

AN OCTAVE HIGHER

A Visual Novel

coming soon



Chapter 1: Master of the Earth



The hexagonal arena is no less than two hundred feet across. In each corner floats a crystal ball. Three of the crystals are mine, three others my opponent's. We're both standing at the center, thirty feet away from each other, separated only by a wizened wizard acting as the referee. Every drop of Mana in my body grows restless, boiling my blood, yearning to be set free as I gather my Willpower to focus in my right hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the moment we've been waiting for! What birthday celebration of Lord Godwin's is complete without a match of Sorcer?" The luxurious, ballroom-like stadium is large enough to take in thousands of people—even the ceiling is almost as high as the arena is wide—but the announcer's spirited announcement doesn't fail to reach every member of the audience. He must have Amplified his voice. "So, shall we start?"

The wizard looks at me, his wrinkled face gentle and solemn. "Frederic Godwin," he says as a weak smile peeks from his bushy white beard and mustache, "are you ready?"

"Yes." The question was unnecessary.

"Joseph Wilde," the referee continues, facing the other way, "are you ready?"

"Yes," my opponent answers. I can feel that he is also raising his magic power. This aura coming out from him is... Faith? It'll probably be a Wind attack, then.

Sorcer is a sport, a game of magic. To win a match, you have to break two of your opponent's three crystal balls located in the corners of the hexagon. Of course, you must also protect your own crystals. The tricky part is that because your opponent only needs to break two of your

crystals to win, you can't just stay near one crystal. You have to keep moving and use strategy. Well, that's the theory, but for me this game is never that complex: I simply immobilize my opponent.

"Then let's get it on!" As soon as the old wizard signals the start of the match, an exquisitely grand Violin Concerto begins to play. The first movement is performed in *allegro non troppo*, which apparently is musicians' fancy way of saying "fast, but not too fast, please." But whatever, it suits the mood, opening up the battle with a tempo that keeps one on the edge but not so much as to send one to a panic.

At exactly the fourth beat, Wilde raises his right arm shoulder-high and opens his hand in my direction. His palm gleams for an instant; then, without warning a violent gust of wind escapes his hand and races to me. Ha! It's just as I expected, so I readily open my Willpower-filled palm facing upward and raise my hand skyward. Summon! A wall of earthen rock shoots up from the floor to shield me from the incoming wind attack. The traveling air slams against my rock shield, after which the shield breaks and crumbles, but not before halting the air movement. When that happens, I'm already fifteen feet away to the side, gathering magic power on my Courage. I feel my right forearm heating up from underneath the flesh.

But my opponent isn't idle either. He prepares to counter me with a magic spell of his own. Intelligence, huh? This'll be interesting.

"Summon!" I point my index finger at him.

"Summon!" He does his at me.

From my finger a flame of fire bursts out at Wilde. However, a forceful jet of water shoots out from his, which not only extinguishes my fire, but also gets me right where it hurts. Dammit! Is my Fire *that* weak? I get sent back a short distance before promptly returning to my battle stance. My drenched shirt is uncomfortable, but not enough to make me throw the match.

Wilde eyes me with an almost quizzical look. "What's with that fire, Godwin? I expected—"

"Just shut the hell up and fight, Wilde." I swear I want to gouge out those eyes. "Or is that all you've got?"

“Hmph.” Wilde smirks, as though his victory were certain. “Very well. Let’s step up the game, shall we?”

I’m not going to make the same mistake twice. There’s no more playing around, so I start building up Willpower. Meanwhile, my opponent is doing the same but with Faith. With swift, precise motion he brings his right hand in front of his face, the open palm glaring at him. It’s another Summon of Wind. In that case, I’ll just— No. Shit. It’s not *just* Summon. Wilde suddenly closes the hand to a fist. He invokes Amplify on top of the Summon. Faith, Summon and Amplify. It’s a Tornado! What the— This guy could chain two magical abilities together?!

I’m still trying to come to terms with my surprise when Wilde straightens his arm and opens his hand, sending a tornado towards me. I try to Summon the Willpower I have built up, but it’s too late—the tornado has sent me flying. When I return to earth, it’s with a loud crash. I soon get back up, but Wilde is ready to smother me with another tornado.

Holy hell, what kind of opponent am I facing? Ah, that’s right. Only now I remember what my father said before the match: “Be careful, Frederic. Your opponent today isn’t like the kids you normally play against. Joseph Wilde is a member of Dragoon—a special forces unit in the police force. He’ll go easy on you, but don’t underestimate him.” Or something like that. “Go easy,” he said? Yeah, right. But no matter. I won’t be satisfied with anything less.

