal. It was a huge honor to be entrusted with an important position in this high-profile unit, but it still didn’t feel real.

“Can somebody really become a lieutenant after less than a year on the job?” I pondered.

“It wouldn’t be the first time, but that was over two hundred years ago, when the Royal Court Magicians’ Division was still new. Your situation is totally different. In the division’s current form, this doesn’t happen. Ever.”

“That’s what I thought. And I mean, even Ryan isn’t first lieutenant yet.”

“Well, he’s in the First Unit. His position there is a big achievement. Rising through the ranks in some units is harder than it is in others, and new units probably present a lower barrier to advancement. But even so, Captain Chris used to hold the record, and he took four years and a month to be promoted to lieutenant. Beating that record by more than three years is seriously special.”

“I-I don’t deserve that sort of praise...” My head was spinning. I still couldn’t believe it.

“Anyway, it’s even more shocking that Luke became a captain in his fourth year as a court magician. I hear there’s been quite a bit of backlash from court nobles, so you shouldn’t worry too much about your... Is something wrong?”

My emotions must have shown on my face. I thought for a moment, then decided to just be honest. “No, it just grinds my gears to think that Luke outdid me.”







“That’s what you’re concerned about?”

“You’ll see. You’ll all see! One of these days, I’ll shut him up.”

“I think your energy might be misdirected...” The other magician shifted uncomfortably.

In any case, I knew that people had hopes and expectations for me. Luke was a unit captain, and I was a unit lieutenant. It was our job to build this place from scratch.

*What kind of unit will we create?* I wondered, smiling to myself as I pictured an exciting future. I hoped we could make something that was as cheerful and welcoming as the Third Unit.

“I heard that new recruits would start joining the Seventh Unit in the spring,” the magician pointed out.

“That’s right! It makes me so happy to think I’ll have juniors to look after. And that means I’ll be the one with experience! Will they be passionate fans of their cool superior officer? I’m so giddy thinking about it!”

“I bet you’ll be popular.”

“Believe it or not, I used to get chocolates from my underclassmen for Valentine’s Day when I was a student. They’d write about how I was so amazing and cute and freaky and funny. I guess I was just too cool for school.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a bigger, weirder story behind that?” Perplexed, the First Unit magician paused. “On that note, I can imagine Luke got a lot of Valentine’s Day chocolates too.”

“Loads. Good looks are all he had, but damn it, he had everybody fooled.”

“Fooled? I thought he seemed quite charming.”

“Yeah, it was all an act. He never even seemed happy about receiving gifts. But there was this weird trend where people thought that was cool. I don’t get it. If I were him, I’d be so pleased! I’d gobble them up!”

“What if he was waiting for someone in particular to give him chocolates? Maybe he didn’t look forward to them if they weren’t from the right person.”

“The right person, huh...?”

Suddenly, I remembered the incident when Luke and I were alone together in the hospital room after the World Magic Championships—the time he had held me.

*Supposing he really has romantic feelings for me...could he have felt that way ever since we were students?* In spite of myself, I couldn't help but consider that possibility. *No way, that can't be right! That's just my ego talking!*

I tried to snap myself out of it. I had more important things to concentrate on in the here and now. I needed to focus all my attention on living up to everybody's expectations. This was no time to let myself fall into a slump in the way I had after the WMC.

*I wanna get better at magic. Deep down in my heart, that's what I desire most of all.*

I could only improve myself if I worked hard to fulfill the role I'd been given as a lieutenant and superior officer to the incoming new magicians.

“Huh?” the First Unit magician said suddenly. “Someone is here from the King's Guard. That doesn't happen very often.”

I looked up and saw someone disappearing up the stairs. I had a hunch about where they were going. *I bet they're here for Luke.*

Most people hadn't noticed, but lately, Luke had been visiting Crown Prince Michael Ardenfeld's private chamber a lot. I didn't know the purpose of those visits, but I had a feeling it had something to do with me.

*“I am here with a request for the Third Unit magician Noelle Springfield. I would like you to join the King's Guard as its chief magician, as soon as you can—starting next month, if possible.”*

I still wasn't over the shock of hearing those words. According to Captain Gawain, that request was on hold for now, after Luke had had several meetings with the crown prince.

“Ever since you joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division, His Royal Highness has been a fan of yours,” Gawain had told me in his office, protected from



bugging by a magical barrier. “I don’t know what will happen. Just keep your guard up. Anyway, I don’t think his true goal was to recruit you into the King’s Guard this time around.”

“What other reason could he have?”

Gawain glanced out of the window. “After hearing that request, Luke was left with no other choice than to nominate you for lieutenant of the Seventh Unit. Originally, Luke wanted you to be third-in-command. We’d talked about it beforehand and decided that it was too early to make you the unit’s lieutenant. Luke agreed too. However, our original plan wouldn’t have been enough to prevent you from having to accept His Royal Highness’s offer.”

“And that’s why he appointed me to this position.”

Gawain nodded. “As a result, court nobles have begun viewing Luke with suspicion. Not only is he the youngest captain yet, but he gave the role of lieutenant to his old friend who joined the division less than a year ago. Even though it’s true that your achievements have caused a stir, it still isn’t a good look, to be honest.”

“I guess they think it’s favoritism.”

“There’s a good chance that the new unit will face severe criticism, but even knowing that, Luke picked you.”

“Why would he do that...?”

“Because he believes that you two can overcome it together.” Gawain sighed, then looked right at me and quietly went on. “This is, without a doubt, the biggest challenge of Luke’s career. If he fails, he might lose everything, but he took a chance. He truly believes that with you, victory is possible. Please, lend him your strength.”

That secret conversation with Gawain had sent my motivation through the roof. My dear friend—the very one who had found me and brought me to the Royal Court Magicians’ Division—was in the midst of the fight of his life. He needed someone he could count on, and he’d chosen me. Nothing could’ve given me greater encouragement than that.

*I’ll make sure he wins this battle. The Seventh Unit is gonna be just as great as*

*all the others!*

I was utterly determined to be of use to Luke.

Not that I'd ever tell him.



Two weeks after the establishment of the Seventh Unit, Luke Waldstein met with Prince Michael in his office.

"I would like to ask you to withdraw your offer to make Noelle the chief magician of the King's Guard." Luke's voice bounced around the elegantly furnished room.

The crown prince remained silent for a moment, before finally replying, almost like he wanted to provoke Luke, "And what if I refuse?"

Prince Michael was praised highly throughout the kingdom and beyond for his great intellect. He had always been innately clever, and his father had taught him from an early age that intelligence was the most noble thing to aspire toward. His golden eyes seemed like they could see right through anything.

One wrong move against such a shrewd opponent could spell doom, but Luke's gaze was unwavering. He was prepared to do anything to be with *her*. He'd been resolute all along.

"I understand the strength of Your Royal Highness's desire to bring Noelle into your inner circle," Luke said. "Ordinarily, going against your intentions might violate my professional responsibility as a royal court magician. However, I wish to express my view that withdrawing your offer would be the most judicious choice. I believe that would be the best means of producing the outcome you seek."

"Interesting," the prince responded coolly. The look in his eyes sent a chill down Luke's spine. "Care to explain?"

"Your Royal Highness wants to employ Noelle because you expect great things from her in the future. The decision is also rooted in the existence of people targeting the Kingdom of Ardenfeld. The kingdom has major potential to access reserves of important resources from the frontier, especially the



Weissrosa Abyss. Those people have taken notice, and there are signs that they are working to destabilize Ardenfeld.”

“Keep going.”

“The King’s Guard is effective at dealing with external threats. Bringing in Noelle would enable you to train her personally and turn a young prodigy into the greatest magician in our kingdom’s history. Is that not Your Highness’s intention?”

“Not bad. I understand the logic.” Prince Michael smiled. “Let’s say that is indeed my intention. How would your suggestion help achieve that goal?”

“I will aid you in your plan. After years of friendship, I know Noelle better than anybody else. That will allow me to guide her. I know the best means of cultivating her abilities and turning her into a great magician. And if you and I coordinate our efforts, that also brings advantages.”

“Do you mean to say that I could gain influence not only over Noelle Springfield, but also you and your new Seventh Unit?”

Luke nodded quietly. “I pledge my full cooperation. However, I would of course reserve the right to make my own decisions.”

“It’s certainly an interesting proposition. There is one last thing I need to ask, though.”

“What would that be?”

“I need to know whether you and the Seventh Unit are really that valuable.” Prince Michael interlaced his slender fingers and lowered his gaze. “As the division’s youngest captain and lieutenant, the two of you are setting new precedents. I’m sure you are aware that there are whispers of doubt in the palace. Do you really have what it takes to withstand that pressure?”

Silence fell upon the room. The crown prince locked his golden eyes on Luke.

Luke responded carefully. “Allow me to remind you of the recent Count Wilhelm affair. He had a dungeon relic that prevented the activation of magic sequences. It was very similar to the Magician Slayer relic used in the attack on Evangeline Runeforest. I understand that you commanded the very best of the

King's Guard to investigate his supply channels."

"That's right." Ever prudent, Prince Michael was still watching Luke. "I learned many interesting things."

"But there was information they couldn't find."

"Are you saying you have that information?"

Luke pulled out a single piece of paper and calmly presented it to the prince.

Prince Michael quietly glanced at the paper. "What is your impression?"

"It is as you imagined, Your Highness. Count Wilhelm was in contact with enemies of Ardenfeld. He obtained the relic from the same people masterminding plots against the kingdom."

One could have cut the tension with a knife.

"Who have you told about this?" the prince asked.

"I've informed Captain Ernest. I was also planning to speak to one other person and ask for their support."

"What about Noelle Springfield?"

"I think I'll wait until the details are clearer before I talk to her about it. She isn't the best at keeping secrets."

Prince Michael took another look at the paper Luke had given him. "Two months ago, Secretary-General Chronos Casablanclas initiated a verification test for time manipulation magic. This is his fourth major experiment. The previous three resulted in Chronos being sucked into hitherto undiscovered dimensions, from which it took several years to return to our world. Since the start of the latest experiment, we have once again lost contact."

"So we're in a situation where the secretary-general may be unable to return for years at a time?"

"Precisely. It's also possible that our enemies have figured that out and are taking the opportunity to act." The prince paused and looked at Luke. "Probing this case seems like it might be beyond the Seventh Unit's capabilities so early in its existence."



“I think I can be more useful than the people under Your Highness’s wing.”

“You sound quite confident.”

“Put it that way if you wish,” Luke said. “I’ll prove myself by getting results.”

“Well, I look forward to it.” The prince smiled. “I hope to hear some good news from you, Luke Waldstein.”

Once their meeting concluded, Luke walked through the restricted area of the palace on his way out.

*I won’t let him have her, he thought.*

Nevertheless, he understood that he’d been placed in a much trickier situation than he’d planned. He had felt the cold stares of the high-ranking aristocrats present at the announcement of the Seventh Unit’s founding.

*“With the royal family’s finances in the state they’re in right now, I don’t see why the Royal Court Magicians’ Division should be launching a new unit.”*

*“Aren’t there other actions that should be taken before we start thinking about hitting the nobility with tax reforms?”*

*“Even if this is supposed to be a small-scale, experimental unit, the young captain and lieutenant lack experience. Is it correct that the lieutenant joined the division less than a year ago?”*

*“I’m sure you’re wise enough to know what will happen if the new unit doesn’t succeed.”*

Expecting backlash, Luke had taken advantage of the dirt he had on certain aristocrats to make them serve his needs. Even so, over eighty percent of court nobles expressed opposition to the Seventh Unit’s establishment. It was as if somebody had planned this all out in advance.

*I thought Prince Michael might be behind it, but his reaction makes me think that can’t be right. No, it’s most likely somebody else with just as much influence over the aristocracy.* Luke bit his lip. *The Big Three.*

There were three noble families that held great sway in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld: the Albarns, the Enneagrams, and, of course, the Waldsteins.

*The most realistic possibility is that the Albarns and Enneagrams oppose the idea of me, a Waldstein, being promoted to captain.*

Making an enemy of two of the Big Three inevitably meant making an enemy of a majority of court nobles. On top of that, because of Luke's poor relationship with his family, he couldn't count on the Waldsteins for support. He was in a tight spot with no allies.

Regardless, surrender was not an option for him. He sought something of unparalleled importance, and he didn't care what he would have to sacrifice along the way. He was working to fulfill his forbidden dream. To do that, he had to become one of the kingdom's foremost magicians—a magus—so that no Waldstein could ever influence his decisions. He would become someone with the power to make *her* happy, and secure a future where they could be together.

He would do anything to achieve that aim, even if it meant alienating the whole world. There wasn't a shred of doubt in his sapphire eyes as he looked up at the headquarters of the Royal Court Magicians' Division.

*Now, if there's a chance she might help me...*

"It's not often that you come to see me," Letitia Lisette-Stone remarked. The Third Unit's lieutenant was surprised to see Luke in her office.

"I'd like to ask for your assistance. I need the support of the division's most skilled investigator and somebody with an intimate knowledge of the aristocracy's inner workings."

Letitia shook her head. "You give me too much credit. Plenty of people are more talented than me."

"At the very least, the aristocrats in my sphere of influence fear nobody more than you."

"I suppose I should take that as a compliment."

"Of the people I can rely on, you're the best." He looked her straight in the eye.





Letitia looked out of the window and sighed. “You’ve really developed a knack for pulling strings.”

“I’m telling the truth.”

“I suppose that’s also something you’ve improved at.”

“If I have, it’s because I’ve been watching you and the captain.” He sounded genuine.

Luke had always had his sights set on becoming captain. Seeking that goal must have made him grow stronger without even thinking about it. He had grown so quickly in his efforts to make his dream come true. When he’d first joined the division, he’d been sharp and aloof, uninterested in seeking help from anyone, but now he acted like another person entirely. By this point, his interpersonal skills had developed so much that Letitia believed he truly was ready to captain a unit.

*But at the same time, it’s all very risky, Letitia thought. Inexperienced new recruits. A new unit. There’s no way to know how this is going to play out.*

She was sure that if anyone knew how difficult the situation was, it was Luke. He was likely to have every court noble against him. Vanishingly few would be willing to take his side. Letitia had made quite a few enemies among the aristocracy herself through her investigations of corruption, but even for her, it was arguably unwise to work with Luke.

However, it didn’t take her long to make a decision. *After all, he was pivotal in the Count Wilhelm case.*

“All right,” she said. “I’ll help you.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“Now, how do you plan on turning things around?”

Luke handed Letitia a stack of documents and explained what he knew. He told her about the shady operations targeting Ardenfeld for its potential access to valuable resources in the frontier land. The same people had been behind the assassination attempt at the Red Rose Ball and caused both the appearance of the goblin emperor in the Misty Woods and the wyvern’s rampage on the

western border. They had even contributed to the rise of the crime syndicate Nightfall and secretly supported Count Wilhelm.

“This is unbelievable,” Letitia murmured. “Could it really be more than just a conspiracy theory?”

“I wish it was that simple, but evidence has emerged. The crown prince has dispatched people to track them.”

“If this is true, it will have a huge impact on the country!”

“Exactly. So if I identify them, the court nobles’ opposition to the Seventh Unit will disappear.”

Letitia quietly looked through the documents. “All right, let’s say this shady organization really exists. But then there’s another question: how deeply has the enemy infiltrated the kingdom already? They’re linked with Count Wilhelm, one of the High Court’s most influential figures. We could reasonably assume they’ve sunk their claws into other regional nobles too. Even worse, they could be in contact with high-ranking figures within the palace.”

“I’m certain that’s already the case. I’m particularly concerned about the Royalists, given their proximity to the royal family. The enemy must be very keen to establish bonds with them. It would benefit them tremendously. With that in mind, the weakest link must be...”

Letitia gulped. “Surely not the Big Three?”

“Precisely.”

“That isn’t possible. How on earth could they have gained such a powerful foothold?”

“That’s a sensible question. However, I was born and raised within one of those families, so I have a different perspective.” Luke continued quietly, “Something about it has seemed strange to me this whole time. Things have been moving too quickly. Now, if the power of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division increases with the addition of another unit, their links to enemies of the state could be exposed. They’re scared of that happening. It makes sense from that perspective.”



Letitia was lost for words.

She thought about that possibility. As some of the most influential families in the Ardenfeld aristocracy, the Big Three were practically untouchable to lowly court magicians. Perhaps those families thought the risk of driving a wedge between themselves and the royal family was worth having this ally, as dangerous as they were.

Letitia could feel herself beginning to sweat. “If all this is true, then this must be the most dangerous investigation you’ve ever conducted.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Luke’s voice was calm and steadfast. He made it immediately obvious that he had no intention of backing down.

*This really doesn’t sound good*, Letitia lamented. Logically, she could have refused to help Luke, but she couldn’t ignore the lasting influence of someone she respected above all others. Her esteemed teacher would surely have offered Luke his support; he had always done what he thought was right, whatever danger it implied.

“How do you want to divide the work?” she asked.

“I’ll ask you to look into the Albarn and Enneagram families.”

“And the Waldsteins?”

“I’ll handle them,” Luke answered resolutely.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Personal feelings can cloud your judgment. Plus, there’s a strong chance people will think you’re trying to protect your family members.”

Luke shook his head. “That won’t happen. Frankly, I’m trying to do the opposite.” He smirked, looking as sharp and intrepid as when he’d first joined the organization.

“If anyone catches onto you, tell me right away.”

“I will.”

“Are you going to ask Captain Gawain for help too?”

“I’ll just make sure he knows that you’ve agreed to help me. Knowing him,

that should be enough to make him get involved of his own accord.”

“Wow. You *are* good at pulling strings. And I’m not so sure that’s a good thing.”

“I just know that you’re special in his eyes.”

“Special...?” Letitia didn’t quite understand. “It’s true that we’ve known each other for a long time, but he’s just as protective of all his friends. You must know that.”

“Maybe you should pay closer attention to what’s going on right under your nose. That’s my advice to you, as another fool who’d sacrifice everything for a single dream.” Luke smiled. “Well, I hope I can count on you, Letitia.”

Letitia continued to ponder over the meaning of Luke’s last comment after he left her office. Maybe he had just been joking or bluffing, but she got the sense that he’d had something to back it up.

*Does he know something about Gawain that I don’t?*

Left alone with that lingering question, she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

# Chapter 1: Day One in the Seventh Unit

“Here’s a list of this year’s new recruits,” Marius said. “Mark the names of all the people you want in your unit.”

We were in the general affairs section of the Central Administration Office. Marius was the division’s chief of Human Resources. As I took the list and tried to respond, I couldn’t relax.

*Do I really get to pick staff...?* I thought. It had been less than a year since I’d shifted over to the Royal Court Magicians’ Division from my job at the Mages’ Guild, and I’d been at the lowest possible rung on the corporate ladder there.

*I still feel like I’m a rookie myself.*

I couldn’t quite get used to the idea that I’d ended up in such an important position, but at least I recognized that my new role came with important responsibilities.

*I am a lieutenant now, after all.*

Even if the Seventh Unit was small and possibly temporary, I was in the same position as Letitia. Besides, I’d decided that if I wanted to repay Luke for bringing me to the division in the first place, I had to work to make the new unit the best it could be.

I went to the new captain’s office ready to work. “Luke! Marius gave me a list of the new recruits.”

Luke’s new office was slightly bigger than his old one. As I walked in, he was unpacking boxes of books to stack them on the shelves. In one corner of the room, there was a desk and chair for me. The magician from the First Unit had told me that Luke and I should share this office until a lieutenant’s office was ready for me.

“Thanks,” Luke replied. “Can I see it?”

I moved my chair over to Luke’s desk. With its leather upholstery, my chair



seemed so luxurious. I didn't have much experience with using expensive furniture like this, so just sitting on it brought me comfort and joy every time.

"How many people will join the Seventh Unit?" I asked.

Close to a thousand people worked across the six existing units of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. The number of magicians in each unit ranged from one hundred and thirty to two hundred, but I'd heard that because of the Seventh Unit's experimental nature, it would have far fewer members.

"I was hoping for twenty," Luke responded, not looking up from the list, "but I think there might only be about ten."

"Only ten?! How come?"

"Because so many people are unhappy with this unit's existence and my being its captain. With the kingdom's economy in a rough spot, many aristocrats would rather cut this division's budget than abolish the Tax Exemption Law. I guess the people in charge decided to scale back the new unit to pacify them."

"You're always so well-informed."

Luke had his own intelligence network within the aristocracy, giving him access to all kinds of information unavailable to the average court magician. I wasn't quite sure why, but there were quite a few court nobles who didn't dare cross him. I wondered what had driven Luke to become such a master manipulator. As his old friend, I couldn't help but feel a little uneasy about his future.

"Well, it's not just about being *informed*," Luke whispered. The corners of his mouth began to turn upward.

"It's not?" I let my confusion show on my face, but then it hit me. "Are you saying *you* pushed for the unit to be scaled back?"

"Bingo." He flashed a cheeky smirk.

"Why would you put yourself at a disadvantage?"

"If we remove some obstacles, it'll make our work easier to do. Having fewer staff means we can spend less time on red tape."

"But won't it be harder to accomplish anything if we have fewer people on

our team?”

“The only people we need are you and me,” Luke said, as if it were perfectly obvious. “Everything will be just fine.”

“You have too much confidence in me. It doesn’t feel right.”

“You shouldn’t undervalue yourself.”

“Overrating me is worse!”

“On the contrary, I’m rating you accurately. Anyway, we should aim to bring in the best people we can. I’d like us to think carefully about who to choose.”

“It’ll be hard to judge based on this list alone, though. Sure, it includes detailed profiles and test results, but we can’t really know what they’re like without talking to them.”

“The more people there are, the easier it is to pay attention to just the eye-catching statistics like test scores and academic achievements.”

“Exactly. I feel like I understand now why people get judged on their education so much.”

It was just too easy to use academic background as a metric for assessing people. Things like test results were an easy shortcut for those assessments, rather than comparing something as amorphous as individual personalities. It also gave people peace of mind to know that if it didn’t work out, they could make the excuse that they’d expected more based on the applicant’s education.

“But this doesn’t feel good,” I said. “If I start judging people like that, then it means I’m turning into the worst kind of adult...”

“Sure, but we can treat it as only one measurement among many to examine. Is that so wrong?”

“I wanna be the kind of person who says, ‘What is essential is invisible to the eye,’ and really means it! I wanna see the potential nobody else recognizes, and when my students finally prove themselves, I’ll be the smug teacher who’s all like, ‘Yeah, I did that.’”

Luke chuckled. “Well, the other units will probably snap up most of the newbies with obvious talent, so we might have no choice but to seek out that

kind of untapped potential.”

Our discussion continued while we marked up the list for the new magicians we wanted to work with.

“You seem to like the responsible types more than I expected, Noelle.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I get the feeling you lean toward the hard workers who scored highly on the written test.”

I looked again at the profiles of the people I’d been choosing. “I guess that’s true, now that you mention it. Maybe I just respect people who are really put-together, since I can be a bit absent-minded. I was always better at practical subjects than writing.”

“I suppose people are most attracted to what they don’t have themselves.”

“And I see you’ve been picking the oddballs.”

“You have a point. Well, I do like people who are a little unusual.”

“Of course, you’ve gone through life convincing everyone you’re a wonderful student and role model.” It made some sense to me that after receiving constant praise as a model student, Luke would be fascinated by people with more distinctive personalities. “Anyway, I think that’s a nice attitude to have. You’d better be careful, though, or some weird woman might catch you in her web!”

“A weird woman...?” Luke had a faraway look in his eyes, then he looked at me closely.

“Is something wrong?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

The grin on his face at that moment would stick with me for some time.



Luke had a lot on his plate as the new captain of the Seventh Unit, from dealing with administrative tasks to procuring necessary equipment and meeting with people from HR. However, Luke was good at that type of work.

He'd also done a lot of planning for the day he became captain, so he managed to get through his first duties in the new job without a hitch.

After many years as the division's chief of human resources, Marius had dealt with many different captains in his time. He was seriously impressed by how well Luke was adapting to his new role. Incidentally, the *worst* captain Marius had ever worked with...was Gawain.

"What a nightmare he was..." Marius sighed heavily as he remembered that time.

Luke nodded in sympathy.

As the captain of the newly established unit, Luke had various responsibilities, but he was generally consistent and reliable in his decision-making. He was the youngest captain yet, and he needed to avoid standing out too much in order to minimize criticism from the court nobility. Still, there was one area where he didn't hesitate to put his foot down.

"What should we do about Noelle's office?" Marius asked.

As a general rule, every lieutenant got their own private office, but the circumstances were a little different this time. This was a provisional unit with a small scope.

"Lacking the perk of a private office will help protect Noelle from criticism," Luke insisted. "Make it so that she can work with me in my office."

There was truth in what he said, but he wasn't revealing the real reason. Really, he wanted to increase the amount of time they spent together. He hadn't failed to notice how selfish he was being.

*Do we even need staff?* he thought. *As long as she's here, that's all I need.*

Of course, he couldn't think that way if he was going to fulfill his role as a unit captain in the Royal Court Magicians' Division. Instead, he got on with thinking about who he could ask to be third-in-command.

*We can already expect this experimental unit to catch some heat from the aristocracy. I doubt I'll get many volunteers. I can't set my expectations too high. I'd better go for personality and rapport over ability and pick somebody we can*



*get along with.*

He got on with the formalities, but at the same time, he tried to delay the arrival of new members for as long as possible. He wanted to extend the time he spent getting the new unit ready and getting to see Noelle face-to-face in his office.

“This person sounds pretty promising,” Noelle remarked, still looking intently at the list of new recruits. “But then again, these written test results are too high, so any on-the-job success won’t really reflect on my teaching...”

Luke and Noelle were alone together, sharing in the excitement of creating something new. Luke felt like he wanted time to stand still, but he held himself back from admitting it aloud.



“You want me to be third-in-command?” Misha Charleroi, a gold-class court magician in the Third Unit, was taken aback. “You must be kidding. Why me?”

“I decided you have the skills we’re looking for.” Luke Waldstein’s blue eyes met hers.

“I didn’t think you even knew my name.”

“Don’t be silly. I always saw you as a great worker. On top of magical ability, you have excellent communication skills. During the expedition to the northern region last autumn, your strong command of support magic helped prevent the collapse of the front line. It’s true that we haven’t had many opportunities to work together, but whenever I’ve had the chance to see how you work, I’ve been impressed.” He sounded full of conviction.

Misha looked at Luke’s clasped fingers resting on the desk. If this had happened ten years earlier, she would’ve lost all composure and leaped at the offer, but she was twenty-seven now. She and everyone else knew about her atrocious luck in love, and as a result, she was thoroughly disillusioned with men. She had learned how to keep calm and work out the intentions behind a man’s words.