Maybe it’s time I employed some strategy. Let’s see—my rock shield won’t be able to withstand that tornado; I can cast another earth magic spell like Quake, but I don’t see how it can help in this situation. Anyway, what I need to do to win is not beat him, but break his crystals. Should I try attacking the crystals directly? No, he would know how to protect them. Alright, let’s try something crazy.

I once again raise my magical power, but this time I focus on Courage.

“What, that weak Fire again?” Wilde’s shout reverberates from behind the wind that’s circling about faster and faster.

“Yes, that weak Fire again. I hope that doesn’t scare you?”

“Well, I should hope not.”

“What are you waiting for, then? You’ve Summoned the wind; where’s the Amplify?”

“Oh, it’s coming, alright.” Wilde makes a fist with his right hand. “Amplify!”

This is it! My first stride is quick but forceful, almost a leap and almost a stomp; then, bouncing off the floor, I propel myself forward and ride the momentum to break off into a dash toward the wind that’s quickly turning into a tornado. Summon!

“Wha— What are you doing?!” Wilde can’t hide his surprise.

I’m not Summoning a fire attack. Instead, I combine my magic with his own. This is a cooperative technique normally employed by two magicians who are working together. Combo magic, it’s called. But right now I’m combining my Fire magic with my opponent’s Tornado to produce a Fire Tornado, a deadly magic attack.

When Wilde is still trying to figure out what has just happened, I quickly zero in on our distance and get both him and myself caught in the fire tornado. We’re both thrown away, along with flames that are spewed forth in all direction by the tornado. I catch a glimpse of guards erecting magic barriers around the arena to protect the audience from the soaring flames. I don’t see where Wilde is flying to, but as for me, I’ve intentionally made the tornado throw me toward one of Wilde’s crystals. Yes, straight toward his crystal, at a time when the owner is an arena away God knows where!

Only problem is that I am too high up in the air. With my current trajectory, I am sure to fly *over* the crystal, not onto the crystal. Lucky for me, I still have another trick up my sleeve. I am gifted with Willpower. He who has strong Willpower is a master of the earth, and he who is master of the earth... is a master of gravity!

Amplify! The surrounding gravity suddenly increases tenfold, pulling me down with a force so powerful I find myself lying on the floor within two beats of the music.

And then, it’s just the orchestra. Everything else has gone quiet. Mere moments later, however, the audience erupts in cheers and applause. I guess they like what they just saw.

My body is hurting all over, but I get back on my feet. Damage check: my body has slammed onto one of Wilde's crystals, which is now in pieces; one of his other two crystals is damaged—but not broken—from the flames that get shot all over the place by the fire tornado; and his last crystal is, sadly, still intact. I observe my own crystals and find all three of them damaged due to the fire, but none have been broken. I now have the upper hand. I only have to break one more crystal to finish this stupid match.

“Goodness, Godwin.” Wilde has gotten back up on his feet as well. His face tells me that he is obviously not amused. “What the hell were you thinking?!”

“I wasn't.” I shrug my shoulder. “I wasn't thinking.”

“Are both of you able to continue the match?” The question comes from the old wizard, our referee, who is slowly descending from the air back down to the floor. He must have escaped to the air during the fire tornado earlier. Sure is nice being able to float up like that.

Huh? Float up? Right. Now I'm thinking.

“Yes, I'm fine,” I say.

“So am I,” Wilde says to the referee. He faces me again and groans, “That fire tornado thing was genius, if suicidal, but I won't fall to the same trick twice.”

“I know.”

By now the concerto has entered its second movement, an *andante cantabile*, inviting the participants to go into slower paced combat as a chance to perform artsier magic, for, as athletes of Sorcer, sorcerers supposedly have duty not only to compete, but also to entertain. Accompanied by the instrumental tunes that flow relaxingly as if being sung—that's what *cantabile* means—a mage may summon water that too flows with the tunes, or wind that blows in the same calmness as the melody, or fire that dances to the music.

Too bad for our audience, I have my own arrangement in mind. Time for some *fortissimo*.

Willpower. Transform!

With no warning I cast a Quake. The arena shakes furiously.

Wilde seems surprised, but not much worried. “An earthquake? Hah! This is nothing!”

Why yes, this kind of magic would hardly do any damage to a mage at Wilde’s level, but it doesn’t have to. All it needs to do is delay his Tornado just for a few moments... while I’m focusing on Willpower again.

Nullify!

This last magic repels me from the floor because I just made the surrounding gravity vanish. When Wilde’s Tornado appears, I am already high up in the air, this time readying both Willpower *and* Courage. Soon after, gravity returns to pull me back down, but that’s fine because a short time airborne is all I need.