“Hold on,” she said. “Be straight with me for a minute.”

“I’ve been perfectly honest this entire time.”

“That’s just an act, though, isn’t it?”

“You misunderstand me. Everything I’ve told you today is the truth.”

“No more lies. If you keep this up, I’m walking away. Why would I work with somebody I can’t trust?”

Luke stared back at her in silence, trying to work out what she was thinking. Finally, he responded, “Fine.”

“You really didn’t know my name, did you?”

“To be honest, no.”

“How many people’s names do you know in the Third Unit?”

“Maybe about ten.”

“You aren’t interested in other people at all, are you?”

“Not really.”

“And that’s because you only have eyes for *her*.”

Luke said nothing to that.

“Did Noelle tell you to pick me?” Misha asked.

“She said she looks up to you because you’re talented and skilled with your interpersonal communication.”

“And so you came looking for me even though you’d never heard of me before?”

“I apologize.”

“It’s no big deal. It just makes things easier if you’re honest with me,” Misha said, brushing it off. “I accept your offer. I’ll join the Seventh Unit.”

“Are you sure?”

“I didn’t think I’d get an opportunity like this. When in doubt, I should take a chance. That’s what my parents told me, and that’s what I’m going to do for my own sake.”

“They taught you well.”

“Then again, because of that, I fell for just about every scheme any guy laid in front of me. Now I’m a devout follower of the Church of the Cat.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I’m not! I live a perfectly happy life with my one true god!” Misha said passionately. “By the way, should I start speaking more formally to you and Noelle?”

“You don’t need to change anything. I think Noelle would be more comfortable this way.”

*Wow, she really is all he cares about,* Misha thought, laughing to herself with a tinge of exasperation.

“Roger that,” she said. “Looking forward to working with you, boss.”



“Misha, is it true?” I exclaimed. “Are you really going to be third-in-command here?”

Misha winked. “You need an experienced hand like me to keep you in check. It’ll be smooth sailing with me on board!”

“It’s great to have you here! Welcome aboard.”

“Just leave it all to me.”

She flashed me a bold smile and got to work on carrying out some of the new unit’s administrative tasks. I’d always known she was capable, but she seemed to be working with greater gusto than ever.

With her help, I began preparing to welcome the unit’s new members. While the royal family was grappling with economic issues and the proposed abolition of the Tax Exemption Law, the newly founded Seventh Unit was predictably facing a lot of backlash. The conclusion was that we were going to kick things off at the smallest scale possible, with just Misha, Luke, me, and eight newbies.

“We can expand once we’ve started getting results,” Luke had calmly proclaimed, but I knew that even this situation was one he’d created himself

using the aristocrats loyal to him. Just as he'd told me, he was planning to talk down critical voices through his own abilities, without relying on rookies for help. But as he got to work on this mammoth of a task, he seemed a little unsettled.

*As his lieutenant, I need to work hard to back him up, I decided.*

Before long, it was the day of the new recruits' arrival. Starting first thing in the morning, the headquarters of the Royal Court Magicians' Division were full of activity.

"Dude, wanna place your annual bets?" A Third Unit magician was sneaking around and approaching the others. "You can join in for as little as one silver coin. You could win big, you know!"

The people from the Third Unit were here to witness the so-called Sixty Seconds of Blood, the brutal initiation test conducted by Captain Gawain. It was a one-on-one duel where newbies could earn a reward for remaining standing after a minute. I'd once taken part in it myself, but the scale of the event seemed much bigger this time around. Everywhere I turned, I saw Gawain posing arrogantly on posters put up by the captain's fans; within seconds, Letitia would appear and coldly pull them down again.

*What do they think they're doing?* I didn't want anybody to cause problems for my beloved Letitia. *Typical immature boys, gambling at work.*

"Yo, Springfield!" one of them called out to me. "Wanna join in?"

"I'll pass. I'm not interested."

"You sure? I was thinking you might have a hidden talent for betting."

"Really? You think so?"

The magician nodded. "The trick to gambling is smart judgment. You have to look calmly at all the possible outcomes and bet on the best option that others fail to notice. Since you're so good at assessing your surroundings, I imagine you're well suited to it."

"I guess so..."

Now that he mentioned it, it *did* sound like something I would be good at. I



thought it might even be an opportunity for me to make a lot of money!

“But you know, if you’re not interested, that’s cool. Sticking to your guns is admirable. Well, I guess I’ll go and find someone else to—”

“Hold on. Maybe... Maybe I’ll place one *tiny* little bet.”

Five minutes later, I was walking down the corridor with my pockets nearly overflowing with betting slips. I’d spent all the cash I had on hand, but I figured that as a gambling genius, I’d have no problem making a killing.

*And then I can use my winnings to treat the new staff to a fancy meal. Everyone’s gonna love their cool, big-hearted superior officer!*

Full of dreams of the bright future soon to come, I walked into the Seventh Unit office with a smile plastered on my face to begin the final inspection before the newcomers arrived. As I looked over everything again, I suddenly had the feeling I’d made a disastrous blunder.

*Hold up a sec. Everyone’s gonna be nervous coming here for the first time. I’ve heard a lot of the newbies are quite sensitive, so we should probably create a nice, welcoming mood to put them at ease.*

I didn’t see how the hopelessly haughty Luke could ever have taken something like that into consideration. He’d arranged the office with ruthless efficiency, eliminating everything that wasn’t strictly necessary.

*Luke and Misha are out to pick up the new staff now. It won’t be easy to make this place more welcoming all by myself...*

Realistically, the challenge seemed insurmountable and almost made me want to give up, but I still wanted to at least do *something* to welcome the new recruits. This was going to be their first impression of their new workplace. They were bound to feel nervous, just like I was when I first arrived.

*I might not be able to make a perfect transformation of this space, but I’ll do as much as I can manage alone.*

I knew that working fast was my specialty, so I started by casting my number one spell.

“Spell Boost!”

*Just you wait, newbies. I'm gonna make this place so full of cheer that it'll blow all your worries away!*



Twenty minutes later, the eight royal court magicians newly assigned to the Seventh Unit arrived. When they saw the room, they were lost for words. Among colorful paper chains, there was a huge, handwritten banner that read, “CONGRATULATIONS! WELCOME TO THE SEVENTH UNIT! LET’S HAVE FUN WORKING TOGETHER!” The whole room was decked out like a child’s birthday party. In the middle of it all, a tiny magician—looking a bit like a child herself—was covered head-to-toe in ridiculous party decorations.

“Wait, it’s not quite d—” she blurted out, then stepped on a fallen strip of colored paper, slipped, and lost her balance. “Whoa!”

She fell to the floor almost as if in slow motion. A gargantuan heap of decorations flew into the air as she slipped, party poppers started going off with a bang, and pieces of paper chains fell like snow. The magician slowly slumped down, landing face-first into a wooden box full of colored paper, and stopped moving.

No one made a sound. Apart from the soft rustling of toppling party hats, it was silent enough to make one think time had stopped. The only other sound was the steady, quiet breathing of everyone else present. All the new magicians could do was look on in amazement.

*What the heck...?* they thought, swallowing nervously. *I don’t really know what’s going on, but I’ve ended up in a weird unit...*

Standing behind the dumbfounded new recruits, Luke Waldstein was the only one making any noise, hiding his mouth to stifle his laughter.

A few minutes later, Luke began calmly, “Without further ado, I’d like to go over the details of the work you’ll be doing here.”

The office was still decorated like someone had run out of time to prepare for a birthday celebration. *Is he seriously talking business in this kind of environment?* the new recruits thought. As Luke continued his professional speech, they spotted the little magician behind him, bashfully gathering the

fallen decorations. *And now she's tidying up...*

She looked totally dejected as she picked paper chains off the floor. On the back of the sash worn over her uniform, the words "PARTY ARTISTE" could be seen.

*How can I focus on what the captain is saying when this is going on in the background?* they all thought.

There was no way to maintain proper concentration in this surreal situation, but these were talented young magicians who had made their way through the grueling entrance exam. They tried their best to listen to Luke's thorough explanation and take notes along the way.

"The work you'll be doing falls under three broad categories," Luke continued. "First, you'll be organizing the Grand Library's archives. Due to staff shortages, the people at the library have postponed translating classical grimoires, so I would like you to prioritize that. Second, I have a list of books here. You'll be putting together a record of everyone who has borrowed these books over the past thirty years. Finally, I want you to gather records related to the twenty-seven trials and criminal cases listed here."

The magicians who had newly arrived in the Seventh Unit hadn't expected tasks like these. Luke Waldstein had been promoted to the position of captain quicker than anyone before, and at a young age to boot. He was known as a prodigy who had devoted his life to his job and constantly broke records within the Royal Court Magicians' Division. He was the kind of person any rookie would dream of working with, but there were reasons to worry too. It wasn't unusual for natural geniuses like him to have personal issues of some sort. Moreover, if he was the benchmark, people might expect a suitably high standard of workload and ability. The newcomers had come in fretting over whether they could keep up with his demands.

However, now that they heard that they'd be organizing library archives and records of criminal cases, they felt like Luke understood their position as people who had only just joined the division. They concluded that he must've wanted to give them easier tasks until they got used to the job.

That moment of relief was short-lived, though.

“I expect you to get all of that finished today,” Luke said, nonchalantly betraying their newfound hopes. “Since it’s your first day, it shouldn’t be too much. I assume this will all be easy enough for magicians of your caliber.”

*Wh-What...?* Several of the rookies stepped back in shock before the great heaps of documents and Luke’s emotionless gaze. *This guy is scary...*

Suddenly, they heard someone cry out, “What’s wrong with you?!” followed by a single sharp slap. Luke was staggering forward after being hit on the back of the head. Behind him, the little magician was gripping a folding fan made out of her earlier paper decorations.

*Why the fan? Is this supposed to be a comedy skit?* The new recruits were utterly bewildered. *More importantly, if she can do that to the captain, would we be at all safer with her?!*

Although this strange development made them shudder, Luke’s reaction was even more surprising.

“Hey, that hurt,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his head and turning around.

“Somebody needed to knock some sense into you,” the other magician retorted. “This is their first day! We have to let them ease into the job.”

“It’s no more than I did on *my* first day.”

“But you’re *weird*. Other people shouldn’t have to live up to your bizarre expectations.”

*Can she really just talk to him like that? Who on earth is she?!*

“Then it’s your job to help them, Noelle,” Luke said. “What’s the problem?”

*Lieutenant Noelle Springfield?!*

So this was the little magician who had racked up record-breaking promotions ever since she first joined the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, becoming the youngest ever unit lieutenant. She had pushed aside all opposition when she represented the Kingdom of Ardenfeld at the World Magic Championships. Even though the crisis during the final had resulted in the official abandonment of the tournament, rumor had it that she’d been more than a match for the

Holy Empire of Vellmar's strongest magician: Evangeline Runeforest, the Fairy Queen and one of the Three Mystic Rulers. Her exploits had earned her a legendary reputation among magicians in Ardenfeld.

"Fine. I'll look after the newbies," Noelle said. She turned to the new recruits. "If he says anything mean to you, come to me right away. Now, let's start with organizing the Grand Library archives. Let's go."

Perplexed as ever, they followed their new lieutenant to the east wing of the palace to begin their first task at the kingdom's Grand Library.

"Who here can read Ancient Almerian?" Noelle asked.

All eight raised their hands.

"Wow, we've got some real smart cookies here." Noelle smiled. "First, I'll ask you to make modern translations of these. Let me know once you've gotten through ten pages, and I'll start assigning tasks based on how things are going at that point."

As they started doing the work, the new recruits could feel Lieutenant Noelle watching over them closely.

"Aha, I see," she murmured, looking over one magician's shoulder. "So you have a knack for more formal pieces of text. Can I ask you to work on the accounts in this book next?"

She swiftly determined each person's skills and quirks, then handed them tasks that would be a good match. Her eyes lit up with delight when they did well, and if they made mistakes, she would point them out and say, "Careful, you missed something here."

Most remarkably of all, she could somehow delegate tasks to her juniors at the same time as doing other work herself. While supervising them all so precisely—they wondered if she could read their minds—she got at least twice as much work done as they did.

*She seemed like a bit of a weirdo at first, but this is crazy. What can't she do?*

As she took on an astronomical amount of work like it was nothing, the lieutenant somehow loomed larger than her tiny frame appeared.



*I knew Noelle would win over the rookies in a heartbeat, Misha Charleroi thought, impressed, as she watched Noelle on her first day as lieutenant. The way she adapts to situations really makes a strong first impression. Of course, she has so much knowledge and passion too. I bet the rookies are blown away. I've been in this job for ten years and even I'm amazed!*

The new recruits were surely drawn to Noelle's thoughtful, friendly demeanor as well. Noelle had learned to care for others at work because her own first job had been such a nightmare.

All the same, Misha felt like this whole situation was the work of someone else. *You've planned this perfectly, haven't you, Luke Waldstein? You're the bad cop who acts all cold and puts pressure on the rookies, and Noelle is the good cop who looks after them. All together, it forces them to work hard. And if you make yourself easy to hate, it makes Noelle easy to idolize. It takes serious brains to be so absurdly self-sacrificing.*

Underlying his elaborate scheme was something quite simple: the desire to bring happiness to the one he loved. The bittersweet sentimentality of it all gave Misha secondhand embarrassment.

*Well, I guess it's not all bad.*

Meanwhile, Noelle was hard at work guiding the new recruits.

"All done for this morning!" she exclaimed. "Who else is hungry? Let's eat meat until we can't anymore! As your lieutenant, it's on me!"

The new recruits surrounding Noelle beamed.

"You sure about this?" Misha muttered, alarmed. "It won't be cheap to buy lunch for this many people."

"No problem. I'm a high roller now."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'll get you something special to thank you for all you've done for me too," Noelle replied, brimming with confidence. "Look forward to it!"

Misha still didn't quite understand as she followed Noelle to the training ground used by the Third Unit. The seats surrounding the ground were packed

with court nobles and magicians from the other units, all leaning forward breathlessly to watch the duel taking place.

*Aha. The Sixty Seconds of Blood.*

This was the test of strength that Captain Gawain put all rookie magicians through. Lieutenant Letitia was there too, watching Gawain incredulously.

*Did Noelle place a bet too? I guess she might have the discerning eye to pick a winner.*

When Noelle returned a few minutes later, all light had fled from her eyes. She stared blankly into space like a lifeless doll.

“I’d love to see the look on the face of anyone unlucky enough to gamble away all their cash!” one passing aristocrat remarked to another. “I doubt anyone would’ve done that today, though.”

“Nah, there can’t be any,” the other replied. “You’d have to place enough bets to spend all your money *and* make all the wrong calls. Frankly, it would be an achievement to lose that much!”

“Ah, that’s true. You’re absolutely right. But damn, it would’ve been a laugh to see it happen just once!”

Seeing Noelle fiercely turn away from the two aristocrats, Misha worked out what had happened and smiled sympathetically at her.

“Did you get burned?” Misha asked.

“Yeah...”

“How much did you lose?”

“Everything. I don’t have a penny left.”

“Let me buy you lunch. Chin up.”

“I appreciate it,” Noelle murmured, trudging along helplessly behind Misha. Misha was struck by the fact that, for all her professional ability, Noelle could be so pathetic.

*She really is something else, huh?*

## Chapter 2: Getting to Know the Rookies

After one week with the eight new members of the Seventh Unit, I'd begun to understand their personalities and what made each of them tick.

Alan was very straitlaced. Iris had unshakable self-confidence. Carlos was a little goofy. Celty was plucky. Solvaria never hesitated to announce, "I apologize unreservedly!" Hugo was a compulsive neat freak. Miles seemed to take issue with everyone in the world. Muna thought she might have gout because she was such an enthusiastic drinker.

They'd all passed the tough entrance exam, meaning they were a talented bunch. I also got the sense that they'd mostly taken a liking to me, maybe as a fear response to their first taste of adult life.

*But I'm not really somebody they can count on, I thought. I'm a commoner, I changed jobs mid career, and I'm younger than any other lieutenant.*

Nevertheless, as much as I worried about how they might perceive someone like me, I was pleased to find that they listened to me respectfully.

*Aww, they're a sweet bunch.*

Getting to know the new recruits brought a smile to my face, but there were two things that caused me concern. First was Luke: he was a cold and aloof new captain, and he held the newcomers to a very high standard. As a result, they were terrified of him. I understood that he was deliberately being strict so that I could slide in as the friendly lieutenant, but I also knew that he was actually a nice person. It was frustrating to see others misunderstanding him.

*And we're even making an effort to get everything done without the need for overtime work!*

The most worrying part was that *Luke* seemed to be working long hours in private. I could tell that he was secretly bringing work home—something related to a mysterious big project. I'd also begun to realize that the tasks he assigned to us were concerned with the same project.

*The assassination attempt on Prince Raphael involved lost technology from an ancient civilization, I reasoned to myself. That's why Luke wants us to organize the Grand Library's archives and translate old grimoires. Plus, he's getting us to find out who has borrowed these books so he can find evidence of people using that technology for evil within the palace. Then there's the twenty-seven trials and criminal cases. I guess he's gathering information on influential nobles like Count Wilhelm as part of an investigation.*

The Seventh Unit had only just been launched. Given the debate going on over the kingdom's finances and the Tax Exemption Law, we were under huge pressure. I imagined Luke was concocting some plan to shake off opposition and further his personal goal of becoming the youngest magus in Ardenfeld's history.

*He's so driven...*

His determination was encouraging to witness, but it made me a little sad at the same time. Even though I was his lieutenant, he never spoke to me about this secret project. Of course, Luke's expectations of me were greater than anyone else's, so he must have simply decided that it was best not to tell me at this point. Even so, I couldn't shake off the feeling that I was being left out.

*And he still won't tell me why he's so desperate to become a magus.*

He had a wish he wanted badly enough that he'd sacrifice anything to make it come true. He'd told me he didn't care about fame or career success. In fact, I worried he was at risk of throwing that all away at any moment. I could see there was something that mattered to him as much as magic mattered to me, but Luke was blessed in so many ways. Surely he could obtain just about anything he desired, so I couldn't fathom what he would go to these lengths for.

*It bothers me, but I bet things will make more sense as I continue with this work. Right now, there's something else I should be concentrating on, and that's these two difficult newbies.*

My second major concern was the two new members of the Seventh Unit who were having a hard time fitting in with the rest. Worrying about how to handle them, I picked up their profiles from when they'd sat the entrance exam.

I looked at the first one:

Name: Miles Knox

Age: 21 (*one academic year below me*)

Sex: Male

Background: Graduated from Ramsdale Magic Academy. Worked for Slaine Mages' Guild. After resigning, sat the entrance exam and joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division.

Written test ranking: 39th out of 857 applicants (14th out of senior academy graduates)

Practical test ranking: 27th out of 857 applicants (11th out of senior academy graduates)

Personal attributes: Possesses keen observation skills and the ability to make impartial judgments. Prioritizes pragmatism over idealism.

Interviewer's comment: A little introverted and prickly, but his ability to identify important points shows promise. Considering his future potential, I recommend hiring him.

His test results were the lowest out of the eight rookies who had come to the Seventh Unit. I'd wanted him to join because we'd both worked at mages' guilds, and I thought I'd be good at giving him guidance.

*I was so sure he'd be more enthusiastic and cooperative than he is...*

The new recruits were generally great, but Miles was a clear outlier. He would ignore greetings and made absolutely no effort to talk to anyone. He always seemed to be sulking as if nothing in the world satisfied him. He was so unmotivated at work that it was a struggle to get him to do the smallest thing. The work we were doing was nothing compared to the entrance exam, so I was honestly more bewildered than angry.

*How on earth did he pass such a hard exam to get into the Royal Court Magicians' Division?*



It was bad enough that I had started wondering if he'd gotten into the division through some kind of backdoor shenanigans.

"You shouldn't ignore people when they speak to you," I tried explaining to him. "At the very least, you should react, you know. People will feel hurt if you don't say or do anything in response."

"Yeah, okay" was all he said, as disaffected as ever.

When things didn't improve, the other newcomers began tiptoeing around him.

"I don't see how it's our problem," Luke said when I tried asking him about it. "It's his loss. You can't change people. What's the point in watering a flower that doesn't want to bloom?"

Luke was quick to give up on improving Miles and soon started giving him less important work to do. I then tried speaking to Misha instead.

"I just wish there was something I could do..." I lamented. "What do you think would be best?"

"To be honest, I'm pretty shocked." She looked confused. "I can't believe somebody so uninterested got into the Royal Court Magicians' Division."

"The person at the Central Administration Office who interviewed him said he seemed quite likable."

"Maybe he was just clever enough to fool the interviewer."

"Yeah, the interviewer suggested the same thing. He said that looking back on it, there were some signs that Miles might have approached it that way."

"It isn't easy to figure people out. But now that we're dealing with the results of that bad decision, I wish they'd offer us some support." Misha sighed heavily. "Anyway, we can't just leave things as they are. He's setting a bad example for the others too."

"Let's do what we can to improve his attitude."

Misha and I began making conversation with Miles and giving him warnings where necessary in an effort to encourage better behavior. However, nothing we did made him a better coworker. It was clear from the way he worked that

his top priority was to make his own life easier, no matter how many corners he cut along the way. It was the polar opposite of my approach as a lover of magic.

*There were a lot of people like that in my old job at the mages' guild, so I guess I'm used to it, but still...*

Different people worked in different ways. There was no single right way, and I didn't believe in imposing one's own outlook on others. Just as I was free to work according to my personal views, he was free to work according to his.

*But he is being paid a salary. There's a minimum amount of effort I'd expect.*

The Royal Court Magicians' Division paid better than any other magic-related job in the kingdom, and only a lucky few were good enough to make it through the entrance exam. Plenty of people had to give up on their dreams when they failed the exam, so in my opinion, it was only right that the people who passed should take the job seriously on behalf of anyone who didn't make the cut.

In sharp contrast to Miles, there was one new member of the unit whose unwavering belief in her rare talents caused her to butt heads with the others. As a result, she was struggling to get along with the rest of the team. I examined her profile next:

Name: Iris Reid

Age: 19

Sex: Female

Background: Graduated top of her class from Risa Tech Magic Academy.

Written test ranking: 1st out of 857 applicants (1st out of senior academy graduates)

Practical test ranking: 1st out of 857 applicants (1st out of senior academy graduates)

Personal attributes: Confident and assertive. Unafraid of confrontation. Enthusiastic about magic, but occasionally impatient with less gifted people.

Interviewer's comment: Proud and confident in her own abilities. Shows signs of immaturity, but her skills more than make up for it. I recommend hiring her.

Her test results were the highest of the new recruits. Even though she'd only just graduated from a senior academy, she had secured the top spots in both the written and practical portions of the exam, even surpassing those who had attended prestigious universities. She also stood out due to her appearance and her refined style. Her mother was born in Ardenfeld, but her father was from the Magedom of Liesvania, and she had lived there until quite recently.

"Growing up, I learned magic in Liesvania, so I wanted to test myself by getting into the Royal Court Magicians' Division in Ardenfeld," Iris said one day. "You see, the examination for Liesvania's magicians was far too easy. It didn't hold my interest whatsoever."

She was the type of utterly self-confident person who believed she was the best at everything. She'd always been treated as a child prodigy, and when she attended Risa Tech, she broke countless records for her achievements at an early age. She had arrived here after blasting through every obstacle in her way.

"I very much wanted to join the Seventh Unit, and I made that clear to the interviewer at the Central Administration Office," Iris told me the first time we spoke face-to-face. "You see, I had heard that you and Captain Luke were the foremost young magicians in the kingdom. I decided that if I joined your unit, that would be the most obvious way for me to demonstrate that I am, in fact, superior to you both." She smiled sweetly. "But it would be frightfully dull if I were to have everything my own way, so please do make an effort to compete. I expect a lot from you, after all."

*Yikes. She's so full of herself!*

Iris was the kind of naturally gifted youth who'd never experienced failure in her life. When she encountered anyone less capable than her, she became cold and harsh.

"Why can't you do something so basic?"

Another time I heard her say, "How do you even continue pursuing this career when you're so inept?"

Then there was "You'd be better off quitting and finding a new job. You aren't

cut out for this.”

Time after time, she ushered in a chilly atmosphere with her needlessly cruel comments.

“Stop right there!” I butted in on one occasion. “I can’t let you be so critical toward our other promising young magicians. We’re all talented in our own ways! The fact that you’ve all made it into the Seventh Unit is something to celebrate!”

Misha and I managed to intervene each time, so it hadn’t developed into a major incident yet, but I felt like it wouldn’t be a great surprise if things suddenly blew up.

“I know magic is very important,” I said at one point, trying to get through to Iris, “but being a good person matters more.”

She cocked her head a little. “Well, in my opinion, a life without magical ability isn’t worth living. Don’t you agree?”

Nothing up to this point had surprised me as much as that reply. She sounded totally frank, as though stating a self-evident fact. I could see in her eyes that she was absolutely certain she was in the right.

The situation came to a head a few days later, when the Seventh Unit was holding its first one-on-one battle practice session. Working as a court magician meant exposing oneself to danger. Encounters with violent enemies or monsters could put magicians’ very lives at risk, so this kind of training was essential. If nothing else, they at least needed to be able to defend themselves.

Misha and I were demonstrating the methods we had learned in the Third Unit.

“I think you’d better try to simplify the magic sequence you use here,” I told the hardworking Celty. “When you set it up that way, you would be better off doing something you can launch faster, even if it means that it has less power. Also, when you use support magic, you should try to avoid excessive—”

“Stop that!” I heard Misha shout behind me. “Hey, what’s going on?!”

I spun around frantically to see what was going on in the mock duel Misha

was supervising. I saw Miles crumpled on the ground, still being pummeled by Iris's relentless attacks. She showed no signs of stopping even though the battle was clearly over. She just kept on going, paying no heed to Misha's attempts to stop her. This was no longer a practice session; Iris was out to inflict pain.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, rushing in and grabbing Iris by the arm.

"He wasn't up for the fight. It's in his best interest to show him how weak he truly is." Iris shrugged. "Why can't you be my sparring partner, Lieutenant Noelle? This isn't worth it for me otherwise."

She seemed unaware that she'd done anything wrong. It scared me. The fact that she was still a rookie explained her behavior, but it didn't excuse it.

"All right," I said. "I'll duel you."

"Please take it seriously. Oh, I know—let's make a deal. The loser must honor the winner's request. How about it?"

"That's fine by me."

"Good. If I beat you, then I would like you to recommend me for promotion to lieutenant. I believe it would be better for the world of magic if the stronger magician filled that role."

"Sure. But in return, I'll ask you to do something if I win."

"Of course. What is your wish, Lieutenant?"

"You must promise you'll never use magic like that again."

For once, she needed to lose a battle, and lose comprehensively enough that she couldn't explain it away.

"Lieutenant Noelle, are you using a dungeon relic to limit your magic power?" Iris asked as we prepared for battle.

I nodded. "You're very observant."

"What exactly is it?"

"It's an Antispell Bracelet, a second-class relic. It restricts the user to half of their power."

Luke had lent me this item back when we were training for my duel with Eric Rashford at the Royal Invitational Tournament. That experience had turned out to be a great help when we needed to fight with limited magical power in Count Wilhelm's villa. Over the past month, I'd been using the Antispell Bracelet again during Seventh Unit magic training.

"So this is how powerful you are even at half your normal strength. I suppose I should say I expected that from you as a lieutenant." Iris smiled. "I can hardly wait. Once you remove that bracelet, you will surely be the strongest opponent I've ever had the pleasure to fight."

"I won't be taking it off."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't need to take it off to beat somebody of your level."

She fell silent as the sparkle disappeared from her eyes. Her face stiffened and her cheeks and mouth contorted violently. It was a look of pure rage.

"Excuse me? You must be joking." Iris glared at me. "Well, don't blame me when you regret your decision later."

"Oh, I won't. You don't stand a chance against me as you are now."

"I assure you I'll beat you until not one part of you is left unscathed." Iris established her first magic sequence.

*Everything is going according to plan so far.* My goal was to make Iris understand how inexperienced she was. It wouldn't have been enough just to win—I needed her to see the difference between us so that she would recognize that there were opponents she wasn't yet ready to face.

However, I was taken aback by the explosion of water magic that came at me a moment later. *I can't believe she has this much power when she's only just graduated...*

She was totally lacking in real battle experience, but her skill was undeniable. She was, after all, the most talented magician of her generation. When it came to pure instinct and knowledge of modern magic, she was probably ahead of me in many ways. She was certainly far beyond the level I'd been at when I



graduated.

*But Iris, I've learned so much more than you since that time.*

I'd experienced the suffering of working day in and day out at my hometown mages' guild when I was already past my limit. No matter how tough the circumstances were, I never allowed myself to be sloppy when it came to magic. No one could argue that I hadn't put in the necessary blood, sweat, and tears.

On top of that, I'd learned a lot by fighting with limited magic power against Luke, and then again in Count Wilhelm's villa. That had helped me improve massively. Iris was no ordinary opponent, but I'd already been through much worse.

*Come and get me. Let me show you who's the boss here.*



Iris Reid's superior officer in the Seventh Unit represented a practical target: someone she needed to surpass. Iris had always been regarded as a child prodigy and had never met anyone her own age who could match her. She first encountered Noelle Springfield during the final qualifying round of the World Magic Championships. When she saw the matches held in the Magedom of Liesvania, she took an interest in the little court magician from Ardenfeld.

*That girl is quite remarkable,* Iris thought at the time.

She had missed out on selection as a national representative for Liesvania, overlooked in favor of a much older magician. But when Noelle Springfield faced that Liesvanian magician, she caused an upset, beating him without conceding an inch.

*The innovative structure of her magic sequences is nothing like the Liesvanian system. Fascinating.*

But what really shook Iris to the core was the realization that the little magician's magic bore similarities to her own.

*We're the same type of person. She's clearly invested an unrivaled amount of time into the pursuit of magic. She casts all else aside to stake her life for the one thing that matters the most.*

There was one simple truth that Iris's parents had always taught her: "Sacrificing everything other than magic is the best way to improve." She followed that advice, and sure enough, it helped her to rapidly become a better magician. She had issues with other people more and more frequently, but none of that mattered to her nearly as much as magic. She had no interest in wasting time thinking about feeble-minded fools without magic skill.

*For somebody of greater intellect like myself, time holds greater value than it does for the masses. I'm sure that girl would understand me like nobody else does.*

She ignored other people's warnings and decided she would become a royal court magician in the Kingdom of Ardenfeld. It wouldn't be all plain sailing to adjust to the magic system of another country, but she thought it would be useful for her in deepening her magic knowledge.

When she reached the Central Administration Office of the Royal Court Magicians' Division, she specifically asked to be placed in the same unit as the little magician she'd seen. But when she got her wish, she was astonished by what she encountered in the Seventh Unit. She was met with her object of admiration saying things like, "I want to make this a place where we can all have fun working together," "Guys, feel free to come and talk to me about anything that's bothering you," and "Don't worry, I'll explain. See, this magic sequence..."

*What?!* Iris thought. The lieutenant seemed more interested in training the new court magicians than improving herself. *This is absurd. That's no way to become stronger.*

But what irked Iris the most was seeing the way Noelle Springfield got so much joy from using magic.

*How can she treat it so lightly...? This is beyond a joke.*

Having fun was for children. The only right way to live was to devote oneself absolutely to magic twenty-four hours a day.

Every day, Iris woke up at five o'clock and practiced forming magic sequences. She contemplated areas for improvement on her way to work, then later spent time reading grimoires while eating her lunch. After she went home, she always

went for an eight-kilometer run to boost her physical and mental stamina. Next, she read grimoires for another hour and then translated ancient texts for two hours. At the end of the day, she went to sleep reflecting on that day's progress and going over plans for the following morning.

Time was precious, so she wasted none of it on housework. Her room was in disarray, with clothes strewn around at random. Innumerable pizza boxes and the wrappers of burgers and hot dogs were scattered on the floor.

*She's so strong. She acknowledged me. And yet...*

There was no way Iris could allow Noelle Springfield to act as she did. The lieutenant's attitude was inappropriate. It was unacceptable.

*I must correct her, she decided.*

Soon, the unit's battle practice session provided Iris with a golden opportunity.

*I will defeat her, completely and utterly. Then she will finally see where she went wrong.*

When the duel began, she activated many magic sequences simultaneously, bringing all the spells together into a rapid-fire flurry of driving water spears.

"Akhtar Rose!"

Noelle Springfield's response disappointed Iris. Rather than confront the attack head-on, the lieutenant used Spell Boost to concentrate on pulling back and avoiding Iris's spells. Her moves were slower than they had been in the final qualifying round of the World Magic Championships.

*That makes sense. That relic limits her to half of her true power, after all.*

They had been on unequal footing since the start of the duel. For that reason, Iris's goal wasn't merely to beat her superior officer.

*I'll make her see that I'm not somebody she can beat with a handicap. I must overwhelm her. It must be a crushing defeat.*

Iris poured everything into her continued attack on an opponent who wouldn't stay still, but as she pushed forward, she faintly saw Noelle begin to smile.

“Wind Shot!”

Noelle’s simplified magic sequence released a small bullet of wind. For Iris, that tiny blow came at precisely the wrong moment.

*There was no sign she was going to attack!*

It seemed as if the lieutenant had read her body language and chosen to strike just as Iris was making her move.

*I was wrong. She was planning this all along.*

By focusing on evading Iris’s spells, Noelle had deliberately presented an opportunity. She’d encouraged Iris to get impatient and turn up the heat, all while waiting for her to attempt a finishing blow. It didn’t matter that Noelle’s attack was a basic one; as a surprise counterattack, it was tricky to handle.

*Ugh... Still, if that’s the extent of her attack...* Iris quickly altered the magic sequence she had been on the verge of activating and turned the hail of water into a defensive wall. *My power is far greater than hers. As long as I make contact, I can deflect any of her attacks.*

The water spears obliterated the bullet of wind, but then a great splash filled Iris’s field of view. She gasped.

*I can’t see!*

Now she understood that *this* had been Noelle’s plan all along. Iris was so desperate to win—to teach her superior officer a lesson—but she could no longer tell where the lieutenant’s attacks might come from.

Magic sequences cast dazzling jade-green light all around. It seemed unbelievable that Noelle was operating at only half her normal power. Unable to spot any of the attacks, Iris quivered in agitation and fear.

*I’m going to lose. It’s over.* Her blood ran cold. *And if I lose, then I have nothing left...*



Moments from the past flashed through Iris's mind.

*"You're really something else."*

*"Maybe you could spend more time enjoying yourself."*

*"You take things way too far. That was pretty sore, honestly."*

Iris had never quite understood weak people. She knew they laughed at her behind her back. There were times when she wanted to give up—at least twice a week, she woke up and didn't want to train—but she had never once gone easy on herself. She had no memory of spending days off with her classmates or celebrating a friend's birthday. She had devoted her entire being to the pursuit of strength. Everything else had to be sacrificed. That was how she had become stronger than everyone around her.

*You can't have it both ways. That isn't how the world works.*

Iris closed her eyes. She focused all her senses to seek out the warning signs of spells being cast. At last, she worked out Noelle's position on the other side of the wall of spray.

*Defeat is not an option.*

Iris's ultramarine magic sequence shone brightly. "Akhtar Blaze!"

An enormous blade of rushing water emerged. Weaponsmithing spells like this were better suited to close-range combat. Though Iris was late in activating the spell, the blade sliced through Noelle's recent Wind Blast that was hurtling toward her.

*Victory is mine...*

The blade of water fell forward to engulf the lieutenant, but at the last moment, Noelle suddenly threw up her left hand to meet it. The blade smashed the Antispell Bracelet, unleashing Noelle's previously restrained power.

*What...?*

A chill ran down Iris's spine as if liquid nitrogen had been poured over her. She had never experienced such a powerful magical aura. Her breath caught in her throat and her mind went blank.



In an instant, Iris felt herself being shaken with the force of a great turbine. She had no idea what was happening. She couldn't see. She could barely even register what was going on. It wasn't until some time later that she even understood that it was the result of a magical attack. Before she knew it, she was on the ground.

*Wh-Why...?*

She felt hard earth against her back and grit in her mouth. Dust danced before her eyes.

*What just...?*

Her senses became hazy. Everything went dark.

She heard a voice, seemingly calling from another world: "I'm sorry, Iris! Are you okay?!"

Iris had just borne witness to something so monstrous that she couldn't begin to comprehend its true form. She couldn't handle this.

*I gave up everything for magic.*

Her mouth was dry.

*But this person is too strong for me.*



*Damn, I really got her...* I thought, head in my hands as I sat in the Fourth Unit's first aid room.

Iris had been hurting the people around her, and I'd had no choice but to take her down a notch. My plan had been to hold back my power and look for my chance, then blow her away with one full-power attack. It had been going so well: I'd taken my time to get to grips with the duel, observed her spells, and worked out how she signaled an all-out attack. I'd wanted to finish off the fight smoothly without causing any harm.

*But I never thought she'd launch an attack like that at the last second!*

Her magic sequence had been so radiant. As someone who'd devoted so much time to magic myself, I knew it was the sort of spell that could be

produced only by someone who had given their life to this.

*She must really love magic.*

I felt like we had things in common, but ultimately, her love for magic was different from mine. I wasn't sure where that difference lay, or whether one was more right than the other. For that matter, maybe loving magic at all was problematic.

*It's a bit of a recipe for disaster, really.*

Iris had been balanced so precariously, like she was bound to slip and crumble at some point. She was like a tough diamond that's easy to split: she'd been under so much strain that at any moment, she could break.

*I hope she can learn to loosen up. I want to help her open her mind.*

Just then, I heard a hesitant voice from behind me: "Um, Lieutenant Noelle...?"

I turned around to see Miles, the cold, uncooperative young magician who had been failing to fit in with the others.

"Why did you help me?" he asked. He must have been talking about how I'd stepped in to stop Iris from continuing to attack him during the mock duel.

"Isn't it obvious?" I replied. "I have to look after my promising disciples in the Seventh Unit."

"I know you don't really think that. Please be honest."

"I *am* being honest. That's why I said it. Sure, you cut corners and do the bare minimum, but you do a perfect job of the things that really need to be done. You're smart and you can figure out what matters most. I commend you for that. Those strong instincts are your secret weapon. You have the foundation to become a good magician."

Miles paused for a moment. "I don't like you."

"Huh?!"

"Excuse me."

I watched him as he walked away. I realized I must have made some kind of

mistake.

*This isn't gonna be easy... I can't just give up on him, though. I'll make the Seventh Unit a place where we can all work together well.*

That was the number one thing I wanted to achieve as lieutenant, and as someone who never knew when to quit, I was determined that this wouldn't be the end.

*I need to bring Iris into the fold too.*

I spotted movement in my peripheral vision. Iris's elegant eyelids were opening.

"Are you okay?" I asked her. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Iris stared back at me in surprise. "Did you wait here with me?"

"Yeah. Oh, I'm not slacking off from work, though! I made sure to bring stuff with me."

"Can you really work efficiently at such a tiny desk?"

"Sure. You'd be surprised how well I can concentrate in any environment once I give it a shot. Actually, I have a harder time when I have nothing to do but hang around. If I have time, I find myself pulling out books on magic."

"Ah, yes. I also find it's nice to read when I'm on the move."

"I agree. I've been reading this book lately."

"I've read that one too."

"Aha! I see you're a woman of culture!"

"Why do you say it like that...?"

We then spent some time chatting enthusiastically about magic. Her way of speaking and depth of knowledge showed me how much she truly loved magic—or rather, her feelings seemed like something more than love. It was a single-minded obsession that she had chosen as the most important thing in her life. Her attitude toward it might have been a little more austere than mine.

"Lieutenant Noelle," Iris said suddenly, when there was a lull in our conversation. "Do you think there's anything I need to improve on?"

I knew intuitively that this was a tough question to answer. I thought carefully about how to gently express my thoughts. “I guess your perspective might be a little limited.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like you think magic is the only thing in the world that matters. I totally get it, but I think there are other *more* important things too, like, say, living a happy life.”

“You’re wrong. You can never become the greatest magician in the world with such a naive attitude.”

“And you think everything will be just fine if you sacrifice your own happiness? Don’t you think *that’s* a little naive?” I shot back. “Working hard is admirable, but we all have our limits. You can’t keep forcing yourself forever. If you continue to push past your limits, you can lose yourself, and it’ll take a toll on you, no matter how much you might love magic. And what I want most of all is for you to live a good life. After working harder than anyone else, you deserve that happiness.”

“B-But you can’t just—”

“Says who? It’s true.”

Iris’s eyes were wide in astonishment.

I smiled broadly. “But having said that, I’m the kind of narrow-minded person that thinks about nothing but magic too. I guess that’s why I know what you’re feeling. Between you and me, you’ve made a great impression. I like you, so I want you to be a thoughtful person who can accept everyone, regardless of where they’re at with magic.”

I didn’t know how much of the message got through to Iris. Maybe she thought I was annoying and overbearing, but I didn’t mind. Even if she disliked me for it, I felt that it was something that needed to be said. She had to hear it if she was ever to live a happy life.

*But maybe I could’ve thought of a better way to phrase it...*

As I looked back, I found myself starting to regret my choice of words. It was

going to be hard work getting used to having subordinates in need of guidance.

When I arrived at work the following morning, I passed Miles.

“Morning!” I greeted him.

Miles said nothing. I wondered if this was just how young people in Ardenfeld were these days. He was only a year younger than me, but his attitude made me worried for the kingdom’s future. Regardless, I never backed down even when I lost, so I wasn’t going to go down without a fight.

*Just wait... I thought. I’ll become cool enough for Miles to want to talk to me!*

My will to take on this formidable opponent flared up within me as I walked on. It was still at the forefront of my mind when Muna, the new unit’s supposed heavy drinker, rushed over toward me.

“Lieutenant Noelle, come quick!” she said, gasping for breath. “It’s Celty!”

“Did something happen?”

“First thing this morning, Iris went to her and said she wanted to talk in private. Iris had this scary look on her face!”

“What do you mean?”

“She looked like she was in an extra bad mood. I thought she was gonna beat Celty up or something, so I followed them at a distance, then I saw them talking. I thought Iris might’ve said something mean, so after she left, I went to talk to Celty, and she was all anxious. She looked like she’d seen a ghost.”

“What did Celty tell you?” I tried my best to hide my trepidation, but I was scared to hear the answer. I didn’t want to find out that my actions had sent Iris in an even worse direction.

*No, I can’t evade responsibility.* I steeled myself for what was to come.

“She told me that Iris said everything was her own fault; that she regretted her actions,” Muna replied nervously. “She sounded so modest, it was like she was a totally different person. We’re really worried. Some of us were thinking she might need a more thorough medical intervention after all the commotion yesterday. Maybe she got hit on the head too hard or something? Anyway, something definitely isn’t right, so she ought to see a doc... What’s going on?”

she asked suddenly. “Why do you have that look on your face?”

I struggled to stop myself from smiling. “Huh? Oh, uh, you must be imagining things.”

“Something’s clearly up... Wait, did you give Iris a talking-to? Are you secretly the one who’s really in charge here?”

“No, of course not! I didn’t tell her off.”

“Wow, I’d better watch what I say in front of you from now on...”

“I’m telling you, it’s not like that!”

While I tried to ease Muna’s worries, I couldn’t help but feel a little pleased deep down. My new subordinates were still inexperienced, but they were honest and they did their best.

*Maybe these kids are cuter than I gave them credit for!*

Before long, Iris had softened, which had a noticeable impact on the other young magicians in the Seventh Unit. Unable to conceal their surprise, they asked things like, “Are you feeling all right?” and “Do you want to see a doctor?”

On one such occasion, Iris came to me to sulk. “Don’t you think they’re being rude?! I shouldn’t have to keep my cool! In the past, I would’ve hit them, no questions asked. I might even have kicked them! Of course, it would be unbecoming to headbutt them, so at least I would never have done that.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“Uh, never mind. Don’t worry about it.” I did my best to convey an air of calm and maturity befitting a superior officer.

*Is a headbutt worse than a kick?* I wondered.

I had a wealth of experience of beating up local bullies in the countryside as a child. Back then, headbutts had been a crucial part of my arsenal; they offered unrivaled accuracy and destructive power. However, in hindsight, I couldn’t

remember seeing many other little girls headbutting people.

*Now that I've come into my own as a serious, mature lady, I'd better avoid headbutting anybody in the future,* I quietly vowed.

"By the way," Iris went on, "I remember you using a headbutt during the World Magic Championships."

"No, I didn't."

"No? I could've sworn there was an incident where you finished off a duel with a headbutt at some point."

"I don't think so. You must be thinking of somebody else."

"Really? Did I misremember?" Iris pondered aloud.

*Phew, that was a close call.*

Having just about managed to fool Iris, I breathed a sigh of relief. Charm was a crucial battleground in the war to win her trust and become someone she could count on. I had to make steady efforts on that front so that she would see me as cool and admirable, the same way I saw Letitia.

"But you know, people are awfully hard to deal with, aren't they?" Iris said. "I made an effort to learn from my mistakes and apologize, but it just frightened them. I really don't understand why I can't get through to them." She shrugged wearily.

"Well, your behavior was really hurtful before. It isn't easy to regain people's trust."

"Honestly, I wonder whether it's worth all the hassle. Actually, I find myself wanting to give up every ten seconds."

"You just have to stick with it. Keep it up, and they'll warm up to you."

"Maybe you're right. Well, I'll do what I can. I do see *some* value in interacting with humans."

"Aren't you human yourself?"

"Throughout heaven and earth, I alone am the greatest and wisest and cutest magician of all."



“Right, it’s important to have good self-esteem.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, Lieutenant Noelle—though I am, of course, cuter. But if we exclude me, perhaps you could be the world’s number one.”

“I’ll choose to take that as a compliment.”

Iris was a bit of an oddball, but at least she seemed to genuinely look up to me. She was surprisingly sincere in her efforts to deal with her interpersonal issues too. I was relieved that the Iris problem was solved—to some extent anyway.

On the other hand, I’d seen absolutely no signs of progress with the other problem child, Miles.

*I’m doing all I can, but I’m getting nowhere!*

I got the feeling things were actually getting worse. Human emotions were complex; perhaps leading an uninterested rookie onto the right path was a greater challenge than magic ever was.

“I can’t stand that boy,” Iris remarked. “If you ever feel like teaching him a hard lesson, let me know. I’ll give you the support you need.”

“I assume you mean you’d want to let off some steam by hitting him with your strongest magic attacks.”

“You know me well, Lieutenant Noelle.”

Shrugging, I decided to speak to Luke about Miles.

When I went to the captain’s office, I encountered a mountain of documents. Luke must have been working on his magus promotion scheme. As I asked him about Miles, he seemed pressed for time.

“If it’s not working, don’t bother,” Luke said, not looking up from his work.

“But then things will never get any better. His attitude affects the mood of the entire unit.”

“As I said before, it’s not that easy to change people. There is no one solution that works on each person. Ultimately, it’s up to him to recognize the problem and make the changes necessary.”

“Then we should help him recognize the problem.”

“And I’m saying changing his outlook is more complicated than that.” He finally looked away from his work, up at me. “People see what they want to see. It’s always easier to blame other people than to acknowledge your own faults and put in the work to fix them. If somebody doesn’t want to change, then they won’t. I’ve learned that from experience.”

“I guess that’s true...”

“Of course, we should reprimand him any time he fails to meet basic standards, but every individual functions differently. Think of it as a kind of diversity. Anyway, we don’t have forever. Rather than waste time trying to get blood from a stone, there are many more urgent things for us to do.”

Luke’s angle on the situation was practical and mature. Whereas this was the first time I’d had anyone working under me since I joined the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, he had a variety of experience already that had led him to this conclusion.

However, I wasn’t ready to give up on Miles yet. When I saw him at work, something seemed off. It was like he wasn’t really used to cutting corners all the time—as if it wasn’t so deeply ingrained after all.

“Nah, that’s just in your head,” Misha said when I suggested this to her. She seemed fed up with the whole situation. “I’ve never seen somebody with such a bad attitude. Maybe this is news to you, Noelle, but the truth is, some people are beyond help.”

“No, I know that. I’ve had some tough experiences myself. But here, look at this secondary support sequence. I don’t see how somebody who doesn’t care could construct it so neatly.”

“This? Come on, surely anybody could...” Misha looked quizzically at the paper I showed her. She peered closer for a moment, then looked back at me. “Now *that’s* interesting. How did you spot that?”

“I thought something seemed strange about his magic sequences, so I watched him carefully to try and work out what it was.”

“How could the person who produced *this* behave so indolently?”

“Let me do some digging.”

I went away and began researching Ramsdale Magic Academy and Slaine Mages’ Guild. I found out that one magician in the Fifth Unit had been Miles’s classmate at the academy. I tried asking her about her memories of Miles.

“Oh, so the newbie *is* Miles! I wondered if it was him,” she said. “I remember Miles well. He was something of a celebrity in our grade.”

“What was he like in those days?”

“He was top of the class. Everyone looked up to him. His motivation and leadership skills were second to none. He was so passionate about becoming the best mage in the kingdom.”

“Huh? You’re sure this is the same Miles?” I asked, but someone passing us in the corridor spoke over me, and the Fifth Unit magician apparently didn’t hear me properly.

“Miles was always so serious about his studies,” she went on. “He worked way harder than I ever did! He was really quite special. Is he still a hard worker now?”

“Uh... Yeah. He’s a great help.”

“That’s good. I was a little bit worried. I’d been hearing some strange rumors about him.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“It sounded like he’d changed completely. I heard he’d lost direction and gotten himself barred from taverns for starting fights.”

“Really?”

“Anyway, I’m pleased to hear that he’s as committed as he always was.” She smiled.

I felt conflicted. I wasn’t thrilled about lying to her, but I didn’t want to air dirty laundry about Miles either. Dealing with other people’s personal situations could be really tricky.

*If nothing else, I’ve learned something about his school days. But really, he*

*sounds nothing like the Miles I know.*

As unlikely as his past behavior seemed, I got the impression the Fifth Unit magician was being honest with me. The logical conclusion was that something must have happened when Miles was working at Slaine Mages' Guild. As I thought about investigating a mages' guild, I felt something stir inside me.

After looking into it, I found out that other than Miles, there was no one in the Royal Court Magicians' Division who had worked at Slaine Mages' Guild. According to the official records, it was a midsize regional guild. About three years earlier, it had expanded rapidly by selling magical items at rock-bottom prices. However, the quality of the company's products had then nosedived. Just after Miles left the job, the guild had run into financial difficulties and ended up halting production.

*It's hard to get more background information than this in the palace, I thought. I wish I could go and talk to people who worked there, but I don't have time for that with the work Luke wants me to do.*

In the process of organizing the Grand Library's archives and the court records, I'd begun to get an idea of what Luke was looking for. As someone who had known him for so long, I was precisely the person who could figure him out.

*I guess there's an influential aristocrat with connections to someone or something working against the kingdom.*

I didn't know whether I was right, but in any case, it seemed that Luke was planning things out in great detail.

*And I think he's asked Letitia for help too.*

I remembered the enormous heap of documents I'd seen in the office. Luke was always serious and reluctant to rely on others. For him, it was definitely unusual to go to someone else for help. Surely that was a sign of how big this project was.

I'd also noticed recently that Luke had significantly increased the amount of combat training sessions in the Seventh Unit's schedule. The sessions were more hands-on and practical than before too.

*If he's planning to take us into some kind of dangerous environment, we really*

*need to get these newbies up to speed.*

Safety was our top priority, so I'd been making an effort to protect the new recruits by giving them additional training on top of what Luke had planned. However, that had also meant a marked increase in the amount of paperwork I needed to do.

*I don't really have time to spend on the Miles problem. The only way I can handle it is to take the path of least resistance.*

Having made my decision, I approached him just before the end of the day. "Hey, Miles, do you have plans after work today? I was hoping we could go somewhere for a little chat."

"I'll pass. I don't want to go anywhere with you."

"Y-You're v-very honest."

It was *too* honest. I was shocked. I wondered again if this was really what young people were like now, even if we were only a year apart. Then again, I was familiar with traditional attitudes from my childhood out in the countryside, so perhaps the difference was between my rural upbringing and his urban one.

*Anyway, this is just as I expected so far. Miles has no interest in work, so I never thought I'd sway him that easily. But luckily, I've got an ace up my sleeve.*

I smiled boldly. "You know, I'd be quite happy to buy you dinner if you come and talk to me. Let's say...a nice ribeye steak?"

This was my ultimate weapon. Since losing all my cash betting on the Sixty Seconds of Blood, I'd diligently saved up money. As a last resort, I was willing to spend it all. I was certain that the irresistible temptation of tender, marbled steak would make Miles lose all reason and crumble before me.