“Oh no.” Now Wilde looks worried, as he should be.



“Didn’t think I could do this, huh?”

Summon! A flash of white light, a thunderous sound. I open my right hand in front of me and a bolt of lightning shoots out from my palm. My target is not Wilde, but his partially damaged crystal ball. Victory is mine.

“Dammit!” Wilde exclaims. He runs to the crystal as fast as he can, but my lightning bolt is way faster. It strikes the crystal dead on with another flash of blinding light and a loud bang.

The light subsides, the sound quiets down, and my body arrives at the earth with a thud. Ignoring the pain, I force myself to stand up in order to enjoy my sweet victory as I gaze upon the crystal that has... cracked? What? It didn't break? Why? Why?!

I can see the relief on Wilde's face. He says to me, “Nice try, Godwin. I'm impressed. I truly am.”

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!” I'm pissed off. Well, whatever, I can do it again. It'll hurt, but I can do it again. “Wilde,” I say to my opponent as I begin to chuckle, “you're lucky, but the next bolt will shatter your crystal without fail. What're you going to do, eh?”

“What to do, indeed.”

“Tornado again? Water magic? I bet you're running out of tricks.”

“No. I'm just running out of tricks that I may use on you.”

“What? What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

Wilde doesn't answer. He just smirks.

And this pisses me off even more because I know exactly what he means. He is supposed to *go easy* on me. “Screw it, Wilde. Use everything you've got on me. Go on. I won't be satisfied otherwise.”

“Everything I've got?”

“Everything you've got.”

Wilde is silent. He seems to be in deep thought.

“Ha! So you *are* running out of tricks.”

The Violin Concerto has reached its third and final movement. It's now *presto*—extremely fast—a perfect fit for the conclusion of our battle.

“Alright,” Wilde finally says. He stretches out his two arms apart, as if about to hug a beloved. In his right hand, he gathers Courage. In his left, Willpower.

Wha...What? Hasn't he been using Faith? Well, that water magic earlier was Intelligence, but why Courage and Willpower now?

“Summon.” Wilde's right hand turns bright with red light. “Summon.” Now his left hand turns bright with yellow light.

This isn't... possible. He is preparing to cast two different magic spells at the same time! Wait, no. This is just like that combo magic earlier, except he's doing it all by himself. Hey, isn't this cheating? Is such a thing even possible?

"Amplify." Wilde makes a fist with his right hand. "Amplify." And then with his left.

I hear rumbling from above and look up to see a crack in the blackened sky. The sky? Surely I mean the ceiling? We're indoors. But that looks like sky... Oh hell no, it's actually something like a magic portal, and on the other side I can see a giant flaming ball of rock slowly making its way across the portal. I'm not kidding about the "giant" part. It's like, I don't know, sixty feet in diameter?

I am... I am *terrified*.

"Wilde, STOP!" I turn to where the shout comes from and find our referee standing right in front of Wilde, his ears reddened and his wrinkles now the shape of anger. "*What* in the names of Mana are you doing calling Meteor in a sport match against a seventeen-year-old?!"

Meteor? That thing is... Meteor? I've heard of this magic, but never imagined I'd actually see it.

I glance up again, but the portal has disappeared, and with it the meteor. "I'm sorry," Wilde mutters after lowering his arms and releasing all magic power. The old wizard grunts in irritation.

Everyone is silent. Even the music has stopped. For a while nobody moves or makes a sound. It goes on until someone in the audience at last breaks the silence, "BRAVO!!" and the others follow suit with their own cheers and applause.

"Th—That was one hell of a match!" the announcer exclaims amidst the thunderous applause. "I believe I speak for everyone when I say that we've all been treated to a superbly exciting show! Joseph Wilde, with his ever so powerful magic spells, and Frederic Godwin, who impressively holds his own against all odds, ladies and gentlemen! Uh... umm... Referee, what's the status of the match?"

The old wizard stays silent and the audience quiets down. Finally, while still glaring at Wilde, the wizard says, "The match is over. We'll do a point count." He turns, glances about the arena, and announces,

“Wilde: one broken crystal. Godwin: no broken crystals.” Looking at me, he concludes, “The winner is Frederic Godwin.”

The audience goes mad with that announcement. They’re shouting, “Frederic! Frederic!” and stuff. The announcer is saying something... something about a teenage son of the Lord who managed to force a Dragoon member into casting Meteor, or something like that, but I can’t concentrate on anything. I realize my knees are shaking. They have been doing that for a while now. I slowly walk out of the arena. Wilde might have tried to approach me for some fake congratulatory handshake or shit, I don’t know. I just keep walking without looking at anything inside the arena.