But despite my confidence, Miles's countenance was as cold as ever. "Not interested. I don't really care about food."

"Wh-What...?"

I couldn't believe my ears. What human could resist the allure of prime grade beef? I was aghast at this unimaginable turn of events.

However, I did remember hearing that some people weren't keen on going out for meals with their senior coworkers. Everybody was free to spend their time outside work however they wished, so it would've been wrong of me to insist at that point.

*I'll just need to think of how I can talk to him during work hours instead...* I began racking my brains to come up with a new strategy.

His voice broke me out of my daze. "What did you want to talk about anyway?"

"Huh?" I looked around and met Miles's eyes.

"You wanted to talk, right?"

"Oh, yeah. I wanted to ask about your old job at Slaine Mages' Guild."

"Slaine Mages' Guild...?" The tone of his voice revealed some tension, like just the name of his old workplace still carried special meaning.

"But it's okay if you don't want to see me after work," I said quickly, trying to make it clear that he could still turn me down. "It's only fair that you value your personal time. There's no need to go out of your way to spend time with me."

Miles paused for a moment. "We can talk."

"What?" I couldn't believe this. I needed to hear it again.

"We can talk."

Half an hour later, Miles and I were on our way to one of the royal capital's finest steak restaurants. It was a luxurious establishment full of fond memories of when Captain Gawain had treated me to a meal right after I joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division. I'd thought it was somewhere I would never have the financial means to go, so that lavish meal with the captain had left a deep impression on me. I'd always thought of it as a place I'd like to take somebody one day when I was in Gawain's position.

*Hmm, I hope nobody thinks I'm playing favorites by taking Miles here... It might not look good if I buy dinner for just one of the newbies. To set things right, I should treat them all. But there are eight of them...*

There was no way I could afford that. I thought about how Gawain had been too generous to his comrades and ended up with mountains of debt. I finally understood how he must've felt.

*Being responsible for these kids is hard work!*

After agonizing for a moment over my dwindling savings, I shook my head and forced a smile. "Eat to your heart's content, Miles!"

I genuinely meant it, but at the same time, part of me hoped he could resist eating *quite* to his heart's content. My desire to seem fun and generous was locked in a heated battle with my reluctance to spend money.

In the end, Miles chose the most expensive items the restaurant had to offer.

*No hesitation! Kids these days... How can he just go right ahead and pick the most valuable things, without any fear or consideration for others? What a formidable power...*

Pushing aside the feeling that I'd come into contact with some unfathomable entity, I called a waiter over and placed our order.

The first thing to come was red wine. I swirled my glass, smelled the aroma, and took a sip. I closed my eyes to fully appreciate the flavor...

*I don't get it.*

My powerful ambition to become a classy lady had led me to try wine on many occasions, lured in by the promise of glamour and elegance, but I'd never yet been able to understand the appeal. I found it to be bitter and not particularly tasty. Frankly, I would've preferred some other kind of alcoholic drink, or even just grape juice. I wondered if everyone just endured the taste so they could seem mature. The other possibility was that it was simply an acquired taste, and the only way for me to acquire it was to keep on trying.

*I'd better grin and bear it a few more times,* I thought, doing my best to enjoy my wine.

"Why did you bring me here?" Miles asked suddenly.

"I wanted us to chat. After all, we both used to work at mages' guilds. See? That's something we have in common! We can talk about all our complaints



and our old struggles.”

“That’s true. I actually wanted to talk to you too, Lieutenant Noelle.”

I wasn’t expecting that. “You did?”

“Yes. Your story of leaving a mages’ guild to become a royal court magician is quite well-known among mages. That was why I took the Royal Court Magicians’ Division entrance exam.”

*Wow... He just said something nice about me!*

I made a great effort to avoid breaking out into a smile. Somehow, I managed to maintain an expression of maturity befitting my position. “I s-see.”

“You even worked at a rural guild. I heard your work environment was particularly harsh.”

“True, there were some difficulties. But in the countryside, I think a lot of guilds have similar problems.”

“What kind of problems did you have?”

“Well, between us ex-mages...”

I went on to tell him all about the brutal working conditions I’d suffered through at my local mages’ guild. I talked about doing more than four hundred hours of overtime work in a month. I described how I’d often gone for a long time without bathing because I didn’t get to go home at the end of the day, and how my joints had ached all the time from sleeping on the floor. That was no recipe for quality rest, but eventually I’d ended up getting used to working after having only four hours of extremely poor sleep. I’d then used magic to accelerate my perception of time for several consecutive hours so I could get all my work done.

“Th-That sounds worse than hell itself...” Miles stammered.

“Yeah, it was bad, but looking back on it now, I feel like it was a useful experience. Still, no amount of money could make me go back there.”

“No one would disagree with you on that.”

“Worst of all, I was totally unappreciated! They’d just call me useless or

complain about commoner girls. It really got to me. I started to think that I had nothing to offer.”

“Wow, you had a really bad experience too.”

“But it makes me all the more grateful that I’m in such a good environment now.”

I thought of all my caring coworkers and smiled. They’d done so much to help me, and now it was my turn to pass on that kindness to others. I felt a duty to be the kind of person these young magicians could rely on.

“What was it like for you, Miles?” I asked.

Miles said nothing. It seemed like he wasn’t sure whether he should tell me. Just then, I heard a sizzling sound—the waiter was coming to our table with steaks on red-hot skillets.

“For now, let’s eat,” I said, getting the sense that it wasn’t easy for Miles to express his feelings. “But you can tell me more whenever you feel ready.”

I took bite-size pieces of steak and savored the rich, sweet taste. Miles quietly began eating as the meat continued to sizzle in the background.

“That place sucked,” he muttered, as if to himself. It took a little moment for me to realize he was talking about his old workplace. “It was full of crappy people making crappy products. The standards were bad; the quality was bad. All anybody cared about was money. We were forced to make shoddy products without using the correct, fundamental basic materials. I wasn’t happy about it, so I told the guild chief that my supervisors were breaking the law for the sake of profit. That was when the bullying started.” Miles took a breath. “The chief was behind all the bad practices. He threatened to blacklist me throughout the industry if I spoke out. It was my dream to be a mage, so I couldn’t just quit. And since I didn’t want to get beaten up, I did as I was told and made the garbage the chief wanted. I started hating myself for it, and I got no enjoyment out of a job I used to really like. Before I knew it, their way of thinking had affected me too. My job had become nothing more than a way to make money. People with the privilege of thinking about whether they actually enjoy what they do for a living are the lucky ones. The rest of us have no choice but to work hard to make ends meet. Do you see what I’m saying?”

There was anger in Miles's voice. I could sense a lingering trace of his shattered dreams. He'd had such great hopes for his first experience of work—at his dream job in a mages' guild. He'd probably known that at the beginning, not everything would go his way. He'd anticipated some difficulties, but he'd expected things to get better once he'd cleared those early hurdles.

However, his dreams had come to nothing. He'd learned that the real world was dirtier and messier than he'd imagined. That innocent academy graduate had found himself trapped in a bottomless swamp, and slowly but surely, the swamp had swallowed him up and broken him down.

"I joined the Royal Court Magicians' Division for the money," Miles continued. "I do the bare minimum to earn a salary and pay my way. Money makes the world go round, after all. There's nothing you can do to change my mind. You're a privileged person who got lucky. Other people don't get to just do whatever they like as much as they like, the way you do. And that's my problem with you, Lieutenant Noelle."

His animosity was clear. I was sure there were a lot of different feelings that went into that—anger, jealousy, bitterness, and all manner of negative emotions—and he probably knew that himself. I'd felt the same way myself in the past.

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

I remembered what I'd said to Luke on the day we were reunited in the remote border town where I used to live. The cruelty and unfairness of the world had worn me down. When I looked at Miles now, I saw the person I had been at that time.

"That must've been hard. I'm sure it hurt." My vision was blurred with tears. "You've done nothing wrong. I'll smack anybody who tells you otherwise."

"But I'm telling you I don't like you," Miles said, confused.

I wiped my eyes. "Still, I support you. You don't need to change the way you think. Your work so far hasn't been quite up to scratch, so I'd appreciate it if you could take a little bit more care, but apart from that, just keep doing what you're doing. I want you to listen to your heart and do what it tells you. But you

know, not *everything* has to be the way it is right now. Once in a while, I hope you look back fondly on how things were before you started working. I think you know how fun it can be to give your all to something. I appreciate who you are now, and who you used to be too. But anyway, this is all just my opinion. Don't feel pressured to pay any attention to me." I grinned. "Whatever you choose, I'll have your back. And I'll be watching over you, because I expect great things from you."

I had no idea how much of an impact that might have on Miles. When I saw him the next day, he seemed exactly like he'd been until then, so I figured he must've thought I was just meddling. Anyway, I decided I'd continue to keep an eye on him.

One week later, Misha and I were looking over the rookies' finished translations of the grimoires from the archives.

"Huh? What's this?" Misha looked startled. "Seriously?"

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Well, I just checked Miles Knox's work. Usually, his submissions are so sloppy and full of little mistakes that I end up covering them in notes, right?"

"I remember. I guess he still hasn't gotten the hang of it."

"But this time I can hardly find any mistakes! Maybe I'm just too tired for this today. Noelle, could you give this another... Why are you smirking like that?"

"What can I say? I feel like I made that happen."

"Huh?"

Resting my chin in my hands to hide my smile, I enjoyed my time looking over Miles's translation for myself.



The door of the Royal Court Magicians' Division Third Unit lieutenant's office was locked. A magical item for preventing surveillance cast a cold, dim light on the walls.

"Tell me about your investigation into the Big Three," Luke Waldstein said. His sapphire eyes flashed.

Letitia Lisette-Stone checked her surroundings briefly. “I couldn’t find a single piece of supporting evidence. Based on what I could see, it looks like there’s nothing to connect them to anyone who poses a significant threat to the kingdom.”

“In that case, should we assume that the Albarn and Enneagram families are in the clear?”

“I’d say we can’t draw that conclusion so easily. It all seems a bit *too* convenient, as if they were expecting an investigation like this. Something about it struck me as contrived.”

“It’s also possible that they’re being more vigilant in response to the Count Wilhelm case.”

“No, it’s too nicely arranged to have been done that quickly. If they are guilty, then I imagine they’ve been planning this out, bit by bit, for a long time.”

The room was quiet. A vague sense of tension hung in the air.

“And what do you think, Letitia?” Luke asked.

“Based on hard evidence, I’d have to say they’re innocent.”

“How about, let’s say, *soft* evidence? What do your instincts tell you?”

Letitia was quiet for a moment as she decided on how to respond, then looked down with an expression of distaste. “Probably guilty. The Albarn and Enneagram families are in contact with somebody plotting against this country.”

“So, it’s a worst-case scenario.”

“But doesn’t this benefit you?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you expose the culprit behind the plot against Ardenfeld and prove a link to the Big Three families, that would be a near-perfect start for the Seventh Unit. Do that, and the position of magus will surely be yours.”

“True, it could work out well for me. But to be honest, things are much as I expected so far. I’m the Waldstein family heir, so I know the Albarns and the Enneagrams well. There was never a chance that they wouldn’t have a hand in

this.”

“Then what about the Waldsteins?” Letitia held her breath.

Luke’s expression remained unchanged. “I’ve discovered nothing within the Waldstein family. Compared with your investigation, my family is a different kettle of fish. They haven’t made any special preparations or countermeasures. Corruption and shady connections are a matter of course for them; if the truth became public knowledge, the Waldstein family would come crashing down. Of course, my father would never allow that to happen.”

“But I suppose there’s no sign that they’re in cahoots with the kinds of people we’re looking for.”

“Correct.” Luke narrowed his eyes as if in pain and looked out of the window.

“That’s good, though, right? This way, we don’t have to worry about the awful possibility that all of the Big Three families are committing treason.”

“It’s not good.” Luke’s face was totally blank. “It’s disastrous.”

## Chapter 3: Undercover

Letitia suspected Luke's main target was his father, Duke Waldstein. He would expose his father's crimes and betrayals, take him down, and gallantly stroll in to gain the duke's title for himself. The family was steeped in corruption, but once he'd demolished it, he would rebuild it from nothing.

*And if he accomplishes that, Letitia thought, there will be nobody to stand in the way of him marrying a commoner girl. He could deflect any criticism that comes her way.*

He seemed two steps ahead of everyone. As soon as he'd realized that the Big Three might be linked to an enemy of the kingdom, he must have pinned his hopes on dismantling his father's power. If Luke could vanquish his father, he could make all his problems disappear without a trace.

However, the reality of the situation wasn't following his plan. Perhaps the enemy had determined that as the kingdom's leading Royalist family, the Waldsteins were unlikely to rebel against the royal family. It seemed like a wise choice; Letitia would've reached the same conclusion if she had been in the enemy's shoes.

*They're clearly informed of the kingdom's inner workings.*

Although the Waldsteins were the staunchest of the Royalists, the Albarn and Enneagram families carried the strongest blood ties to the throne. As a result, it was hard to tell from the outside which bonds were stable and which could be tested and broken.

*Our enemy must have infiltrated far into the country long before they ever made contact with the Big Three. Alternatively, could they have inside sources feeding them details of the latest court happenings?*

Letitia took another look at the files Luke had given her. The newly established Seventh Unit had been organizing the Grand Library's archives and criminal case records. To any onlookers, it would've seemed like they were

merely taking on odd jobs that had been set aside due to staff shortages, but their true goal was to seek out potential moles within the court.

There was reason to believe that influential court nobles were orchestrating plots involving lost ancient technology, just as Count Wilhelm had. Thanks to Luke's efforts behind the scenes, the Second Unit's Improper Magic Usage Bureau had already placed three aristocrats and eight servants under observation. But despite these wide-ranging efforts, Letitia was still no closer to finding clear information on the identity of the enemy organization.

*When the wyvern went on a rampage on the western border, it was because of a relic that drove it berserk. The goblin emperor that showed up in the Misty Woods was hidden with high-level concealment magic, so it's feasible that a human had been involved. And we still know little about both whoever was supplying the crime syndicate Nightfall with funds and who masterminded the incident with the wyrm in Grambern.*

If things had gone worse, those events could have resulted in tens of thousands of casualties. The Grambern incident could have wiped the Holy Empire of Vellmar off the map entirely.

No one had found anything definitive to link these cases, but Luke and Prince Michael both believed the same individuals were involved in all of them. Continuing to investigate in the same way was unlikely to uncover anything, so Letitia decided that the time had come to take a chance. Nothing ventured, nothing gained; to win a great prize, one had to be prepared to incur losses.

*I expect that Luke is probably in hot water already. I can't afford to stand by and do nothing.*

Luke was a risk-taker who liked to do things his own way. Letitia felt some affinity toward him, and for that reason, she'd worried about him ever since he'd first set foot in the Royal Court Magicians' Division. Because they were birds of a feather, Letitia had known all along that there was no stopping Luke. To protect her intrepid younger coworker, she had no choice but to take some risks on his behalf.

*I do have eight years' more life experience than him, after all.*

Letitia's thirtieth birthday was approaching. She had no regrets about how



much of her life she had sacrificed for the sake of getting revenge for her beloved teacher. Thanks to Luke and her other invaluable comrades, she had achieved her greatest dream, and her tale of vengeance had reached a conclusion too perfect for words. She had been blessed with great fortune. There was nothing more she could ask for.

*Now it's my turn to do what I can to help Luke and the others. What he's done is amazing, though it shouldn't surprise me at this point. Would I go to such great lengths for love?*

Due to her cool, dispassionate personality, Letitia didn't think she was capable of such grand actions. The idea of feeling romantic love for someone was something she didn't fully grasp. She understood it perfectly well in theory, but she had never experienced it for herself. Many had admitted romantic feelings toward her, but their words had never swayed her, as she was always focused on more important matters. Perhaps those bigger concerns had left her no time for love, or perhaps she was never meant to have such feelings.

*"That girl is so cold, am I right?"*

*"I can never understand what goes on in Letitia's head."*

People had often made those kinds of comments about Letitia. As she remembered them, she felt like she agreed. *I don't understand myself either. Unless...that was love.*

Letitia cast her mind back to a much earlier memory. She remembered being ten years old and feeling like she was protected by a divine force. All the adults around her seemed so big and impressive. Whenever she'd expressed any sadness, her parents or her teacher would console her. She had never come face-to-face with death. As far as she'd been concerned then, she and everyone she knew would live forever. In hindsight, that time seemed like a fleeting dream.

One day, the ten-year-old Letitia joined her teacher and her schoolmates at his private school on a visit to a magical items shop. On the way there, she spotted a lost little boy, called out to him, and helped him look for his parents. Being a clever child, she parsed his rambling explanation and used the most

relevant details to figure out what had really happened. When she found his parents, they were full of gratitude.

But shortly afterward, Letitia suddenly realized the people she knew were nowhere to be seen. Based on her composed behavior, the boy's parents had assumed she lived nearby, while her teacher and the others knew her to be responsible and trusted that she would be fine. That series of events had led to something no one had expected: Letitia was lost.

It also turned out that there were greater gaps in Letitia's knowledge than anyone had appreciated. She could handle her areas of expertise even better than an adult, but when it came to anything else, she was no smarter than any other child her age. As the daughter of a local lord, she'd learned neither that there were rough parts of town where it was dangerous to go nor that the world was full of cruelty and vice.

She soon strayed into a dingy alleyway littered with blackened rags, broken crates, and smashed bottles. There were squishy spoiled berries and dead rats on the ground.

A group of men in ragged clothes spotted Letitia. The stench of sweat and booze filled her nostrils as a large man grabbed her arm and began to direct her into a corner of the alleyway.

Just at that moment, a dirty gray shoe eclipsed the man's face. Someone had leaped into the air, as if taking flight, and kicked him. Letitia saw that it was one of the boys from her teacher's school. He drove the men back, took Letitia's hand, and pulled her out from the alley without waiting for a response.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the boy demanded angrily. "This place is dangerous."

He said nothing more. He simply continued to grip Letitia's hand firmly and faced forward, not once turning to look at her. She felt a strange heat from his hand. He seemed like a different person from the boy she knew—almost like an entirely different creature.

After returning home, Letitia kept thinking about the warm touch of that boy's hand. Every time she remembered it, the thought grabbed hold of her and

brought her right back to that moment in the alleyway. The memory unsettled her. It was like some kind of heat had been left behind within her when she'd felt it from his hand, and it wouldn't go away. It was a mystery that she wanted to solve.

*Why do I think about that moment so much?* she wondered.

But try as she might, she couldn't come up with an answer. She had never experienced that feeling before, and as the sheltered daughter of a nobleman, there were many things she didn't know. She couldn't understand what she'd felt, but she wanted to.

She decided to try and hold the boy's hand again. That way, she might be able to learn something. However, it wouldn't be easy. While she came from a noble family, the boy was a ruffian among ruffians, so they had little in common. She had a feeling that there was something wrong with trying to change her habits to get closer to him. Worst of all, it would've been deeply embarrassing if anyone noticed.

But one day, an opportunity arrived out of nowhere. Having returned to her teacher's private school in the evening to collect something she'd left behind, Letitia saw the boy sprawled out on a desk, sound asleep.

No one was around. To be on the safe side, Letitia carefully checked outside the room too. She opened all the lockers to make sure there were no boys playing hide-and-seek. She looked out of the windows in case someone might peek inside, but there was no sign of life. Letitia and the boy were all alone.

The setting sun bathed the room in a reddish glow. It was like the rest of the world had vanished. Letitia looked at the sleeping boy. An orange shimmer surrounded his red hair. His slumped back rose and fell steadily.

Letitia's mouth felt dry. She felt herself starting to sweat. She was anxious; something about this was wrong.

But although she felt like she shouldn't, she did: she reached out and quietly took hold of the boy's hand. She didn't know how long she held on. It felt like a long time, but she also thought it couldn't have been more than a brief moment. All she was certain of afterward was that his hand had felt warm.

When she came to her senses, she let go as if she'd touched something red-hot. She pulled away in a panic and clumsily fled from the room. She couldn't stay calm; it was like her heart was going to leap out of her chest.

She ran until the school was out of sight. She stopped and hunched over with her hands on her knees, panting. Once she'd brought her breathing back under control, she noticed a little white flower swaying in the breeze. The flower seemed oddly beautiful.

Perhaps that had been a form of what people called "love." Letitia was well aware that such a thing existed. As she approached adolescence, she intuitively felt that she wasn't imagining things and that she was indeed on the verge of love.

She didn't know what to do about it, though. After that incident, she continued as normal. She felt like she had done something bad, something she didn't want people to know about. Maybe she was simply afraid of what might happen if she was rejected. She thought that if things remained as they were, she would reach some kind of decision somewhere down the line, whether that meant expressing her feelings or keeping them a secret while their relationship continued as before.

In the end, she did neither. A major incident turned her life upside down: her teacher departed this world, and his school closed down. It vanished abruptly as if it had been ripped away from Letitia's grasp. She vowed revenge. As burning rage took over, those confusing earlier feelings faded away. Maybe that had been her first love.

*Had it not been for that tragedy, life could've continued as normal, she reflected many years later. He and I might've gotten together, and by now, we could've been married. Well, maybe not.*

Letitia was of noble blood. That meant she was fated to marry only someone of suitable parentage. At the very least, that's what her parents and other relatives would've expected. Her grandmother would probably have fainted at the mere mention of marrying a commoner who had been raised in an orphanage.

No, her love had always been doomed. It was for the best that it had never come to anything.

*I wonder where he is now...*

She would've liked to see him as an adult and speak to him if she could. It would have been nice to meet him again by some lucky happenstance and reminisce about their shared childhood. Of course, things didn't work out so neatly in the real world. He might not even remember her. In any case, that memorable day probably held no special meaning for him.

*That's fine. It can just be my own precious memory.*

Letitia knew such was life. She still had lingering memories of her ill-fated first love, and for a foolish woman who had dedicated her life to revenge, that was more than enough.

*Now, I'm taking on my most dangerous job yet.*

If Letitia put the wrong foot forward here, she could lose it all. She might not make it back alive, but the potential reward was great. Ultimately, she knew she had to put herself at risk so that her headstrong comrade wouldn't end up in an even bigger mess.

*This is something I must do.*

The Albarns and the Enneagrams were two of the Big Three families, among the upper echelons of the Ardenfeld aristocracy. Letitia decided it was time for her to conduct an undercover operation.

Clever military strategies were the Albarn family's great claim to fame. The family had earned a reputation through fighting the kingdom's wars and producing outstanding officers. Many of the Albarns could be found in the King's Guard, the Order of Royal Knights, and Parliament.

Graham Albarn was the current patriarch. He was a famous Royalist, regarded as one of the most powerful politicians in the country.

Bonds between family members were strong and deep. On the other hand, many Albarns notably pushed back against the expectation to prioritize the

family's good name. Those members went on to sever ties with the main family and oppose them from the outside. Rumor had it that Raven Albarn, the western region's greatest adventurer, grew up in the family. Though the family formed part of the kingdom's backbone, the fact that so many people like him had opted to forge their own path far from high society was a sign of how stifling the Albarn name could be.

Being a royal court magician, Letitia had met members of the Albarn family countless times. Every time, their demeanor had conveyed the strict, uncompromising nature of their education and upbringing. Their every move was carefully calculated. It was clear that most of their behavior was ingrained as a result of disciplined repetition. There was precious little space for creativity or individuality. Like ideal nobles, they all exhibited perfect conduct, had honed physiques, and spoke in a manner that commanded respect.

Letitia imagined that the harsh education Luke had received was modeled on the Albarn family's approach. Despite the Waldsteins' strong reputation for magic ability, the Albarns had the upper hand when it came to familial traditions and noble appearance. It seemed plausible that Luke's father had tried to borrow the strengths of a rival family to craft his son into an unimpeachable specimen. His efforts seemed to have paid off: everyone recognized Luke Waldstein as an astounding young nobleman, the likes of which the kingdom had never seen before.

*After seeing the next head of the Waldstein family perform such remarkable feats, perhaps concerns about the future drove the Albarns to betray the kingdom,* Letitia thought, but Luke's assessment of the situation didn't quite match.

*"I'm the Waldstein family heir, so I know the Albarns and the Enneagrams well. There was never a chance that they wouldn't have a hand in this."*

Luke had apparently been sure all along that both families were already in contact with someone plotting against Ardenfeld. Having grown up within the Big Three's orbit, he must've seen a side to the Albarns that most people weren't privy to. Maybe someone in that tenacious family had decided there was value in hedging their bets in case of emergency by forming a relationship with enemies of the state.

It was possibly a similar situation with the Enneagrams. As a family renowned for political acumen, there was no one who could outmaneuver them. They knew how best to read the political tides and lend their support to the leaders of tomorrow to curry favor. It wasn't unusual for them to be pulling strings behind both sides of any major political debate.

At the same time, the Enneagrams were always ready to break off a disadvantageous relationship, knowing that people might otherwise hold them accountable for backing the wrong candidate. Like a lizard shedding its tail to make an escape, they would push someone into the firing line and force them to take responsibility without the family's reputation ever taking a hit.

Of course, this wasn't common knowledge. The Enneagram family was known as a great aristocratic family whose members possessed brilliant insight and rarely made a blunder.

*The stronger the light, the greater the shadow. Those that seem the most squeaky clean have the dirtiest secrets to hide.*

That was Letitia's impression based on her unrivaled knowledge of the court nobility's dark underbelly. She was sure that Luke knew these facts intimately, having been raised by one of the Big Three families.

*The question is, how close is the relationship between the Big Three and these unknown enemies? And more importantly, we need to get more information on this organization.*

It wouldn't be easy to conduct an undercover investigation into the Albarn and Enneagram families. Their estates were protected by powerful magical barriers, while skilled private soldiers kept watch like wolves around the perimeter. On the other hand, no one knew as much as Letitia about the security systems of noble residences.

She used a shape-shifting potion to take the place of a staff member and began gathering information. She went into private chambers, found hidden libraries, and copied the contents of secret files into her notebook.

Something called "the Order" was mentioned in those files twenty-nine times. Eight instances referred to "the Order of the Dragon." She determined that this was probably the name of the organization she and Luke were trying to find.

The name made her think of the chaotic events surrounding the wrym, an ancient dragon sealed beneath the Guardian City of Grambern. She wondered if this organization had something to do with that ominous creature.

So far, the undercover operation had taught Letitia that the Albarns and the Enneagrams were more actively involved with this mysterious organization than she ever could have imagined.

*And what's going on with all this money?!*

She was gobsmacked by the vast funds she saw being gathered. She hadn't worked out the details yet, but it looked like both families were providing some group—very possibly the so-called Order of the Dragon—with unprecedented sums of money.

*But why...? Does this Order have serious dirt on them? Or is this payment for something that they can only acquire through that organization?* Finally, Letitia arrived at a third possibility that she could hardly bear to contemplate. *Maybe they're hoping that they'll gain control over the country if the Order overthrows the royal family!*

It wasn't so hard to believe. Looking at how closely the two families were working with the organization and how much money they were giving them, it made sense. It made too much sense.

*Ever since the Count Wilhelm scandal, the king has been serious about abolishing the Tax Exemption Law. I'd heard that some of the court nobles who benefit from that law regard the move as a betrayal, but still...*

Letitia couldn't deny the possibility that the Albarn and Enneagram families had reached that conclusion. They had inherited honor and prestige from previous generations. Perhaps they saw being stripped of tax-exempt status as something more than merely losing potential income—or maybe they were just using the proposed abolition of the law as a pretext to defend their own vested interests.

Letitia didn't know which was closer to the truth. People often lied without realizing it; they came up with beautiful lies to fool themselves. But either way, the two families were directing huge amounts of money toward this organization to increase their own power.



*They need to be stopped!*

Letitia sought out details of the families' business transactions. It turned out there were plans in place for a huge amount of gold coins to be handed over in three days' time. It was going to take place at night in the royal capital's shady Nineteenth District. The Order apparently had a base in a corner of an abandoned building in the center of the district.

However, that was as much as she managed to learn, regardless of how hard she tried. It didn't look like the staff in the Albarn and Enneagram estates knew anything more than that either. Even on the inside, it appeared that members of the Order were extremely sly and cautious in their actions.

*This is as far as I can get right now. I'd better take back what I've found and examine it more closely.*

Letitia began to make her way out, taking great care not to make a sound. But just then, an intense feeling of cold washed over her. She sensed an approaching threat. She wanted to believe it was all in her head, as there were no signs that anyone was nearby, but even so, she immediately followed her instincts. She opened a small window leading outside, made herself as small as possible, and pushed her way through.

It turned out she'd been right to feel anxious. She felt some kind of presence, cloaked in a concealment spell, closing in as if to surround her. There were at least three people there; it was safe to assume that there were in fact twice as many.

Letitia worked out the most direct escape route available to her. She was using concealment magic too, but she wanted to avoid casting any other spells, if possible. If it came out that she was adept at ice-type magic, that would bring suspicion upon the Royal Court Magicians' Division. People would become wary of two individuals in particular: the captain of the Second Unit, Chris Sherlock, and of course the lieutenant of the Third Unit, Letitia Lisette-Stone. It would be dangerous to provide the enemy with information. She needed to continue making herself difficult to identify, just as her opponents had. In other words, her only path to victory lay in getting out without using magic.

Letitia jumped from the roof of the two-story building and rolled on the lawn

to soften the landing. She fled across the garden between fragrant flowerbeds, aiming for the hole she'd opened earlier in the magical barrier surrounding the estate.

However, the unseen enemies following Letitia had predicted this and planned accordingly. The flick of a knife grazed her as she ran. Despite her use of concealment magic, her opponents knew precisely where she was.

Letitia suddenly grabbed her attacker's arm and dislocated his shoulder. In her years of seeking revenge, she had trained diligently in martial arts. She had no difficulty in shifting her toned body into any position she could imagine. Her hold should've made the big, muscular man cry out in pain, but even with a dislocated shoulder, he made no sound. He merely sucked in short, quick breaths.

The next moment, sparks appeared before Letitia's eyes and she felt a sharp pain in her head. With a powerful hit from behind, she'd been launched into the air and thrown down onto the flagstones beneath.

That was when she realized her mistake. These weren't people she could fight face-to-face without magic. She had no choice but to use whatever means necessary to get away. But in the last few moments, her enemies had caught up to her. She had no time to cast magic.

*But if I get captured...*

She didn't even want to think about that possibility. She would be at the mercy of two of the kingdom's most influential aristocratic families, and they would stop at nothing to take both her and Luke out of the picture. They might falsely accuse her of a crime and have her thrown in jail indefinitely. Or maybe she would end up dead at the bottom of a lake long before she could be imprisoned. As she pictured scenes of torture and force-feeding of truth serum, she began to contemplate using a suicide spell.

Just then, one of her attackers collapsed, and another was suddenly sent flying. Invisible, one of them was attacking the others.

*Infighting?*

They couldn't have expected they'd have to fight one of their own allies. They

lost control over the situation immediately. Someone took Letitia's hand and ran with her toward the gap in the magical barrier.

The attackers' brief moment of indecision determined the outcome. As soon as Letitia had made it through the hole in the barrier with the person who had turned on the others, she used the dungeon relic to seal the hole again. The barrier now prevented her pursuers from following her. She eliminated all evidence of the relic and ran off into the moonlit streets with her mysterious rescuer.

The hand that held hers was big. It seemed familiar to her.

Once it was clear that they'd shaken off the earlier attackers, her rescuer let go of Letitia's hand and disappeared into the night. Letitia had no way to follow the large frame vanishing before her eyes. She was left alone and motionless in the dark.

*Could that have been...?*

A strong breeze blew against her cheek.

The next day, Letitia went to the captain's office in the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division.

"Was that you yesterday, Captain?" she asked as soon as she entered.

The room seemed more disheveled than usual. Gawain wasn't the fastidious type, but when he'd first been made captain, Marius had given Letitia the responsibility of strictly ordering him to keep his office tidy. As a result, he generally maintained it at a level where it wouldn't interfere with work. It was a small change, but Letitia remembered it well.

"What are you talking about?" Gawain looked dubious, but not particularly unsettled. He glanced up from the newspaper he was holding, then continued reading. "I'm busy right now. Can it wait?"

"What are you doing?"

"Thinking about something very serious. Something that will affect the future of the kingdom."

“What could that be?”

“To be specific, I’m trying to decide which horse to bet on in this weekend’s King’s Derby.”

Letitia stared blankly at Gawain. “Is that the *Ardenfeld Times*?”

“It is.”

“There are no pieces about the King’s Derby in the *Times*. The editors disapprove of the royal family sponsoring gambling.”

“Well, when you’re in as deep as I am, you know the race card by heart anyway.”

“What were you doing last night in the hour between eleven and twelve?”

“I was out drinking with Henry. Ask him yourself if you don’t believe me. I was with him until after midnight.”

“All right. Henry did say something similar as well.”

“See? It was a pretty wild night. We were talking about all kinds of things I shouldn’t rep—”

“I also already spoke with the people working the bar, and they told me you two weren’t there,” Letitia interrupted. “When I pressed Henry, he confessed that you’d told him to say you were drinking together. He was actually alone, exercising in preparation for a group date this weekend.”

“Hmm, he did seem to be self-conscious about his belly lately...”

“I want you to tell me what you were doing. If you aren’t honest with me, I’ll have to insist that you pay me back all the money you owe me immediately—with interest.” Letitia’s tone was harsh and unrelenting.

“Okay, fine. I’ll talk,” Gawain conceded. “A few days ago, I discovered that you and Luke were up to something dangerous. *You* didn’t do anything all that suspicious, but Luke left enough evidence for me to notice. I think he might’ve done it deliberately.”

“But why...?”

“Luke admitted that he wanted my help. That was fine by me. When I looked

into what you were doing, I found out that you were conducting an undercover operation. Then I disguised myself as one of the bad guys and caught them by surprise at the last moment.” Gawain scratched his head. “You wanted to avoid using magic and make sure you didn’t leave any identifiable evidence, right? I was trying to assist in your plans, and I thought I’d done everything right, but here we are.”

“You really did all that...?” Letitia sighed. The captain was as soft on his friends as always.

At that same moment, a perplexing thought came to mind, but Letitia could only write it off as a passing whim: *The boy who helped me that day couldn’t possibly have been...*

She decided that unrealistic thoughts like that only entered her head because the very idea of romance was something that she’d barely encountered. Such an idealistic notion was borne of inexperience. She heaved another sigh, exasperated by her own stupidity.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the office door. No sooner had Letitia begun to feel a sense of foreboding than a tall man walked in, as thin as if he were pieced together with wire. Five soldiers flanked him on either side.

“Please pardon my intrusion. My name is Clow Erling. I am an officer of the High Court.” The man showed his identification card. “I take it you are Letitia Lisette-Stone, lieutenant of the Third Unit of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“You are hereby under arrest on suspicion of carrying out an illegal investigation into the Count Wilhelm case. May I ask you to follow me?”

Letitia’s eyes widened.

“Wait,” Gawain said quietly. “Letitia was operating under my orders during that case. I alone am responsible.”

“Captain—”

“Don’t say anything,” Gawain insisted.

“Yes. Gawain Stark, as captain of the unit, you were in command during this case. You, too, are under suspicion, and I would like to bring you in for questioning as well. We expect to detain you for two weeks, but depending on the circumstances, the period may be longer.”

“Who’s giving you these orders?”

“I do not understand the question.”

Clow Erling and the other men restrained Gawain and Letitia with anti-magic handcuffs.

*I was so sure we hadn’t left any identifiable traces during last night’s mission, Letitia thought desperately. If nothing else, we moved too quickly to be caught. Could it be that somebody had been plotting to suppress us much earlier?*

Letitia considered trying to break free of the handcuffs and escape, but since the court officer was following all the correct procedures, she could cause serious harm to the Royal Court Magicians’ Division if she did anything foolish. Indeed, that might just play directly into the enemy’s hands. Their goal was to bring down the Ardenfeld royal family and weaken the meddling court magicians. If they got the slightest chance, they might go one step further and dissolve the division altogether.

*I suppose all I can do is have faith. If anybody can find the evidence, it’s you.*



“What?” I exclaimed, frozen to the spot in front of Luke. “Letitia and Gawain were arrested?!”

My old Third Unit coworkers had always been so nice to me. My lowborn status had never mattered to them. I was so stunned to hear of their arrest that everything seemed to go dark before my eyes. I was totally lost for words.

“They’re only under suspicion. They haven’t actually been charged with anything, so don’t worry,” Luke said. “I can’t imagine *she* would’ve left any real evidence of her involvement. And without evidence, they’ll have to be released. The people of the High Court are well aware of that. But even though it won’t get them anywhere in the end, they had no choice but to take action.”

“Why is that?”

“Because somebody else is pulling the strings. I believe it’s somebody from the Big Three—maybe the Albarn or Enneagram families.”

“The Albarns and the Enneagrams?” I repeated. They were famous enough that even I’d heard of them.

We were up against two of the kingdom’s most powerful noble families. Their goal was to suppress Letitia and Gawain, and by extension, their unit. According to Luke, this would allow them to pile criticism on the Royal Court Magicians’ Division and keep it in check.

A court of inquiry took place a few days later. The aristocrats present harshly rebuked the royal court magicians.

“I never expected such incompetence,” one spat.

“Given that we are in an era of peace, perhaps we should discuss scaling back the division,” another suggested.

“I hope you understand that the kingdom ultimately has to bear the burden of these failures.”

Central among the speakers was the Minister of Finance, Fourier Enneagram. Under the watchful eye of Prime Minister Graham Albarn, loyal court nobles continued their relentless questioning. As the new Seventh Unit was one of the primary targets of their ire, Luke and I had been called in to face criticism.

“I see no point in this new unit!” one complained.

“These two are much too young to work as captain and lieutenant,” another chimed in.

“And spare a thought for the magicians who are expected to take orders from a commoner! Imagine what a hard time they must be having.”

*I’m the one who’s really having a hard time right now,* I thought bitterly. I wanted to say it aloud, but I held myself back, knowing that they were trying to provoke me. They were itching to seize on a gaffe and bring me down. *I just need to endure it for the time being. Soon enough, I’ll prove them wrong.*

The aristocrats’ long list of grievances eventually led them to call the

continued existence of the division into question.

“We already have both the Order of Royal Knights and the King’s Guard,” one griped. “Maybe we should consider shutting down the Royal Court Magicians’ Division.”

“You magicians are wasting taxpayers’ money! Have you no shame?” another fumed.

“You’re holding this great nation back! Our kingdom has no more use for royal court magicians.”

They made their intense hostility toward us very clear. Likely they intended to further their own goals by weakening the Royal Court Magicians’ Division.

*Something’s up. This must be connected to Luke’s investigation.*

Once they were done berating us, I joined Luke in the Seventh Unit captain’s office.

“What are you gonna do?” I asked.

“About what?”

“I know you’ve been planning something. They’re so angry with us only because they’re scared. You have a trick to turn the whole situation around.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I’ve known you for so long. I know you’re up to something.” I watched Luke intently. “Did you think I hadn’t noticed?”

“I figured you *might* notice.”

“So you should’ve kept me in the loop from the start!” I softly punched him on the shoulder. “Come on, tell me your plan. I wanna help you.”

“Thanks. I was hoping I could count on you at this stage.”

Luke went on to explain the investigation he’d been working on since before the Seventh Unit was founded and what he’d discovered so far.

“I can’t believe the same people were behind it all...” I said, amazed, once I’d heard the details. “The goblin emperor in the Misty Woods. The dragon attack in the western region. The plot to revive the wyrm under Grambern. Even the



Count Wilhelm situation...”

“It’s true. They’ve made their way deep into the heart of the kingdom and developed a relationship with both the Albarns and the Enneagrams.”

“It’s that bad, huh?” It was hard to believe, but at the same time, there was something about it that made a lot of sense. “And that’s why the court nobles are attacking our division.”

“Compared to royal knights and members of the King’s Guard, court magicians have greater autonomy. Captains and lieutenants are very influential, and even lower-ranking magicians are encouraged to make their own decisions.”

“Is it different in the Order of Royal Knights and the King’s Guard?”

“They’re more streamlined, so everyone in the organization is working toward the same goal. They’re very hierarchical too. Individuality isn’t something they want from junior employees. That makes it easy for the nobility to keep them under control. They can prevent everyone in those organizations from working against them just by suppressing a few difficult individuals.”

“But the Royal Court Magicians’ Division is harder to control, so it’s a nuisance for them.”

“Precisely.” Luke glanced out of the window and continued. “I suppose we’ve been a thorn in their side for a long time. But now that the Tax Exemption Law controversy has pitted them against the royal family, the Royal Court Magicians’ Division is a bigger problem for them than ever. They want to find a weak point that’ll let them destroy the division.”

“What a selfish attitude!”

What angered me the most was to think of how hard my fellow magicians worked, only for these crooks to attack them out of pure self-interest. To make the country a better place, we needed to take action against corrupt aristocrats with links to evil organizations. We were all just trying to do our jobs and avoid being tempted into doing the wrong thing. I couldn’t bear the thought that my hardworking colleagues had to suffer like this.

*I’m gonna expose these people’s evil deeds and knock their lights out!* I felt

ready for action.

“Letitia hid her investigation notebook in a bookcase in her office just in case something happened to her,” Luke said.

“But didn’t the High Court inspectors raid her office right after they arrested her and Gawain?”

“That’s right. They searched every nook and cranny and took everything away.”

“Then that means her notebook—”

“It was already gone,” Luke interrupted breezily. “I got in there just a few minutes before they did.”

“I see you’re as cunning as ever.”

“It was a real close shave, I must say. I would’ve been in trouble if Captain Chris hadn’t bought me some time.”

“He helped you?”

“Apparently, he’s known Gawain and Letitia since their school days.”

Thank goodness Chris had realized in the nick of time that the two were in a predicament.

Luke continued, “Letitia did great work as always. She discovered an organization known as the Order of the Dragon. She also got hold of information that could destroy the Albarn and Enneagram families.” He produced a notebook from his inner pocket. “The night after tomorrow in an abandoned building in the Nineteenth District, the Albarns and the Enneagrams will transfer a huge sum of gold coins to the Order. This has all been the Order’s plan.”

“Both families at the same time?”

“I expect they’re both worried about being double-crossed.”

“I see what you mean. If one family went first, the other might tip off the authorities and land them in hot water.”

“It works out well for us. However, we can assume they’ll be on incredibly

high alert.”

“So it won’t be as simple as rushing in and seizing evidence.”

“Right. After all, this could cause irreparable damage to both families. I’m sure they’ve planned everything out perfectly to avoid even the slightest chance of a slipup.”

“That means we need to do all we can to prepare too.” But as soon as I thought about who should be involved, I realized there was a problem. “The Seventh Unit alone isn’t enough. We’d better get help from people in other units.”

“We can’t,” Luke replied. “The enemy has eyes and ears throughout the royal palace. I’m sure they’re monitoring everything that goes on. If they catch a whiff of suspicion, they’ll call off the transaction. I’ve been keeping tabs on them, so I know what they’re like. It’s because they’re so slippery that they’ve managed to stay in the dark for so long, avoiding my intelligence network, Letitia’s, and even the Crown Prince’s.”

“Still, this is too much to ask of the rookies. There’s no way they have enough experience.”

“We need evidence for only two things: the transaction and the connection between the two families and the Order. Combat is not necessary. In fact, I’d rather avoid it.”

“Yeah, but it’s your job as captain to guarantee their safety during contact with an enemy. We’re talking about putting them in a situation where somebody might die if a fight breaks out. Are you sure you understand what that means?”

“I understand perfectly. In fact, it’s the reality of the work we do.”

“Try telling that to a bereaved family.” I shot him a dark look.

“If we pass up this chance, many innocent people will come to serious harm.” Rather than avoid my gaze, he looked me straight in the eye. “I know the importance of ensuring my subordinates’ safety. I certainly don’t want to put them in danger. I don’t want to put *you* in danger either. If I had it my way, I’d conduct this entire operation by myself.” He looked down. “I thought about

that, but no matter how I looked at it, it was impossible. It'll only work with your help."

"No! Don't put this all on your shoulders!" I blurted out frantically.

Having known him as long as I had, I believed that he'd seriously considered going it alone. He hated relying on others, and if left to his own devices, he would rush headlong into danger without telling anyone. That was the one thing I couldn't allow him to do.

"I'll help you," I said. "You can count on me."

"But if it's only the two of us, I can't ensure your safety."

"I could say the same to you! But I'll be fine. I'm a tough cookie."

"That won't be enough."

"Trust me. Nobody will complain if I get roughed up a bit. I'm willing to put myself at risk to expose this shady deal and prevent other people from being hurt. You and I share that determination, right?"

"No, we don't. My approach isn't like yours."

"We're the same. When you put yourself in a dangerous situation, I'm right there fighting alongside you. That's what it means to be your mentee—"

"You have no idea," Luke said forcefully.

Irritated by his domineering tone, I began talking without thinking. "You're the clueless one here! Why don't you value your own life a bit more? If I take my eyes off you for two seconds, you always go overboard and get yourself in trouble. You need to look after yourself properly! Who gives a damn about career success? Your life is way more important. Maybe you should try thinking about the people who would be upset if you weren't—"

"That's exactly what I mean. You have no idea!" Luke retorted, his voice quivering slightly. He sounded furious. "Promotions mean nothing to me. *You're* what matters! As long as you're here, I don't need anything else. I'd risk my life for you. I know it's stupid and selfish, but I don't know how else to live. There's nothing, *nothing* more important than you."

"What do you—"

“But you don’t care about yourself at all. From the bottom of your heart, you really don’t think you matter, do you? So listen to me. There’s somebody who is desperate not to lose you—somebody who needs nothing else as long as they have you. I will do whatever it takes to protect you. The Seventh Unit is going to carry out this plan.”

Not taking no for an answer, Luke stormed out of the room. I was left in utter silence.

## Chapter 4: Something Worth Protecting

*Why did Luke say that?*

The whole day, I repeated Luke's words over and over in my head. He'd told me I was so important, he needed nothing else. He would risk his life for me. He'd said nothing was more important to him than me—nothing at all. That was the part that was so unexpected and inexplicable. It would be easier to understand if he'd just been joking, but he'd spoken with such a sense of urgency that I had to assume he was being fully honest.

No one had ever spoken to me like that. Deep inside, his passion rattled me. Someone needed nothing else as long as they had me. Having heard that, I could no longer focus.

*This is no good, I thought. Right now, I should be concentrating on work so I can make sure everyone in the Seventh Unit will be safe.*

Fortunately, self-defense training had been the unit's number one priority since we'd started working on it. The rookies had at least reached the minimum level of skill necessary for court magicians to look after themselves.

*But still, when I look at our numbers, I'm really not confident this is enough yet.*

Luke had said we shouldn't tell anyone about the deal we were trying to thwart.

"The fewer people there are who know about this, the lower the chances there are of something leaking," he'd explained.

"We have to tell the others in the Seventh Unit!"

"We'll give them a full explanation right before we kick off the operation. Otherwise, there's a strong likelihood that the enemy will figure out that we're gearing up for the night of the deal."

"But it's so dangerous. They need to be able to prepare themselves

emotionally.”

“I’ll handle the most dangerous aspects. And remember that the plan is to find out about the Order of the Dragon and secure evidence of the transaction taking place. There’s no need to engage the enemy.”

To my mind, everyone’s safety was paramount. There were, therefore, parts of Luke’s explanation that I didn’t fully agree with, but practically speaking, I knew we needed to come to an understanding. We were dealing with an enemy that was obsessively cautious and refused to come out into the open. No one had been able to get information on them, and I could see that we wouldn’t get any either unless we took some risks. Even so, I thought we should at least inform Misha, so I twisted Luke’s arm into letting me tell her.

“Okay, so Lieutenant Letitia left us information about this deal, huh? Thanks for letting me know. This is really exciting.” Misha gave me a fist bump. “I owe a lot to the Third Unit. I’ve felt that way ever since I joined the division. People have all sorts of ideas about Lieutenant Letitia and Captain Gawain getting locked up. I’ve heard all these reckless comments about how the Royal Court Magicians’ Division is a hotbed of corruption, or how its budget should be slashed because it’s full of useless crooks. But I’m like, ‘*You’re the corrupt ones! You’re the crooks!*’” She was getting pretty fired up. “Let’s expose the Big Three’s treachery, reveal the evil organization behind it all, and prove to everyone that the Royal Court Magicians’ Division is the best! This is our daily struggle. No one messes with us!”

As we secretly planned out our infiltration, it became apparent that Luke had been preparing for this since the day the Seventh Unit was established.

We obtained permission to go on an expedition to the Misty Woods, some distance from the capital, and arranged for a horse-drawn carriage to take us there. As well as providing the young magicians with their first taste of battle, this basic extermination job would allow us to see what kind of monsters were around in the wake of the goblin emperor’s defeat. Crucially, it provided us with an excuse for increasing the rookies’ training hours and carrying out our other preparations.

The day of the big deal arrived. We departed the royal capital according to the

schedule we'd submitted ahead of time, and headed for the Misty Woods. If people were keeping watch on us, they would've seen us reach the forest from far away. They were probably ready to slam the breaks on the deal the second they noticed us doing anything suspicious.

Somewhere in the forest, surrounded in thick mist, Luke had hidden a second carriage. It belonged to a merchant family that came this way once a month for business in the capital. Luke had used his influence to persuade them to take a one-month break from trading in the capital and lend him the carriage.

The carriage was laden with many magical weapons and shape-shifting potions. Luke had employed eight servants to take the shape-shifting potions and disguise themselves as us. While they were getting ready, I told the junior magicians what we were really here to do today.

"That's such a big responsibility..." one of them whispered.

It was no wonder that they were all shaken. Even when I explained that we'd be on standby to provide support from a safe distance if combat really did break out, it wasn't enough for some of them to overcome their visible fear.

"Good grief! None of you are of any use," Iris said at the beginning, brimming with confidence. "Leave it to me. I'm good enough to do the work for all the others."

However, when I'd gotten further into the explanation, even she started getting more and more scared.

"I j-just need to get some air!" she would say, time and again, before rushing away to stand with her back against a distant tree and take deep breaths.

"Don't you know you're being unreasonable, Lieutenant Noelle?" Miles approached me and whispered. "Such an important job is too much to ask of people who only just joined the unit. This could all go horribly wrong. Actually, I'd be more surprised if this went off without a hitch."

"I'm aware of that, but we have to do this," I replied. "I'll make sure to protect you all, so please have faith in me. We need your help."

Miles stared back at me, as if he was trying to peer inside me and figure out my true intentions. Finally, he said, "All right. I'll do what I can."



We used the shape-shifting potions to take on the appearance of the merchants, then returned to the capital without alerting any observers. Our first stop was the Albarn family's mansion. Luke had planned to deliver various goods there.

"Please wait while we bring the delivery inside," Miles said, disguised as a merchant.

I was impressed by his good manners. I could see that there was truth in the claim that he'd been serious about his work when he first joined Slaine Mages' Guild.

"Aha, there's the old model student," I commented.

"Well, I won't keep up the act."

"I think I like you better that way."

"I don't." He shot me a sour look, but it seemed like he was prepared to maintain his polite persona for now.

*I think he's got this side of things sorted.*

I joined the other Seventh Unit members hiding in the cargo and entered the Albarn estate.

"First, we want to get our hands on evidence that this deal is happening," Luke said.

I nodded. "Roger that. Let's go."

We used shape-shifting potions to transform again, this time into absent members of the Albarn family. With the help of concealment magic, we sneaked past the guards and made our way into the mansion.

"I'm getting kinda excited," Misha whispered.

Using the information Letitia had left for us as a guide, we began hunting down anything that might provide solid evidence of that night's transaction.

Iris prodded me on the shoulder. "Lieutenant Noelle, look."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Does this file look like what we want?"

“Ah, this is exactly it! Great job!”

“Well, of course. You see, I intend to overtake you one day, Lieutenant.”

“I look forward to it. Thanks for working so hard to get this.”

“I’m j-just doing my job. It’s no big deal.” Iris abruptly looked away and returned to her search.

Luke approached me. “Hey, you’ve turned into a pretty good boss.”

“I know, right?” I replied, keeping my voice down. “Praise me more!”

“You’re a great help. I knew I could count on you, Lieutenant.”

As we continued our banter, we came across a considerable amount of useful evidence.

“My job is up next,” Luke said shortly afterward.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Negotiate.”

In the appearance of a merchant, Luke handed a letter to a servant with sharp, catlike features. “Could I ask you to take this to the master of the house?”

The servant bowed. “Certainly. I’ll give it to his lordship right away.”

We only needed to wait for ten minutes before the servant returned, out of breath.

“His lordship wishes to speak with you immediately,” he said hurriedly.

Luke smiled softly. “I’ll just go and have a little word with him,” he said to me. “You wait here.”



The private chamber of Graham Albarn—the family head—was tastefully furnished. It was laid out with care but not distasteful extravagance. The magical lamps were designed primarily with function in mind, and the bookshelves were organized beautifully, like the books themselves knew their place.

Without betraying any emotion in his expression, Graham Albarn glanced at the man his servant had brought into the room. He was a merchant around thirty years old. He looked strong and capable, but there was a dullness in his eyes. At the same time, those eyes had a strange aura, almost like there was someone else behind them.

“Who are you?” Graham Albarn asked.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You’re using a shape-shifting potion.”

“I’m not surprised you noticed.” The man produced a beautifully decorated gold pocket watch. “I am Luke Waldstein, captain of the Seventh Unit of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division.”

“The Waldstein family heir. It’s been a while.”

“Indeed it has.” Luke bowed politely. “It must be difficult to be the head of a family. When those in your household are led by their desires like beasts in heat, keeping them muzzled must be a challenge even for someone as distinguished as your lordship.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I truly think it’s a great pity. You are so honest and sincere, and yet the greedy, calculating actions of your family members have put you in an awfully difficult position. Indeed, this might have been part of their plan from the beginning. Perhaps they think they can earn more with you out of the picture.”

“Well, that is the reality of being the head of the family. I’m sure you know that well.”

“Was it the Enneagram family who decided to use the kingdom’s economic situation as a pretext to attack the Royal Court Magicians’ Division?”

“At the beginning, yes.”

“But not anymore?”

“I think another player has taken control by now.”

“And who might this be?”

“They call themselves the Order of the Dragon.”

Luke pursed his lips. “Have they made the Enneagrams into their puppets?”

“I believe so.”

“They’re proving to be quite a tricky opponent.” Luke sighed heavily. “It seems that the Order of the Dragon intends to weaken the Royal Court Magicians’ Division in order to gain control over the kingdom. They have developed a relationship with the Albarns and the Enneagrams, two of the Ardenfeld aristocracy’s most influential families, and used them to further their goals. Am I correct in my understanding?”

“That sounds right.”

“Then I ask for your cooperation.”

“Mine?” Graham Albarn raised an eyebrow.

“You have broken the kingdom’s trust. If this comes to light, it will devastate the Albarn family’s reputation in high society. However, I’m prepared to drop the investigation into your family. If you agree to work together, I’ll welcome you as an ally.” He held out his arms in invitation. “Picture this: the Albarns cooperate with the Seventh Unit and work on our behalf during tonight’s deal to learn more about this mysterious organization. There was never any treachery; it was all for the kingdom’s sake.”

“But what’s in it for you?”

“I have powerful evidence against you; I have plenty of leverage. Moreover, if we can lure the Order of the Dragon into a trap and gain information about its unidentified members, that would be extremely valuable to me.”

“You mean you could secure the position of the youngest-ever magus.”

“Exactly.”

“How do I know you won’t turn on us?”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s better for me if I work with you. Besides, I don’t think you’re really in any position to refuse.”

Graham Albarn said nothing. A heavy silence swept his private chamber for

some time—at least thirty seconds. The air in the room felt remarkably cold.

“Very well. You have my support,” he said at last. He glanced out of the window. “Will you go to the Enneagrams with the same request?”

“That is my plan.”

“I expect they’ll agree.”

The corners of Luke’s elegant lips curved upward. “Yes, I’m sure they will.”



Infiltrating the Enneagram estate and negotiating with the head of the family followed the very same pattern. Luke had planned everything out carefully in advance, so we had options available even in the event that something unexpected happened. In the end, both the Albarns and the Enneagrams agreed to work with the Seventh Unit and conduct their deal with the Order of the Dragon in that capacity.

“You’re as good at these kinds of shenanigans as ever, huh?” I remarked.

“I just know what kind of people they are,” Luke replied casually.

We replaced the huge amount of money that had been prepared for that night with false gold coins from the carriage Luke had brought. They were made of copper and coated with a special magic paint to look like gold. Once exposed to the air, the paint would begin to degrade after seventy-two hours, leaving only copper lumps after ninety hours. There were also magical tracking devices. Luke’s plan was to follow them afterward to gather information on the enemy’s movements and where their main base was hidden.

As originally planned, the deal would be carried out by members of the Albarn and Enneagram families and their guards. Of those fifteen people, eleven were Seventh Unit magicians disguised with shape-shifting potions.

“Remember, our top priority is to avoid combat breaking out,” Luke said before our departure. “According to Letitia’s notes, she dealt with people with ferocious physical strength and magical prowess. She did her best to escape, but even as the lieutenant of the Third Unit, she couldn’t quite get away from them by herself. There’s nobody like that in either the Albarn or Enneagram

families. That means we can assume that members of the Order of the Dragon had made their way into the families' estates. Letitia also noted that they seemed to be making an effort not to kill her."

"Do you think they wanted to take her alive?" I asked.

"Probably. My guess is that they wanted to use torture or truth serum to make her talk. They would've done it if somebody else hadn't stepped in at the right moment."

"Who could do that to Letitia...?"

"I'd say this is the riskiest job we've ever taken on. If we end up in danger, I want you to take care of yourself first. Understood?" Luke stressed.

The Seventh Unit had only recently been formed, and now we were about to face a dangerous enemy in a life-threatening mission. I wondered if it might be an impossible task. Nevertheless, I didn't waver. I was selfish for endangering my juniors, but on the inside, I felt determined that we'd succeed. I was reminded of my first big job as a royal court magician at the Red Rose Ball.

"We aren't limited to protecting party guests," Captain Gawain had said. "Their loved ones are awaiting their safe return, and those people are counting on us too."

I'd thought his speech was so impressive. Just as my own mother always waited for me to come home, everybody else had people who cared deeply for them.

*I'm gonna make sure every Seventh Unit member makes it home safe and sound!* I decided.

The deal was due to take place in a corner of a ruined building in the Nineteenth District. The walls were cracked and the paint was flaking. Shards of broken vases and lamps littered the floor.

It was a moonless night. With no other light source to be found, the place was shrouded in darkness. The Albarns and Enneagrams had brought handheld magical lamps and the back of our carriage emitted some light, but neither of those seemed very useful. It was like lighting candles and walking into a strong

wind.

Luke was taking note of suitable hiding places.

“So, where are you gonna hide?” I asked him.

“I won’t be hiding.”

“Huh?”

“They’ll be wary of obvious hiding places. Spots that seem safe will actually be the riskiest here, so I’ll do the opposite of what they expect.”

“What do you mean?”

“The most dangerous place is the best bet for me.”

At first, I wasn’t sure how to respond. He was planning on taking the risk of hiding in plain sight while I stayed with the others further away, where the enemy wouldn’t pay so much attention. It sounded just like his usual reckless approach, where he didn’t think about himself at all, but I understood why this was most optimal. Nowhere was safe here. If he was to do his duty as captain and protect his subordinates at the same time as pulling off the plan, this offered the best chances of success.

“You told me to take care of myself first,” I murmured.

I bit my lip, wanting to say I’d go with him. I wanted to tell him the safest place was by his side. However, I had a responsibility to protect the young magicians in our unit. I couldn’t go with him. I had to trust that we could count on him.

“I’ll never forgive you if you don’t come back alive,” I added.

Luke widened his eyes in surprise, then smiled warmly. He looked at me like someone might look at a sleeping cat. “If all goes well and we get information on whoever is working against the kingdom, more people will take our unit seriously. It’ll improve your reputation...and mine too.”

“I thought you said you didn’t care about promotions.”

“I don’t, but I think I can become the next magus. And if I do, there’s something I want to talk to you about. Something I’ve wanted to tell you for a

long time. I never could before, but soon, I'll be able to."

I could see where this was going. This was something of great importance, and I had a feeling it would change everything when I heard it. Things wouldn't be able to continue as they had until now. I was sure of it.

The thought scared me a little. I wanted us to keep on being great friends like always. But I figured that if it was what Luke wanted, I should hear him out. It was the right thing to do not only as his friend but as a human being. I needed to confront this with integrity.

"Will you hear what I have to say?" Luke asked.

"I will," I replied. "But that means you need to make sure you come back safe. Got it?"

"I don't think you know how happy I am to hear that. I'll be back, no doubt about it. That's a promise."



First, two men appeared. Both were dressed from head to toe in thick, black cloaks. They seemed to fade in from the shadows, like a part of the night itself had manifested physically in front of us—but surely that was only an illusion.

*This magical aura is intense...* I thought, swallowing nervously as I took in the masked faces. The aura around them gave me a strange feeling. The amount of magical power was exceptional by itself, but there was a hint of something else that seemed to defy normal logic. *Drugs? Supreme relics? Probably both. Getting that kind of monstrous power requires great risk. You have to give up part of your humanity.*

I was part of the Royal Court Magicians' Division, an organization filled with the kingdom's brightest and finest magicians, but it was hard to think of any one of us strong enough to beat these two.

*If we have to fight them, what about the newbies...?*

A straightforward battle against the two men would definitely result in severe injuries—maybe even death. It was clearer than ever that we couldn't afford to let the situation turn violent.



*Let's just concentrate on making sure we fool them.*

The cloaked men observed the people who had come on behalf of the Albarn and Enneagram families. It was impossible to see their expressions. The masks they wore robbed them of any individuality or human qualities.

The abandoned building was totally quiet. I wondered if the two men were on the alert. Something wasn't right. Maybe they had figured out that court magicians were here, ready to cause problems for them.

*All right, calm down. Don't get carried away.*

As much as my heart pounded, everything was still silent. We needed to avoid letting them work out what was going on. Pulling off our plot was also the only way to ensure that everyone would be safe. I was determined to make it work, but that determination made me nervous and stiff. Eager to avoid being caught, I breathed in deeply and managed to relax my muscles. Still, I was ready to take action in the event that things suddenly changed.

The two men turned to face the outside and made a hand gesture. Another man emerged from the darkness, wearing a black hood and a far more elaborately designed mask.

*I guess he's in charge around here.*

The man in the black hood walked forward. "We greatly appreciate the opportunity to arrange this meeting with you all in the interests of the kingdom," he said. "Our bonds are unbreakable. Now, shall we get down to business?"

Stewards from the Albarn and Enneagram estates handed over heavy-looking briefcases stuffed full of gold coins. There were six in total: three per family. The masked men took the bags, bowed quickly, and opened up the briefcases to check their contents.

"I hope everything is as it should be," the man with the black hood said.

"It is," one of the stewards replied. "We prepared the money exactly as agreed."

"Yes, that seems to be correct. Very good. I can see that you are trustworthy."

“I am much obliged.”

“However, I’m not sure I feel the same about *all* of you. Is there some chance that a member of your flock may have ulterior motives?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I fear that somebody could have infiltrated your families in an effort to track us down. For example...” the man paused suggestively, “...a royal court magician?”

I made an effort to keep a straight face. I couldn’t let my nerves show. Confirming the man’s suspicions would be disastrous.

We had been so meticulous in our efforts to infiltrate the Albarn and Enneagram families and strike deals with them. Even if the Order had had people keeping watch, I doubted that they would’ve spotted anything. That made me think this was likely to be a bluff, intended to make us uncomfortable.

“Certainly not,” the steward said, looking somewhat confused. “I see no way for them to know about this transaction.”

He was being honest. He didn’t know that his employer had had a change of heart only a few hours earlier.

“But a pair of rats were found on your estate just the other day,” the man with the black hood went on. “Quite impressive rats too, I must say. They even used concealment magic. How do I know that, say, the man over there isn’t secretly a court magician?”

He pointed at one of the Albarn family’s servants. Of course, I knew that that particular servant was actually someone else entirely.

*Luke!*

We all looked at Luke. He seemed uneasy. Choosing not to run the risk of giving the man in the black hood any ammunition against him, Luke said nothing.

“Impossible,” the steward said. “I have known him well ever since he began working for the Albarn household.”

“Is there no chance he could have used magic to change his appearance?”

“Well, I can’t say there’s *no* chance of that...”

“Then why don’t I ask?” The man turned toward Luke. “Are you a royal court magician?”

“Absolutely not,” Luke responded.

“That was a very quick answer. Almost like you’re trying to win me over.”

“Not at all. It’s a habit that comes with the job.”

I gulped. *He’s good!*

Even as someone who knew who he really was, I was almost taken in by Luke’s portrayal of a clueless employee of the Albarn family. I remembered something he had told me when we sneaked into Count Wilhelm’s villa.

*“In a way, I’ve been acting ever since I was young.”*

I expected nothing less from the erstwhile fake model student. His cultivated acting abilities came with a sense of realism that distinguished him from other people.

The man in the black hood nodded softly and moved on. “Very well. Let’s say you can be trusted. Ideally, I would like to interrogate each and every one of you, but we simply don’t have the time for that. I will choose to believe that everything is correct and aboveboard, just as planned. That’s the compromise we must make to accomplish our duties.”

The other two men picked up the briefcases. A single one would’ve been extremely hard to lift, yet they had no trouble carrying three each. I thought again about the illicit drugs circulating on the black market—maybe that was the source of their astounding physical strength.

“Thank you very much. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you all for your involvement this evening.” The man with the black hood bowed deeply. “However, we believe that discretion is the most important of all virtues. We must always do our very best to avoid trouble and protect ourselves from harm. Now, imagine if there is indeed a traitor in your midst, or if somebody here right now decided to turn on us later. Our approach is always to plan for even those remote possibilities. But how can we avoid double-

crossers? Well, the answer to that lies beneath this ruined building. A certain someone left one thousand kilograms of Berthold gunpowder at his villa. We are in possession of both that gunpowder and its detonator.”

His voice rang out around the ruins with tremendous clarity. “Farewell. Perhaps we will meet again after this life.”

In an instant, a wind of over three thousand degrees swept through the area, obliterating everything in its path.

But the moment the gunpowder ignited, I cried out as loudly as I could, “Activate magical barriers!”

I desperately needed backup. Even if I pushed my power to its limit, I couldn’t hold back the blast alone. Luckily, I had skilled people here with me, so there was still a chance with our magic used together.

Once I’d cast Magic Barrier, Luke was the first to come to my aid. He immediately worked out how my barrier was constructed and increased its strength, adding new barriers to reinforce its weak points. Then, after seeing how we’d strengthened our barriers by doubling up, the others followed our lead. Next was Misha, then Miles. His quick responses came from experience of a workplace that demanded on-the-spot decision-making. The other rookies then each erected barriers of their own.

“Iris!” I shouted, and she jumped. “Cast a water enchantment!”

The explosion was wiping out even the ground beneath our feet. She used a water-type enchantment spell to imbue the floor with resistance to fire, but it still wasn’t enough.

Hot air scorched my skin. My wind-type barrier had just about warded off the worst of the blast, but it wasn’t perfect. A white light brighter than the sun lit everything up, shining through my eyelids. I didn’t know what kind of shape I was in physically, or if I even still had a body beyond my brain.

I lost my footing and plummeted through the floor. The feeling of the air told me I was falling, so I quickly cast another spell.

“Wind Blast!”

A cannonball of wind cushioned my fall. I was still completely off-balance, so I landed on my face at the bottom of the pit, but it wasn't any more painful than falling over.

Most importantly, I was alive. I could still feel my body. Relief washed over me.

"Is everyone okay?!" I exclaimed.

I looked around. Amid the darkness of the underground level, I could see people lying on the ground. It wasn't easy to determine that they were all safe, but I called out to them one by one to make sure. I breathed a sigh of relief once I'd confirmed that everybody in the Seventh Unit was unhurt.

*It looks like nobody else is severely injured either.*

As I took everything in, I realized exactly why that was the case. It was because one of us was a fool who always prioritized others over himself in this kind of situation. Not only that, but he was also stronger than any of us.

"Hey, did you focus on making barriers to help other people instead of yourself?" I asked him.

"Maybe a little."

"Why do you always have to do that?"

"I simply do what my heart tells me to," he said nonchalantly.

His response sent my mind into overdrive. Generally speaking, he didn't care about other people, so he would only go to such extreme lengths for someone he especially wanted to protect. But in all the commotion, he hadn't known where that person was, so he had gone all out to look after anyone but himself.

Even I wasn't too stupid to know who he wanted to protect. It had to be me.

My heart was racing, but I tried to shake off those thoughts. That was something to worry about later. At this moment in time, I needed to get everyone out of here safely.

I heard a voice coming from above the huge hole created by the explosion. "Well, well. It looks like my concerns were not unfounded. But then again, only two of them are strong. The rest are no match for us." The man with the black

hood spoke in a cold, emotionless voice. “Let’s clean up, starting with the court magicians. There will be no survivors.”

The three masked men dropped down to the bottom of the hole.

“All right, everyone!” I commanded. “Work together, just like in training! Make sure you don’t get separated!”

The strategy we’d worked on involved everybody working in pairs and launching attacks together. Carlos and Hugo formed one pair and quickly landed a direct hit on one of the masked men.

“It’s impossible alone, but we can do it together!” I could hear some excitement in Carlos’s voice.

A burst of smoke interrupted the darkness, followed by a burning smell, but the smoke cleared to reveal something truly astounding.

“H-How...?”

The masked man was getting back up and cracking his neck. He was covered in dust, but otherwise perfectly unharmed. His endurance was extraordinary.

Without missing a beat, the masked man established a magic sequence of his own. His spell launched a blast that demolished Carlos and Hugo’s threefold barrier in an instant. The two were blown off their feet, knocking over three of the other rookie magicians before coming to a halt.

“It’s just too much...” Hugo’s eyes were wide open in shock.

“Stay calm!” I called. “Focus on what you *can* do!”

Alarmed, Alan and Muna were the next pair to activate magic sequences. They put up another barrier and cast an ice-type spell, but in the face of the masked man’s rapid-fire attack, it was only enough to buy a tiny bit of time. Nevertheless, that brief moment was hugely valuable for us, allowing me to cancel out his spell with a blast of wind magic. Luke swiftly followed up with a lightning counterattack. While he launched his precise attack, Misha provided him with cover.

“Thanks,” Luke said, his expression unchanging.

“Just buy me food sometime,” Misha replied with equal seriousness.

It was extremely uplifting to know that I had friends I could count on. Thanks to them, I could look the younger magicians in the eye as I tried to pass on that encouragement. “We’re gonna keep you all safe. But we want you to help protect us too. If we all work together, we’re sure to win.”

Luke’s attack appeared to have had a pretty strong impact on the masked man. Our opponents were starting to ease off of the rookies, taking a more defensive approach.

Among all the colliding spells, I spotted an attack targeting Celty from behind.

“Celty, seven o’clock!” I shouted, launching another blast of wind to neutralize the threat.

We had an advantage in numbers, but the three attackers were obviously skilled, and we had several new recruits to protect. It took all we had just to hold out against the men’s attacks.

On the other hand, the environment was another important factor in determining how the battle would unfold. It was a moonless night, and now that we were in the hole left by the gunpowder explosion, it was as dark as the bottom of the ocean. The darkness was all-consuming. We could barely rely on our vision at all. I knew just how to deal with a situation like this, though. During the final qualifying round for the World Magic Championships, I’d faced a magician from Liesvania who specialized in anomaly-inducing magic. That duel had forced me to fight with restricted eyesight.

*I can just give up on being able to see. I’ll work out where they are based on the movements of the wind.*

I sharpened my remaining senses. Despite our disadvantageous position, I didn’t feel any doubt. I still had the same conviction I’d had since the outset.

*I will bring everybody home alive.*



The masked men possessed superhuman skill. It was a struggle for the magicians of the Seventh Unit to even stay in contention. Amid the dizzyingly fast shifts in the combat situation, Misha had the best view of Noelle’s movements.

*She keeps getting better, Misha thought.*

It was remarkable how well the little lieutenant dealt with the lack of visibility. Her powers of concentration and responsiveness were phenomenal. She understood her environment perfectly and made all the right moves. Her prowess continued to grow from a foundation of her accomplishments. Her awful experience working at the mages' guild had planted a seed that had then flourished during her time as a royal court magician. Moreover, Misha knew that the magician she saw now was stronger than she'd ever been before.

*I suppose it's because of her new responsibility.*

Noelle was determined to look after her subordinates. That mentality and motivation had driven her to become ridiculously capable in battle. It was, after all, her duty as the unit's lieutenant. She had been Misha's junior until recently, but Noelle had taken so much upon herself in an effort to become the perfect superior officer.

*Fighting for others gives her so much strength. That girl really is amazing.*

Noelle had risen through the ranks at record-breaking speed and overtaken Misha in the blink of an eye. Misha couldn't deny feeling a little frustrated about it, but more than anything else, she saw Noelle's progress as a thing of beauty.

The lieutenant's passionate pursuit of her goal was so intense; it was as if she needed it like she needed oxygen. The very fact that she still felt the same way as she had at the beginning was a mark of something special. Always maintaining a positive outlook, she devoted everything to her goal. As someone who had never been able to do that herself, Misha saw real beauty in that diminutive, often foolish girl.

*Still, she could be stretched to her breaking point here.*

The explosion had taken a lot out of them all. The three masked men had incredible fighting strength. Protecting the eight young magicians alone was clearly a bridge too far, even for Noelle.

*That means it's my job to back her up, Misha thought determinedly, establishing another magic sequence. Go, Noelle. Reach new heights!*





The masked men didn't see these royal court magicians as much of a threat. They understood that the magicians must have special talent, since they'd risen to the top of one of the western continent's most advanced magic nations, but that distinction was only relevant in mainstream society.

There were other ways of fighting in the criminal underworld, where people didn't have to be so picky about their methods. Hazardous illegal drugs enabled people to gain great advantages, though it meant shortening their lifespan. With backroom surgeries, one could even acquire a whole new body. The technology used by crime syndicates like Nightfall made use of supreme relics to develop new, more powerful techniques. Such techniques would destroy most people mentally and render them useless, but when they worked, they could equip magicians and knights with monstrous power that no ordinary person could ever hope to achieve.

Not only did the royal court magicians lack the underworld's technology and methodology, but the masked men primarily faced rookies.

*Two of them could be dangerous, one of the men thought, but the rest are hardly worth bothering with.*

They believed the outcome was clear before the battle had even begun. They intended to completely wipe out the court magicians, so their top priority was to keep the group surrounded. Everything that had happened here needed to remain in the dark. No one could be allowed to make it out alive.

*They're clearly no match for us. As long as we block their escape route, everything will fall into place.*

However, the court magicians handled the situation better than the masked men had anticipated. Even though the rookies were one wrong move away from death, they kept their composure and worked together to hold the line.

*It's that girl. She's giving the orders.*

With her precise instructions and practical support for her struggling comrades, the little magician was bringing out the best in those with less experience and boosting their power to the very limit. Even though she could

barely see two meters in front of her, she handled everything like she could see perfectly.

The support of the other magicians empowered her. The group's power wasn't merely the sum of its junior court magicians; by commanding the others, she made the most of their numbers and took advantage of their individual abilities to turn the tide in their favor. As more of them got involved and the battle became more complex, it only sharpened her situational awareness and leadership. Not only that, but as time went by, her sequences were faster and stronger.

*Who the hell is she...?*

Before them in the darkness was something that seemed to have unlimited capacity for growth.



In the thick of the battle, Iris Reid could sense the evolution taking place. *She's gotten stronger.*

Lieutenant Noelle was doggedly fighting to protect everybody. The captain's power was impressive too, but it was no match for Noelle's astounding performance.

*She must be doing this for our sake.*

"Iris!" Noelle cried. "Look out! Five o'clock!"

Iris hadn't even noticed the attack coming her way, but she narrowly avoided it thanks to Noelle's amazing grasp of the situation. Even as Noelle managed to gallantly fight on her own, she commanded the troops perfectly.

It was also vital for the lieutenant that she was getting such tenacious support from Misha. They were both fighting for others. Iris recognized it, but it was something she couldn't wrap her head around.

*It's much more efficient to protect yourself than to spend your energy on somebody else.*

No matter how much effort one might put in for another person, there wasn't a lot to gain from it, and it could all come to an end without any result

whatsoever. It was inevitable that people would hope for something in return for their actions. If that never came to pass, one could easily feel worthless.

*“Iris, help! Let me see your notes for the next test!”*

*“Thank you, Iris. You always come to my rescue.”*

*“Friends? No way. She’s so impossible to please. I just get her to help me with tests. But it is sad how she’s always just studying magic by herself.”*

Just thinking about her early years at school made Iris want to die. She’d always been alone. Magic was her only friend.

When other children looked down on her, the anger drove her to work harder, but then her classmates mocked her for her studiousness. She got even more annoyed and pushed herself to try to fit in. Being a pretty girl in the first place, she made great efforts to know more about makeup and fashion than any of the others. She was sure that her newfound popularity would shock her detractors into silence.

When the other girls ostracized her more than ever for her supposed arrogance, Iris decided she didn’t care anymore. She no longer wanted to waste her precious time on people who lacked talent and brains. They were the kind of fools who hated hard work and got together to bad-mouth others just to boost their own egos. The pathetic boys were no different, showing cruelty to others only to change their tune entirely the second someone’s physical appearance changed.

Iris decided she needed no one else. “People are born alone, and they die alone. I don’t need anyone else” had been her mantra.

However, when she joined the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, she found that her superior officers looked after her extremely well, especially the little lieutenant. Even though her professional achievements were unmatched, she stubbornly kept looking out for Iris.

*What a fool she is. She’s wasting her energy caring for others. I can’t understand her.*

Iris assumed that apart from magic, Noelle must’ve been lacking in other fundamental knowledge. Either way, she wasn’t going to change Iris’s

worldview, no matter how hard she might try. Changing other people was impossible, and it was pointless to even hope otherwise.

*“What I want most of all is for you to live a good life.”*

*“After working harder than anyone else, you deserve that happiness.”*

*“Between you and me, you’ve made a great impression. I like you, so I want you to be a thoughtful person who can accept everyone, regardless of where they’re at with magic.”*

That conversation with Noelle touched Iris’s heart. She felt something soft and warm, and she didn’t know what to do about it. It was like she’d come across a part of herself that she hadn’t even known existed.

Back in the heat of battle, Iris closed her eyes for a moment.

*Good deeds deserve something in return. Lieutenant Noelle, I’ll lend you a hand.*



Captain Luke and Lieutenant Noelle were going all out, with support from Misha and—much to the surprise of the other rookies—Iris Reid. They knew their coworker as a prickly person who neither listened to nor relied on others, someone with absolutely no sense of altruism or cooperative spirit. But that very same person was there on the front line, putting more at stake than any of them. Like their superior officers, Iris was fighting with all her might for someone other than herself.

*Why’s she so dedicated now?* Miles asked himself. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

The most painful lesson Miles had learned from his first job was that humans were stupid, shameful creatures. They castigated others as a distraction from their own problems. Time and time again, their actions were eye-wateringly unreasonable. Everyone was in it for themselves, and they wouldn’t hesitate to mistreat anyone standing in their way.

*“Can we really sell these when they aren’t up to scratch?”*

*“Sure. That never stops us normally.”*

*“I can’t make this with these materials. It won’t be durable enough without the approved—”*

*“Isn’t it your job to think up a way around that?”*

*“Is it right to make up numbers for the inspectors?”*

*“Feeding my family is what’s right. Keep your mouth shut.”*

*“This is real work. Don’t be so damn naive.”*

*“You can’t do it yourself, but you still never shut up.”*

*“I never thought you’d be so useless.”*

*“Don’t you know nobody here likes you?”*

Criticism and even violence became daily occurrences. Miles had tried to endure it, but he died a little on the inside.

He learned to stop questioning and go on doing the wrong thing. There was nothing else he could do if he wanted to make a living. There was no one to look after him. That was just the way society worked. Survival meant getting tough.

Because of all that, the little lieutenant bothered Miles from day one. The two of them had similar backgrounds, but everything she did conveyed her love of magic. Just seeing her made him miserable.

It made him feel like he didn’t belong. He started to be disobedient and childish, and he ended up having no friends at his new workplace either. But he didn’t care.

Miles decided that if he lost his job, he'd get a new one that didn't involve magic. He'd come to understand that doing a job revolving around his interests was a recipe for failure. After all, he knew that he didn't have the skill level to make it work. However...

*"I support you. You don't need to change the way you think."*

*"I want you to listen to your heart and do what it tells you. But you know, not everything has to be the way it is right now. Once in a while, I hope you look back fondly on how things were before you started working. I think you know how fun it can be to give your all to something. I appreciate who you are now, and who you used to be too. But anyway, this is all just my opinion. Don't feel pressured to pay any attention to me."*

*"Whatever you choose, I'll have your back. And I'll be watching over you, because I expect great things from you."*

The lieutenant, small as a child, didn't want to give up on Miles. She met him at his level and spoke to him with sincerity.

Now, during this battle, she was protecting him with all her might, as if he were just the same as all the other, better-behaved young magicians.

*It isn't right!* a voice cried out within him. *It isn't right to hold back when she's done so much!*

Miles wiped his blurry eyes. He knew he had to take this seriously. He wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he didn't. He hated himself for his weakness, his lack of ability, his indecisiveness. But as worthless as he felt, he couldn't give in after everything he'd been through.

*I can't let this be the end. I have to give everything I've got to help her!*



As the fight stretched on, the man with the black hood could sense the growing power of the royal court magicians. The advantage had seemed clearly to be in the favor of the three men from the Order, but it had begun to decline. The magicians' willpower had put the wind in their sails. Their magic was subtly

more effective now, but the black-hooded man knew even a subtle difference could be hugely significant in a magic duel.

*The way things are, trying to go for the perfect victory might end badly, he thought. We'd better make sure to pick them off one by one, even if it leaves us open.*

And it was immediately clear to him who they should focus on stopping.

*We have to go for that little one there, whatever it takes.*

In that deep darkness, the court magicians' morale was high. Even though many of them lacked experience, they were still fighting with precision and great teamwork. Because of the little magician's efforts to protect them all, they were able to go on casting spells without fear.

But while the man knew that, actually stopping her was a different matter. Every time she focused on launching an attack, Luke Waldstein came in right beside her. Despite all the confusion, he didn't take his eyes off her for a second. He was ready to step in and help her if anything came up.

*If we crush her, victory will effectively be ours. With that in mind, we'd better use the most reliable means to take her down.*

"Time for plan C," the man murmured. His masked comrades nodded.

He had noticed a tiny chink in Noelle Springfield's armor. She was obviously straining herself to protect every single one of her teammates.

*Her weakness is her refusal to cut off the weak. If we spread out our attacks, it'll increase her workload.*

The men simultaneously targeted the two magicians at either end, farthest from Noelle—where it was hardest for her to lend support.

"Muna, to your right!" Noelle shouted.

The young target couldn't fight back against their attack, so all three men continued to focus on her. Noelle did her best to help her out, accelerating time to meet their attacks with inhuman speed and effectiveness, but she couldn't block everything.

A deadly fire attack rushed toward Muna, instantly smashing the magical

barrier in front of her. Time seemed to stretch out, like everything was in slow motion.

*Is this the end...?* Muna thought, frozen with fear.

Just at that moment, Noelle dived forward. She got in front of Muna and launched a wind attack to neutralize the incoming shot, but it wasn't quick enough. The fire attack struck Noelle directly.

"Lieutenant Noelle!" Muna cried out next to Noelle, her breathless voice nearly inaudible.



When the attack hit me in the back, I felt like I was being blown apart. As the fireball burst, I smelled burning flesh—the pain made my mind go blank. As all the strength left my body, I fell to my knees.

The effects of Spell Boost were gone. My vision was blurred. My magic power had been depleted so suddenly that I was entering a state of hypomagia. I'd exceeded my limits.

However, I realized something at that moment. Since the enemies had been concentrating their efforts so much on Muna and me, that inevitably meant that they'd taken their eyes off everybody else—and there was no way *he* would pass up a chance like this.

An extreme high-voltage lightning attack struck one of the masked men, instantly removing him from the battle. As Luke moved on to the next opponent, I saw an unusual urgency in his expression. I sensed that he was determined to eliminate the enemy, right here, right now. He needed to do it to protect his comrades and what mattered to him most.

But it wasn't all going to go his way. The man in the black hood used his partner as a shield to block Luke's attack, then sent a spell my way. Spears of ice rained down, bringing me face-to-face with too many razor-sharp points to count.

Suddenly, nine magical barriers appeared before my eyes. Misha and the rookies had focused on activating new magic sequences just in time.



“Don’t even think about it!” Misha shouted.

The barriers weren’t enough to stop the onslaught, though. The man launched another attack, smashing through the barriers in a flash and sending the young magicians flying with a deluge of ice. Now that I had absolutely no way to protect myself, he began to establish a new magic sequence. The attack came toward me with lethal power, but at the last second, I saw three figures dash in front of me.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said?!” Misha bellowed, letting loose a full-power volley with enthusiastic support from Iris and Miles.

Their combined spells could only help to stall for a brief moment, but under the circumstances, that was more than enough. The other six rookies pulled themselves to their feet and overwhelmed the man with the black hood with magic attacks. They must have learned from how I’d shown them to optimize their abilities. And as all nine of them fervently continued their assault, something new happened: one of the attacks landed perfectly on-target.

“Ugh!!!” the man grunted, falling to the ground.

Just as he pulled himself back up to his knees, Luke’s lightning attack struck him. A great flash of light briefly illuminated everything as it tore through the darkness.

The sound of the man with the black hood crumbling to the ground echoed softly in the silence at the bottom of the pit. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lieutenant Noelle, are you all right?!” Iris called out, rushing toward me.

I couldn’t resist breaking into a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just couldn’t go on fighting. I’m pretty much all out of magic.”

“Me too. It was getting really close.”

I could see that everyone had given it their all. They were all drained, both in body and magic. I didn’t want to think about what might’ve happened if the battle had gone on any longer.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant Noelle,” Muna said, looking concerned. “It was my fault.”

I smiled up at her. “Don’t worry. Really, it’s thanks to all of you that I made it.”

Everyone had fought so desperately to help me. That warm feeling of reassurance would remain in my heart for a long time afterward.

“Thanks for helping me,” I said to Miles.

“I was just returning a favor,” he replied curtly.

The others all nodded in agreement. I was so relieved to know that I’d managed to keep everybody safe.

Just then, I began to sense a magic aura. Everything suddenly felt cold and tense. There was a whiff of death in the air.

What I saw next stunned me. Five masked men were surrounding us. None of them were the same as the ones we had fought; they were reinforcements who had just arrived.

“This can’t be happening...” one of the rookies whispered.

“No way...” another gasped.

I could practically hear their spirits breaking. It made perfect sense that they were dejected. After all, we had no strength to carry on fighting. I had good enough situational awareness to recognize that there was no way out for us, no matter what we tried.

The masked men established magic sequences. “Take out Noelle Springfield first,” one of them commanded.

Air hit me with great force and heat as a flurry of attacks approached with enough destructive power to tear a person to shreds instantly. Those attacks never reached me, though.

“Luke!” I exclaimed.

I saw him standing before me, shielding me from the attacks.



He was in no fit state for this anymore. He mustered his remaining magic power to throw up five barriers, but they quickly shattered. The enemy attacks sliced through, tearing at his clothes and skin.

“Why...?” I murmured.

“I won’t let them hurt you any further.”

Even though he was clearly on the verge of hypomagia himself, he stubbornly kept himself conscious and continued making new barriers. His knees trembled and he stumbled repeatedly, but he put his hands on his thighs to hold himself up and refused to budge.

The other members of the Seventh Unit were sprawled on the ground. They must have used up their remaining energy in a vain attempt to hold off the latest attack. Barriers were no help to us anymore.

*I’m in charge... I’m supposed to look after them...*

They respected me and had even come to like me. They had done their best to protect me, and so had Luke. He was always thinking of me. He’d brought me to the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, watched over me, and kept me safe. But now, he couldn’t move. He’d used up all his magic.

*I’m sorry, everyone,* I thought.

Luke fell to the ground. The five masked men activated more spells and sent an array of attacks flooding toward us. I closed my eyes in fear, waiting for the pain to hit me.

And that’s when it happened.

“Absolute Zero.”

I didn’t understand what was going on. Everything in view turned to ice. It was like time had stopped; even the air itself seemed to ooze like liquid. The temperature had plummeted and everything was tinged with blue.

“You should be careful,” a voice rang out. “You led my friends into a trap and hurt my junior colleagues. That makes me very angry.”

The speaker quietly dropped down into the pit. In the dim light, I could see him calmly turn to look at us.

“Put up the best barriers you can,” he said. “Otherwise, I might accidentally kill you.”

It was the captain of the Second Unit of the Royal Court Magicians’ Division—Chris Sherlock. He wasn’t alone. Standing in front of us, gripping a sword with a flawless stance, was the master swordsman Eric Rashford. They were followed by a huge squad of other magicians and knights.

*Agents from the IMUB! And royal knights too!*

“Springfield, are you okay?” Seamus Glass asked. As lieutenant of the Second Unit and head of the Improper Magic Usage Bureau, he had fought alongside us during the raid on Count Wilhelm’s villa. “You made a big mistake in thinking you were the only ones on their tail. Thanks for giving us the chance to catch up to you, Waldstein.” He grinned. “You did a good job of holding them at bay. I commend your efforts.”

The masked men unleashed another series of attacks, but they didn’t stand a chance against the power and sheer numbers of their new opponents. One by one, they were taken out of action and rendered helpless.

It was such an unbelievable sight that it almost made me wonder if I was hallucinating on my deathbed. The only proof that this was real was the fact I could still feel pain all over my body.

*We made it. Thank goodness.*

I had protected them all. I’d accomplished my mission as lieutenant. Perhaps it was that feeling of relief that sapped the very last of my energy.

“Lieutenant Noelle!” I heard Iris shout. “Hold on!”

With her voice ringing in my ears, I drifted out of consciousness.

## Epilogue: Rendezvous in the Royal Capital

I awoke from a nap to see the ceiling of a hospital room. I noticed shiny new magical light fixtures and some tiny dark stains. I'd seen this before.

*This is the same place I ended up last time, I thought.*

I turned around gingerly in the bed to take a look at myself. My entire body felt sluggish and heavy, presumably as a side effect of powerful healing magic. Fourth Unit Captain Vicente Cera, the kingdom's greatest and most knowledgeable healing magic specialist, had previously treated me using similar magic after our encounter with Count Wilhelm. The so-called Savior Magician had come to my aid again.

*I'm all in one piece. Looks like I made it out okay.*

As I continued shifting around to check the rest of my body, I spotted someone lurking in the corner of my vision. It was Iris, arranging a vase of flowers and looking out of the window. Her left shoulder was heavily bandaged. A gentle breeze made her long hair flutter, and I smelled a graceful perfume—the scent of a chic young lady.

Just then, Iris turned around, spotted me, and froze. She remained perfectly still, her eyes wide, as if time had stopped. Evidently, she hadn't expected me to wake up. She frowned and retreated from the vase. With her hands behind her back as if she was hiding something, she quietly left the room.

A few moments later, Captain Vicente entered.

"Do you have pain or discomfort anywhere?" the magus asked.

"I'm fine," I replied. "Just a little sleepy. I guess that means the healing magic is working."

"Well, the most important thing is that you're feeling okay. By the way, it looks like you have an admirer."

"Who?"

“Iris Reid, from the Seventh Unit. Even though she needed care herself, she’s come to see you three times in two days. I said she must like you, and she told me, ‘I need to be the one to defeat her. I can’t allow somebody else to do it.’”

“Is that *really* admiration?”

“Admiration to the extreme, yes. Of that, I am certain,” Captain Vicente said theatrically. “Anyway, you put in another fine performance, preventing a shady deal and apprehending enemies of the state. The crown prince is delighted. His Highness had apparently suspected that such enemies existed.”

“Does that mean the crown prince was the one who sent the other royal court magicians and knights to help us?”

“The Order of Royal Knights operates under Prince Michael’s command, yes, but I think the IMUB found out through their own investigation. A certain letter proved important too.”

“A letter? What about?”

“Immediately after his arrest, Captain Gawain contacted Prince Michael and Captain Chris, telling them to ‘keep an eye on Luke Waldstein.’ They then observed Luke in secret and were able to come to your aid in the nick of time.”

“Do you think Captain Gawain was trying to make Luke sound like the mastermind behind the plot so that the crown prince and Captain Chris would be on maximum alert?”

“Perhaps. After all, they even got Eric Rashford to make an appearance. That Captain Gawain really has a soft spot for his comrades, doesn’t he?” The magus beamed. “But you know, I think Seamus was the happiest of all. Luke Waldstein has always outwitted him and stolen his thunder, but after this, he’s indebted to Seamus. Then again, Luke helped with the Count Wilhelm affair, so I suppose they’re even now. I don’t think Seamus appreciated my pointing that out, though.”

I thought back to when the Second Unit’s Improper Magic Usage Bureau had come and saved us from the Order of the Dragon. Captain Vicente explained that afterward the Albarn and Enneagram families, happy that Luke had pulled them out of their own sticky situation, had pressured the authorities to clear

Letitia and Gawain of suspicion. The two of them were expected to be able to return to work the very next day.

At least for now, everything was neatly wrapped up without causing any serious problems. Most of all, I was relieved that I'd succeeded in getting my Seventh Unit subordinates out of danger.

"I'm so glad I managed to protect everybody," I said happily.

"You really worked hard. You understood your duty as superior officer to provide the rookies with proper guidance."

"I have no idea whether I actually did a good job. There are a lot of things I ended up regretting."

"That's just how it is. Being in charge isn't always easy."

"Do you find it hard too?"

"Not a day goes by that I don't regret my mistakes. Is that such a bad thing, though? Think of it like trying out a new magical item. The most dangerous thing is to believe that you've mastered it."

"I guess that's true..."

"It's important to ask yourself whether you're doing things the right way. And in that respect, I think you're handling your responsibilities admirably."

Hearing that gave me a strange feeling. I must've been more worried that I'd realized. Since my first experience of working life had been so disastrous, the prospect of being responsible for others had come with unexpected pressure.

For that very reason, Captain Vicente's praise was especially pleasing. It was like the sweet, red cherry on top.

"Maybe you're right." I scratched my head, bashful. "I hope so, at least."

I felt a breeze roll in through the window and blow against my hair. The feeling of the air told me summer was on its way.



Ernest Maeterlinck, also known as the Glimmering Magician, was the captain of the First Unit of the Royal Court Magicians' Division. His office was sealed off



from the outside world by eighteen layers of magical barriers. As the kingdom's leading expert in magical barriers, he had constructed them himself. This was one of the hardest places to infiltrate in the entire western continent.

Facing Captain Ernest was Luke Waldstein. The young man looked down glumly, trying to work out what to say.

Eventually, his lips parted. "There was nothing I could do." He sounded both remorseful and helpless.

Ernest looked bemused, as if he'd heard something in a foreign tongue he barely knew. "You uncovered the treachery of the Albarns and the Enneagrams, and you thwarted clandestine operations that posed a threat to our kingdom. The Order of the Dragon seeks to harm us, but now we have a leg up. Despite us being unable to even confirm its existence before, now we have some of its members in custody. From what I've heard, you did a marvelous job."

"But my overeagerness placed her in danger," Luke retorted. "I thought I'd be able to keep her safe, but I couldn't."

"Your opponents used supreme relics to increase their magical and physical strength at the expense of their humanity and years of their lives. Few court magicians have the individual ability to defeat them, but you were more than a match for them even when you were surrounded. According to my understanding, you and your team played a crucial role by wearing those enemies down."

"Never mind all that. If I'd made an additional mistake, even a small one, it could have had irreversible consequences. I was powerless. I put her life—all their lives—at risk. All we could do was wait for help to come. It's as simple as that." Luke paused. "I regret it immensely. I repeatedly acted alone just to get the results I wanted, and I can't really say I communicated with my subordinates. I think this whole situation was just one blunder after another. It was bad enough that it would be reasonable to demote me."

Ernest watched Luke closely. "You want to be removed from your position?"

"Absolutely not. I want to continue if I can, but after what I've done, I'm in no position to complain if I am demoted. I should've been so much more careful. I should've tried to work out a safer approach, and I certainly should've spoken

to the others.” Luke avoided Ernest’s gaze. “If you decide I should be stripped of my position, then I accept that punishment.”

Luke’s voice was full of shame. This was no act; these were his true feelings.

He had decided he would do whatever it took to make his wish come true, and he had risked everything. But now, he was choosing to push his greatest dream out of his own reach. A voice in his head told him—screamed at him—not to be so stupid.

It pained him to his core, but he felt the need to own up to his mistakes. It would be an even greater loss if he didn’t. He would no longer deserve to be by her side.

Ernest’s expression remained as solemn as ever. “I’ll take your opinion into consideration. I’m thinking about upgrading the Seventh Unit to one of the division’s official units. Lieutenant Noelle Springfield will be promoted to the adamantite class. For the first time, we will have eight magi, and the new magus will be captain of the Seventh Unit.” He lowered his voice. “I intend for you to be that magus, Luke Waldstein.”

Luke couldn’t believe his ears. He had pointed out all his shortcomings; they’d been discussing his imminent demotion. His actions were not appropriate for a unit captain.

*So why should I be the first person to attain the position of eighth magus?* he thought.

“You already had many of the necessary attributes for a magus,” Ernest explained. “You’ve put in more work than anybody else in the Royal Court Magicians’ Division, and your appetite for career advancement is remarkable. Simply looking at your achievements, it’s a wonder that you weren’t promoted sooner. However, I’d felt that there was something missing. You lacked experience connecting with your colleagues and subordinates. You also hadn’t had a chance to truly question yourself. You seemed overconfident. I had the sense that you were trying too hard to disguise your fear of failure and loss. What you needed most of all was to make mistakes, so that you could learn from them.” Ernest smiled gently. “Now, I am firmly of the belief that you meet the requirements to become a magus.”

Luke was at an utter loss for words. Becoming a magus was the goal he had sought for so long. He had endured so much frustration, but what had always evaded him was now finally within his grasp. It was a trump card that would silence any naysayers from the Waldstein family.

What really mattered to him, though, was what might happen next. He had been watching her from afar, but this would enable him to bridge the gap between them. He could express his feelings without having to worry about an ensuing scandal causing her pain. The wait had felt endless.

He still remembered the day she'd disappeared from his life, but after all this time, he could finally make the progress he had wanted. He could approach her and reveal what he had been hiding.

Luke's vision blurred. A tear fell from the corner of his eye and traced a soft line down his cheek. He wiped his eyes, adjusted his stance, and looked firmly at Captain Ernest.

"I will make sure I live up to your expectations," he declared.



Letitia Lisette-Stone, lieutenant of the Third Unit, was in her office, sorting through work that had accumulated during her absence. She and Captain Gawain had been detained and questioned for several days after being arrested on suspicion of illegal practices in their investigation of Count Wilhelm. Since they had both been unavailable at the same time, the Third Unit's paperwork had become unmanageable.

However, it was said that there was no one in the division who could do paperwork as fast as Letitia. Even at normal times, she would do additional paperwork on behalf of Gawain, who couldn't stand the tedium. After returning to work, she quickly set about dealing with the delayed work, and by the end of the next day, things were moving along smoothly. She had already succeeded in getting over eighty percent of the unit's tasks back on schedule without needing to work even a second of overtime.

*I just need the captain to approve it all now,* she thought, gathering up a huge pile of papers and carrying it to Gawain's office.

She knocked, then entered the office. Inside, a thoroughly disheveled Gawain looked out from among an even greater pile of papers.

“Captain, can I ask you to approve these documents?” Letitia asked.

“Again already...?” Gawain muttered. He scanned the paperwork with lifeless eyes. “You know, Letitia, I was thinking a little change of scenery might be good for boosting productivity. It’s hard to keep working efficiently when you’ve been sitting at a desk all day. With that in mind, I think I’ll head over to the training ground—”

“No, you will not. Please leave training ground duties until after you’ve finished your more urgent tasks. I’m sure you realize you have a significant backlog.”

“But that’s because you keep bringing me more things to look at...”

“And if I hear another word of complaint, I’ll go right now and bring back all the work I’m *already* doing for you.”

“Thank you for all your hard work, Letitia! I’m so, so grateful! I really appreciate everything you do!”

Gawain returned to work. Letitia watched his red hair bob around between the stacks of paper. He was the type of person who might grumble constantly but could be trusted to do what needed to be done. He knew how to identify key points of concern and carry out the most important tasks correctly. On the other hand, he made no effort whatsoever to do less pressing work, which regularly caused a headache for his trusted lieutenant and the general affairs section.

*He’s been like this for as long as I’ve known him.* The straitlaced Letitia could remember many occasions back at the academy when his behavior had left her incredulous. She covered her mouth to hide her smile as she fondly recalled those times. *No, he could never be the one.*

But just as she felt sure that Gawain had nothing to do with her childhood memories, she couldn’t help but picture the boy that had grabbed her hand that summer in the alleyway—and whose hand she had held in the classroom one evening. His hair had been red too.

The words of her younger coworker echoed around her head.

*“I just know that you’re special in his eyes.”*

*“Maybe you should pay closer attention to what’s going on right under your nose. That’s my advice to you, as another fool who’d sacrifice everything for a single dream.”*

On the crimson carpeted floor outside Gawain’s office, amid soft amber rays of sunlight, Letitia stood frozen.

*Surely not...?*



Finally, my time at the hospital ended and I could return to normal life. I’d been concerned about how everyone else in the Seventh Unit would cope without their lieutenant around, but when I returned to the workplace, I found that they were getting on with their jobs without any trouble.

“Nice work, Celty!” Misha called out.

She exuded confidence. I’d known I could rely on her to look after everyone. What I hadn’t expected, however, was the person next to her.

“Look at this while you work on the translation.” Luke was instructing Miles. “The most important part is the third magic sequence, so concentrate on that. It’s a bit tricky, but do your best.”

Until now, Luke had constantly been working behind closed doors, rarely getting involved in day-to-day activities with the younger magicians. However, after a few days without me there, he had become perfectly comfortable speaking with them. His ability to change was really something to behold.

Now that Luke was taking part, it looked like things were running more smoothly than they ever had with me in charge. Jealousy consumed me when I learned that even Iris and Miles were working with newfound vigor.

*Why...? I agonized. Why is he doing a better job than I am?!*

I’d been so sure that I was a more reliable boss than him. I’d told myself that I needed to use *my* skills to make up for *his* deficiencies. I could just picture his gloating face saying, *“This isn’t that hard, though, is it? Of course, taking your*

*job away wouldn't be right, so I only did it while you were away."*

The mere idea of it made my blood boil.

"I don't know if I could hold myself back if he really said that to me," I told Misha. "I think I'd be running up to punch him in the face before I even knew what was happening. So yeah, could you help me hide the evidence and come up with an alibi?"

"You don't want me to get him in a full nelson or anything?"

"No, I want it to be a clean, fair fight," I replied seriously.

Misha giggled and held a hand in front of her mouth. "You two are pretty funny, you know. But I should tell you that things are going better at work mainly because everyone's getting more used to it. The fact that Iris and Miles are taking it more seriously doesn't hurt either."

"But isn't that just proof that Luke does my job better than I do?"

"Sure, he's been handling things well. But when it comes to those two in particular, your influence is really what turned them around. They're doing better because you confronted the problem head-on," Misha assured me. "Believe in yourself. You're actually pretty good at this."

I replayed her kind words in my head. *Iris and Miles are making an effort thanks to me? Heh.*

I couldn't stop myself from grinning as I watched them working.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Miles muttered.

"Please stop that, Lieutenant," Iris complained. "You're creeping me out."

*They don't respect me at all!*

Feeling crestfallen, I heard a familiar snickering laugh behind me. I spun around angrily to see Luke avoiding making eye contact with me.

"Don't get too pleased with yourself about taking charge," I said.

"I'm not."

"You so are."

“Fine. And?”

“You’re so smug. Ugh, I can’t stand it!”

Luke chuckled at my sullen expression. It was a sound I knew all too well. Then he said, “Anyway, I’d like to talk to you about something. Do you have a minute?”

I followed him as he walked away. Evidently, this was supposed to be a private conversation. He took me through the palace garden, where seasonal flowers were blooming brightly. I remembered the time we’d danced together here after the Red Rose Ball.

“I had a meeting with Captain Ernest earlier,” Luke said. “He was very pleased with the work we did on the recent case, and he wants to make the Seventh Unit official. He also told me you’re being promoted to the adamantite class.”

“A-Adamantite...? Me?” I was astonished. The idea had never crossed my mind, though it was true that it wasn’t so strange for a unit lieutenant to have such a high rank. “But wait, that would mean I’m breaking your record for fastest promotion, right?”

“True. I would still keep the record for *youngest* adamantite-class magician, but you’ll be the fastest by far to reach this rank since joining the division.”

“W-Wow...”

It was hard to believe. It didn’t seem real. I pinched my cheek, just to make sure. *This isn’t a dream...*

Even though I still had my doubts, I couldn’t hold back my excitement. “The day has finally come! I’ve beaten you fair and square!”

“Well, I’m getting promoted at the same time.”

“Huh? You are?”

“That’s right. I’ll be the eighth magus—the first time there’s ever been one. And that also means I’m the youngest *and* fastest to ever reach that position.”

I met this revelation with total silence. Setting a new record for the quickest promotion to the adamantite class was pretty special, but it was nothing compared to joining the magi. Just as I’d always thought, playing with Luke was

no fun. He was constantly too far ahead of me. I couldn't help wishing I could give him a thorough beating.

But I had better things to do than get envious of one of my oldest friends' successes.

"That's amazing," I said, almost in tears. "I'm so happy for you."

I knew that he'd been working hard and pushing himself like nobody else could. The world was a cruel place where good deeds weren't always rewarded, but after all his efforts, Luke had finally achieved his goal. I could hardly contain myself.

As I dabbed at my eyes, Luke smiled. "Do you have plans tonight? There's another thing I've been wanting to tell you."

We agreed to meet by the fountain in a plaza in the center of the capital at eight o'clock. I finished work on time and headed home to get ready to go out again.

I reached for some typical everyday clothes, assuming I wouldn't need to make more of an effort if it was only Luke, but then I stopped myself. It felt different this time. He had given me the impression that there was something special about this particular meeting.

I paused in thought for a little while, before picking out the nicest, most fashionable items I owned.

"Are you going out, Noelle?" my mother asked from outside the room.

"I just have some plans."

"I don't suppose you're meeting that boy you know from school?"

"Yeah, I am..."

"Great! That's my girl! But if that's what's going on, you'd better doll yourself up a bit. At the very least, don't just wear the same rags you always—" Just at that moment, she opened my door, saw me, and froze. "Oh, I see you're really going for it."

"N-No, it's nothing special. I guess I just, uh, felt like getting dressed up." I



looked away sheepishly.

“So you understand how high the stakes are. I knew it! You really are an irresistible expert in the ways of love!” Her voice trembled. “With your wisdom and charisma, you’ve mastered the art of romance. I have nothing more to teach you. Just approach this battle the way you always do!”

I had no idea what on earth she was talking about, but I was used to it. I didn’t let it bother me.

My mother suddenly seemed to think of something. “Oh, you won’t be needing dinner before you go, will you?”

“No, I will.”

“But aren’t you going out to eat with him?”

“I said what I said.”

As far as I was concerned, there was no limit to how many dinners I could eat. If second helpings were available, I could easily take another two portions.

After enjoying a quick meal of walnut bread, mutton stew, and vegetable salad, I headed out. As I walked down the cobbled streets under the evening sky, the day’s final rays of sunlight outlined the mountains on the horizon.

This felt like a new beginning. Something big and decisive was about to happen, and there would be no going back. Some amorphous, unsteady feeling was preventing me from thinking straight. Bound up within it were many emotions—hope, anxiety, fear—but I needed to hear what Luke had to say.

Perhaps due to nerves, I arrived thirty minutes early. The plaza where we’d planned to meet was crowded with people. It was a Friday night, after all. It was also a pretty popular meeting place, so there were quite a few people besides me waiting for others to show up.

I took a seat on the edge of the fountain. Absentmindedly stroking the smooth marble surface with my fingertips, I waited for Luke’s arrival.



I was walking through the division’s headquarters after completing the last of the day’s outstanding tasks when a familiar voice called out to me.

“Luke, I heard about your promotion!”

I turned around to see someone who had taken great care of me ever since I first joined the division—Third Unit Captain Gawain Stark. I would’ve recognized his tough build and flaming red hair anywhere.

“Are you gonna tell her?” he asked. His tone was deeply serious.

“I will, shortly.”

Gawain grinned, slapped me on the back with a big, heavy hand, and went on his way. He said nothing more, but he must have felt there was no need. I watched his broad back slowly disappear from view. Smiling slightly, I also turned to leave.

I went home and changed into my favorite outfit. Suddenly, I stopped. I wondered if it might be best not to look like I was trying too hard. I fretted over whether to change into something more ordinary instead. Before I knew it, a considerable length of time had passed.

*This is no good, I thought. I need to get a move on.*

In the end, I decided to stick with my favorite clothes after all. Maybe it would seem excessive, but I didn’t mind. After all the time I’d waited for this day, it wasn’t so strange to look my best. It made perfect sense.

*It’s fine as long as I make sure the way I say it isn’t too intense.*

I’d kept my love for her hidden since I was a fifteen-year-old academy student. Actually, I’d probably fallen for her some time before then. She held a special place in my heart.

She was unlike anyone else. I could immediately pick her out in a crowd of any size. Everything about her was perfect in my eyes—her voice, her face, her figure, her personality. Even the features that seemed strange to others were incomparably wonderful from my perspective.

As much as I wanted to be near her—right beside her—and spend all my time looking at her, I knew that wasn’t possible. Nothing stayed the same forever, and I understood that feelings and relationships changed over time. The two of us were from different worlds, and that had always meant we couldn’t continue

to be together.

The day I arrived at the Royal Court Magicians' Division for the first time, the fact that she wasn't there truly had hit home. I'd worked to change that, even though I knew it would come with an expiry date. I just wanted her to be with me, closer than anyone. No, that wasn't all I wanted. I wanted everything about her—her heart, her body, her love, her kindness, her jealousy, her anger, her dissatisfaction, her anxieties—to be mine.

*I want to cherish you. I want to make you happy. I want to see you smile. I want to hear you laugh. I want you to be vulnerable. I want to comfort you. I want to bother you. I want to cheer you up. I want to worry you. I want to make you angry. I want to tease you. I want to laugh with you. I want to make a mess. I want you to be with me. I want you to have eyes only for me. I want you to tell me you love me. I want you to choose me. I want us to be together forever.*

Basically, I was in love. She was the absolute perfect person for me. There was no one else in the world like her. If it was for her sake, I'd gladly give everything else up. I'd be happy as long as I had her.

*Hold on a second. I can't say all that. That's definitely too intense.*

Scratching my cheek awkwardly, I ruminated over how to convey my feelings. I wanted it to be light, as if I'd only just awoken to those feelings myself.

My legs carried me faster than I meant. I wondered what kind of face she would make when I confessed. Maybe she would look surprised, or uncomfortable, or even sad. She might reject me.

Alternatively, maybe she would be happy.

I could hardly contain my emotions. After all this time, I could tell her. I could express my feelings. There was a warmth in my chest that came from knowing that even though it might go badly, that was okay. I just hoped for the best possible future for the two of us.

I continued along the cobbled streets. I was getting close to the plaza in the city center. I could see it starting to come into view at the end of the street.

Suddenly, I collided with someone and lost my balance. It didn't seem like there was any malice or intention behind it. Staggering, I turned to look at the

person who had walked into me.

Long hair hung over an unmemorable face. The person didn't stand out as unusual. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of red: in the person's hand was a knife, dripping with blood.

My mind went hazy. Reflexively, I established a magic sequence, but my summoning circle was weak and ineffective. It quickly vanished into nothingness. I felt faint.

"You know too much," I heard a sinister voice say.

The strength left my body, and I fell unconscious.



Sitting on the edge of the fountain, I continued waiting for Luke. I caught a glimpse of someone who looked familiar, but when I looked closer, I realized it was only their general posture that was similar to Luke's. I collected myself and went back to waiting.

I thought this would be the start of something big. I wondered what Luke wanted to tell me, and how I would react when I found out. I felt nervous, but hopeful too.

Our meetup time came and went, and there was still no sign of him. I decided I should make him buy me dinner to make amends.

With my fingers still tracing the marble surface under me, hearing the bustle of the crowded plaza, I waited.

*To be continued in volume 6*



## Extra Chapter: Fireworks in Winter

I had feelings for someone. Since the moment it suddenly hit me, everything about her enchanted me: the sound of her laugh when she talked with her friends, the serious look on her face when she picked out library books, the sight of her sitting ahead of me during class.

She always listened intently to the teachers—so long as they were talking about magic. In classes on other subjects, she was so unfocused that you might think someone else had taken her place. She took naps and pretended to be awake. Other times, she had her lunch box open under her desk and surreptitiously sneaked in bites while the teacher was looking the other way.

That strange girl was short, gluttonous, and obsessed with magic above all else. She had all manner of flaws. Upon seeing her provincial ways, her classmates would remark, “Noelle’s not all there.”

But I loved all of those things about her. At first, I thought she was simply an irritating commoner, so what had changed? Even when she did things that would have annoyed me had it been anyone else, I didn’t mind at all. She made pointless conversations fun. When she said something odd, it would swirl around my head afterward and find a place deep in my heart. It made me happy just to see her looking my way.

She provided me with company, worried about me, and was willing to be herself around me. We would sneak out of the dormitory together to watch the stars or get into risky adventures.

Once, she made a test tube explode, and it completely messed up her hair.

“Nobody will ever love me when I look like this!” she despaired.

“I don’t know. I think you have some strong points,” I replied. “You make me laugh, for one thing.”

“More mockery?!”

*I’m not mocking you. I mean it,* I thought, but I couldn’t say it.

Before I knew it, I was spending all my time thinking about her. I wanted to see her, be around her, and hear her voice. I wanted to wrap her hand in mine. I wanted to hold her. I longed to tell her I loved her and express everything that I was feeling. There was so much that I wanted.

However, the fact that I cared so much frightened me. If she knew how I felt, everything might change. Perhaps it'd ruin our close relationship.

She regarded me as a dear friend, placing me higher than the others she knew. Intent on not letting me win, she would make a beeline for where I was after every test and tell me everything that was on her mind. I got to see her closer than anyone else could, and that alone was enough to light up my everyday life.

"Hey, Luke," I heard her whisper from behind me one day. "Do you have a minute?"

The sound of her voice sent my heart racing. I was worried that she might discover what I was thinking, but that also made me a little hopeful. I snapped myself out of those thoughts and made an effort to act just as I normally would.

"What is it?" I asked. "Is there a problem?"

"I want you to help me out with something. Nothing big, though. It'll be really easy."

"Sure..."

"Thanks, Luke!" she replied gleefully. "All anyone really needs is a friend they can rely on!"

I held myself back from breaking into a huge grin of my own. "Anyway, why do you need my help?"

"I wanna sneak into the library's Forbidden Collection."

"What?" I felt like I must have misheard her.

Noelle looked firmly back at me. "The school library. I wanna sneak into the Forbidden Collection."

"I don't think you should be breaking the rules, no matter how much you might want to read those books," I said coldly.

“No, no,” she replied, waving her hand. “It’s not because I wanna read the stuff in the Forbidden Collection. Well, I mean, I *do*. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have tried to get in there twenty-nine times in the past four years.”

“That’s a lot of effort...”

“Being told not to just makes me want it more. The moment I heard there was a ‘Forbidden Collection,’ I was desperate to get in there.”

“I understand how you feel, but *twenty-nine* times?”

“Anyway, I keep failing, but since I’m so smart and sensible, the teachers have caught me only eight times.”

“That many, huh?”

“Being forced to run laps on the training ground sucked. But still, I learned something from it: students aren’t allowed in that forbidden section.”

“Most people figured that out right away.”

“But one day, I found out that Ms. Frow is leaving,” Noelle continued. “She used to be in a long-distance relationship with her fiancé, and now that they’re getting married, she’s going to the southern region to live with him.”

“That’s good news for her.”

“Yep. She taught me all kinds of things one time when I was making a potion.”

“What potion?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But—”

“*Don’t* worry about it,” she replied forcefully.

I thought it was best not to pry any further. “All right. I won’t.”

“Good. Now, I was on good personal terms with Ms. Frow. She told me about something she wanted to see at least once in her life. They’re called fireworks.”

“Never heard of them. What are they?”

“Apparently, it involves launching a big bunch of magic gunpowder into the sky, so when it explodes, it looks really pretty and you can see it from miles



away. They're supposed to be really popular in parts of Vellmar and eastern countries. We don't have them here in Ardenfeld, but Ms. Frow said she wanted to see them one day. She doesn't have the time or money for long trips, and she has no way of knowing when people outside of Ardenfeld will set off fireworks. Even for her honeymoon, it wouldn't be realistic to go somewhere that took weeks of travel to even reach. She said that unfulfilled dreams are a part of life, but she seemed so sad about it."

"I take it you want to let her see these fireworks?"

"Bingo. I tried to learn as much about them as I could, but since they aren't part of the culture of Ardenfeld or anywhere nearby, it's hard to find any information," Noelle explained. "But then I had an idea! I remembered seeing a list of books in the Forbidden Collection, which included one about eastern magical items and culture."

"I can imagine there would be something in there about fireworks."

"I think that book has instructions. Supposedly, the reason students aren't allowed to read it is because it goes into detail about how to make dangerous magical items."

"Even if it has instructions, I feel like it won't be easy for us to successfully make our own fireworks."

"And that's why I asked *you* for help! You're the academy's pride and joy—the great prodigy—and you'd be teaming up with your rival. No problem is too tough when we have the power of friendship on our side! We'll cruise through and make Ms. Frow's dream come true!"

"The power of friendship, huh?"

"Yep, the power of friendship!"

The turn of phrase stung a little, but it didn't seem like Noelle had any idea how it made me feel. Still, I accepted it.

"All right," I said. "I'll help you."

"Thank you! What a relief. Finally... I'll finally get to see the Forbidden Collection!"

“So that *is* your main goal,” I teased her.

Noelle shook her head. “Not at all. Both parts are really important to me. I want to show fireworks to Ms. Frow, *and* I want to read the grimoires in the Forbidden Collection. I want to try making fireworks, *and* I want to use that experience to learn more about magic. That’s my wish from the bottom of my heart.”

Her passionate honesty struck me as truly beautiful. In the corrupt world we lived in, I’d lost such genuine, powerful emotions. That made her eagerness all the more amazing in my eyes.

It was so obvious to me that I was in love with her.

The Forbidden Collection was in the basement of the academy’s library, hidden behind a locked door and three layers of magical barriers. In her twenty-nine attempts to gain access, Noelle had been able to construct quite a detailed picture of the area’s strict security measures.

“The door doesn’t actually have a key,” she explained as we prepared ourselves outside. “It can only be opened using a lock-picking spell, but that activates the barrier.”

“So that means you need to break through two different defensive systems at once,” I said.

“That’s right. First, let’s look at this barrier. It isn’t easy to remove, but don’t worry. I know more about this barrier than anybody else in the academy, so I’ll tell you everything you need to—”

“I suppose it’s something like this. Is that right?”

Noelle fell silent. Her eyes immediately became wide and round. She stared blankly at the barrier.

“I asked you if that was right,” I repeated.

“It *is*, but I don’t want to *admit* it.” Noelle pouted. I tried to suppress my laughter, but she noticed anyway and scowled at me. “Why do you understand it better than I do?! We never use this kind of barrier in class!”

“I’ve used them at home. When I lived with my parents, they taught me how to remove them.”

“You learned *before* you came here...?” She looked stunned, but she quickly pulled herself together and returned to normal. “Well, it’s fine. We both understand it now. I must be a pretty good student if I’m on equal terms with a teacher’s pet who had all kinds of private tuition.”

“You’d be an even better student if your preferred method of study wasn’t breaking into the Forbidden Collection.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“I’m not flattering you.”

Noelle ignored the unimpressed look on my face and prepared a magic sequence for dealing with the locked door. As one might expect from something that she had tried and failed to do twenty-nine times, opening the door was difficult enough that I couldn’t have done it myself on the first attempt, but Noelle had a wealth of experience to draw from. She had worked out the crucial details necessary to cast the needed spell.

The magic sequence shone with pale green light and the lock opened with a *click*.

“At last... The time has finally come!” Noelle exclaimed. She reached out and put her hand on the door handle, but then she paused.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

“I don’t wanna sully this moment by opening it right away. I need to take my time to properly savor my first visit to the Forbidden Collection.”

“Is this part really something to savor?”

“Greetings! Here I am, Forbidden Collection!” Noelle opened the door and excitedly stepped over the threshold.

The Forbidden Collection was illuminated with magical lighting. The atmosphere was cold and utilitarian, and the air itself felt icy. The windowless chamber had the claustrophobic feeling that comes from being underground. The books were all chained down to prevent them from being taken out.

“Wow, there are so many books we aren’t allowed to read... The Forbidden Collection is amazing!” Noelle looked at the shelves like she’d discovered buried treasure. “All right, so I’ll read this one first... No, wait, *The Apocrypha of Grand Bishop Seiros* sounds super interesting! Oh, but I always wanted to read *The Tryponesque Spirit Scrolls*—”

“We’re here to find books about eastern magic culture, are we not?”

“Sure, but give me a minute. This won’t take long.”

“No. We don’t know what materials we’ll need, and time is of the essence.”

“Ugh, you’re no fun.”

“Well, maybe I’ll just leave if you don’t want my help.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll focus!” she yelped. It pleased me to see how she panicked when I threatened to leave, but that was my little secret. She faced the bookshelves. “Don’t worry, everyone! I’ll read every last one of you one day, just you wait!”

Noelle moved on to scoping out the book we were looking for. She looked like she knew exactly what she was doing. She spotted it on a high shelf, jumped up, hooked her finger over the top of the spine, and deftly pulled it out. With one more jump, she grabbed it and brought it back down with her. The spine of the heavy tome read: *Secrets of Eastern Sorcery*.

“Looking at the table of contents, I think it’s probably in this chapter,” she said, flipping through the pages until she found the entry on how to make the magical items known as fireworks. “So this is what they’re like...”

The two of us inspected the instructions for these mysterious items. Our faces naturally drew close to each other, but her eyes were focused single-mindedly on the page. Pretending I wasn’t bothered by our proximity either, I carefully read the book.

“Huh, it doesn’t *seem* so beautiful,” Noelle remarked.

“Right. It’s basically just a big pile of gunpowder.”

“Is this really gonna turn into something pretty?” She cocked her head.

“The pretty part is how it looks in the sky after it explodes, though, isn’t it?”

“Oh, maybe. I guess that’s fine.” Since we couldn’t take books out of here, she pulled out a notebook and copied the drawings. “It shouldn’t be all that hard to get these materials. I don’t think the magic gunpowder it needs is very expensive either.”

“It seems like the specifics of the magic sequence are what matter most.”

After our visit to the Forbidden Collection, we set about making fireworks as quickly as we could, based on Noelle’s notes.

We bought the gunpowder and apportioned it into smaller piles that would form the basis for the light pattern and larger piles that would send the firework far up into the air. We made a dome-shaped shell out of thick paper and packed the smaller pile of gunpowder around the outside, then put in a paper partition and filled the inner section with the larger pile. To make it produce a beautiful display in the sky, we imbued the shell, the gunpowder, and the partition with magic sequences. Next, we took two of these domes, stuck them together to make one sphere, and covered the outside in glue until it was solid. Finally, we rolled the sphere on the ground to expel air, and put it out in the sun to dry out.

“We’ve done everything detailed in the instructions,” I said. “Will this really work?”

It was hard not to be dubious. The firework just looked like a ball of cardstock, held together and hardened with glue. It was full of magic gunpowder and spells to make it explode with light, but it didn’t give the impression that it would suddenly become beautiful.

“It’s fine. We’ve made nine of them, so at least one of them should work,” Noelle responded. Evidently, her plan all along had been to improve the odds though sheer numbers. “Now we just need to use earth magic to make the launch tube.”

After enchanting each tube to strengthen them, we filled them with more gunpowder to launch the fireworks. Seeing the nine little cannons all in a row was quite an impressive sight.

“You know, we could get in big trouble if anybody finds out,” I said.

“Oh, silly little Luke,” Noelle replied arrogantly. “Did nobody ever tell you? You’re only breaking the rules if you get caught.”

I said nothing. I was starting to want to pull out of this scheme immediately, but I was already in too deep. It was too late to go back now.

On a cold winter’s day, my sigh condensed before my eyes. This was to be Ms. Frow’s final day at work, so we decided to feign illness and cut class to put our plan into action.

“See these thermometers they use in the nurse’s office?” Noelle said, acting like she was imparting arcane wisdom. “Give them a real good shake and it’ll show up as a slight fever.”

While Noelle shook her thermometer like her life depended on it, I raised the temperature on mine by simply moving it toward the fireplace. I laid out my bedsheets to look like I was curled up and asleep, then slipped out through the window.

An assembly was being held outside in the courtyard, and all students were expected to attend. Our plan was to launch the fireworks right in Ms. Frow’s line of sight while she gave her farewell address.

“Luke, I think she’s started her speech,” Noelle announced, running over to me from her lookout point. “Light the fireworks!”

Holding my breath, I attempted to light the fuse, but it was damp with morning dew. If it was this bad, there was a decent chance the gunpowder in the launch tubes was affected too.

“What’s wrong? Hurry up and light them!” Noelle said, but once she got close, she went quiet. She’d realized the fuses and the gunpowder in the tubes were unusable. “What do we do? How can we launch the fireworks now?!”

“Calm down. It’s fine. I have a solution.”

“What kind of—”

“We’ll use magic to launch them.” I spoke confidently, but I certainly didn’t *feel* confident. Using magic to set off fireworks was totally uncharted territory

for me.

However, Noelle's doubts seemed to vanish in an instant. "Let's do it. Together, we have what it takes."

It sounded like she'd been ready for this moment all along. It was an encouraging thought. Better still, she had faith in my suggestion. It made me happy to know she trusted me.

"I'll use fire magic to force the gunpowder to ignite," I said. "And Noelle..."

"You want me to blow it as far away as possible with wind magic, right? You can count on me."

In perfect sync, we established our magic sequences. I cast my fire spell and released the fireworks into the air, then Noelle's wind spell blasted the nine balls of gunpowder far up into the sky.



The very moment Ms. Frow finished saying farewell to the students on her final day of work, it happened. She looked like she'd seen a ghost as the sky was filled with blooming flowers of light. One by one, the fireworks opened up, sparkled magnificently, and faded away, followed by the delayed *pop* of gunpowder.

This was something Ms. Frow had always wanted to witness. The balls of light looked close enough to touch.

"What are those...?" another teacher murmured, confused.

Ms. Frow was captivated. Lost for words, she stared at the display as if she were under a spell. What moved her most was that someone had done this for her. She had dreamed of seeing fireworks one day, but she'd long since given up, believing it was unrealistic. Now, on the eve of her new journey in life, someone had decided to show her fireworks and make her dream come true.

It couldn't have been easy. Ms. Frow knew better than most that merely acquiring information about fireworks was a tall order. Whoever had done this must have overcome many hurdles and put in a great deal of work. Knowing that, the sight of these crude fireworks touched her heart, perhaps even more

than professionally crafted ones would have.

*Thank you*, she thought, watching the smoke lingering in the sky. When she closed her eyes, she could still see the glorious patterns of light, shining so beautifully that they seemed too good to be true.



I thought it might not work. We decided we'd be satisfied if even one of the fireworks was a success. That was why I was so enthralled by the display that lit up the sky above us. Looking from below, the light of each one radiated out in a sphere. It was as if the entire sky were full of great flowers in bloom.

The magical sight of the nine twinkling fireworks took my breath away, but even more captivating was the girl next to me. Gazing at the sky, her face seemed to shine brighter than the midday sun. I'd never seen anything so beautiful before. My mind went blank and I couldn't think straight. It was like she'd bewitched me.

"I love you," I blurted out unthinkingly.

However, the sound of a firework drowned out my voice, and she didn't hear me. I was relieved, but a little disappointed at the same time.

Deep in my heart, I felt something I wasn't supposed to feel. Unbeknownst to the girl beside me, I prayed that one day, I would be able to tell her about those feelings.



## Afterword

What should I write in an afterword? It's quite a tricky question. I feel like anything I write could come across as superfluous, but I also want to do the best I can to convey my gratitude to everyone who bought this book.

With that in mind, I want to open up—literally. I want to bleed out onto the pages and share a tale of my past misfortune.

The truth is, between the ages of twelve and twenty, I was in love with someone the entire time. When I was twelve, I just had a vague sense that she was great. When I was fourteen, the classroom layout was changed one day and I got to sit next to her. Miraculously, we became closer. It was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

During the earlier years of elementary school, I'd changed schools many times. As I entered adolescence, I thought I was so enlightened in believing that we all go through life alone. But after meeting her at that age, she was perfectly etched into my psyche.

At one point, other kids were gossiping that she and I were a couple.

"I'm sorry people are saying those things about us," she said to me.

I was happy that people thought we were together, but I've always been the type of person who overthinks everything before taking a single step. I was afraid that we might not be able to keep being friends if I messed things up. Worst of all, I didn't know whether she'd accept my feelings or reject me.

In the end, I was too scared. I never told her how I felt.

We were in the same class again in high school. To be honest, at least twenty percent of the reason I chose to take advanced humanities courses was because she did too. (Not being able to do science to save my life was another major factor, though.)

As time went by, we drifted apart. She got a boyfriend, leaving me to cry over my broken dream of going out with her one day. Even after we graduated and

went to different universities, I still felt the same way for a while. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I'm still not completely over it. I feel like I'd be up for a final showdown if the opportunity presented itself.

But at the same time, I think I might be better off not knowing what could've happened.

The version of her that lived in my mind was better than the real thing could ever be. From an objective point of view, that's hard to deny.

In reality, she was a human being just like me. There must have been things about her that were shameful or unpleasant. If the two of us had really gotten together, things might have turned out completely differently from how I'd imagined. Because those kinds of thoughts kept going through my head, I ultimately lacked the courage to take action.

But one thing is clear to me: it's unmistakably thanks to her that I've become a writer today. More than friends and family, classes and club activities, what really cultivated my storytelling skills were the months and years I spent admiring her. I'm quietly grateful in ways I could never tell her.

I hope you all got something out of this embarrassing story from my past. There's value in experiences that didn't go your way. It's easy to look back and cringe at moments when you were weak and miserable, but we should cherish those memories and try to be kind to ourselves.

Life is full of shame, but if those memories come from living life to the best of your ability, then that's worth celebrating. Even negative experiences can be transformed into a positive force, so let's all spend our days embracing both the good and the bad.

Thank you once again, everyone. It's thanks to all of you that I get to live my life. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart.

Shusui Hazuki

Wishing My Younger Sister Happiness on Her Wedding Day This December



THIRD UNIT CAPTAIN  
GAWAIN STARK

"I'm trying to decide which horse to  
bet on in this weekend's King's Derby."

THIRD UNIT LIEUTENANT  
LETITIA LISETTE-STONE

"Is this his important business...?"





Illustration: **necömi**

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



V

Shusui  
Hazuki

Illustration: necomi

My Magical Career at  
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My Magical Career at Court: Living the Dream After My Nightmare Boss Fired Me from the Mages' Guild! Volume 5

by Shusui Hazuki

Translated by Mari Koch Edited by Carly Smith

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