Outside the hexagon, my father is already waiting for me. One might expect a father to be proud of his son’s victory, but if he is, he doesn’t show it.

“What kind of fighting was that, son?” my father asks.

“I don’t know. The kind that ends with your son winning the match?”

“Ha. Funny. I’ve seen many a battle, sports and no sports, but not many that leave the victor trembling.”

I wish I had a witty comeback, but I don’t, so I just keep walking.

“Do you know why your Thunder failed to shatter Wilde’s crystal ball? Do you know why your Fire was so easily extinguished by his Water?”

I halt my steps, but I don’t feel like answering. Those are rhetorical questions anyway. He knows I know.

“Because Fire and Thunder depend on Courage, but you are not gifted with Courage.” Although my father still keeps his calm expression, you can’t miss the hint of anger in his voice. “Your strongest magical traits are Willpower and *Compassion!* Why don’t you ever use Compassion-based magic? Like Heal. An infinitely useful magic, that one, certainly much more so than your half-assed Fire and Thunder. If you would just take the match slowly, healing yourself when you had to, the match could’ve turned simply into a battle of endurance, and in such contest, he who has Compassion has advantage. You could have even won against Wilde.”

I could have even won. In other words, I didn't. "Who, me? Compassion? I don't want a lame trait like that! I'm doing just fine with Courage!"

"Pfft. Are you?" My father's face makes a pitying smile.

"What about Wilde? He was using Faith and Intelligence in the beginning, but that Meteor was Willpower and Courage!"

"Joseph Wilde is a dragoon who's been in countless battles—real battles—for more than a decade. His gifted traits are Willpower and Courage, but he is good with *everything*."

So his gifted traits are Willpower and Courage, but he was going to only use wind and water magic on me? I'm sick of all this shit.

I decide to leave. I storm out of the Sorcer stadium through a mass of people who are praising and congratulating me. "Oh Frederic, that was an amazing fight." "Frederic, you were so great. You won against Wilde." "Frederic, that strategy with the fire tornado was brilliant." "Frederic, you'll be a great mage someday!"

Fuck them all.

Chapter 2: Engulfed in White



“So, if I understand you correctly, Mr. Byron, you’re implying that there may be a way to create a machine that works with Compassion magic?”

I am standing in a huge room whose walls are painted in warm beige color. In front of me are rows of seats arranged on a pitched floor, such that those in the rear are higher than those at the front. There must be at least a thousand seats in total, although only about four dozen of those are occupied. Behind me is a

largish screen onto which a machine is projecting an image. A man is operating this machine, having inserted his hand through an opening at the back and cast illumination magic behind a small sheet of film. At the top of the screen is a text that reads “Conservatoire de Ouverture Annual Seminar.” And then, at the center, printed with large letters: “Study and Analysis of Compassion-based Magic and Its Effect on Inorganic Matters.” Near the bottom, printed with smaller letters, is another text that reads “Franz Byron,” and right below it, “Student.”

I take a deep breath before answering the question from this gentleman sitting at the third row from the front. From the way he’s dressed I can tell he is a fellow student—was it really necessary to address me as “Mr. Byron”? I finally say, “I don’t know yet, but that is... That is a possibility, I think. It’s just that... Well, let me explain from the beginning so that the freshmen who may not be that familiar yet with magical science can follow our discussion.”

I feel nervous. If I were gifted in Courage I might be able to chase the nervousness away simply by letting my Mana flow throughout my body. However, my strong traits are Intelligence and Faith.

“As you all know, there are five magical traits that a human can have. They are Courage, Intelligence, Willpower, Faith, and Compassion. Any magic is based on one or a combination of these traits. For example, water magic is based on Intelligence.” I pause to observe my audience. Everyone is still with me. Good. “And there are four types of magical abilities that can act on those five magical traits. They are Summon, Amplify, Nullify, and Transform. Don’t confuse magical traits with magical abilities. Remember, the abilities use the traits. The act of applying a magical ability is called an *invocation*. Let’s return to our water magic example. The most basic water magic is simply to make water appear. Whether it’s to attack an enemy or to water plants, the principle is the same. The Water spell is cast by invoking the Summon ability on the Intelligence trait.”

I turn to the magician who is operating the projector machine and give him a nod. With his free hand—the other is still casting illumination magic—he touches a metal pad on the machine and the image on the screen changes. It now displays a magic formula.

WATER = Summon(Intelligence)

“That is”—I point to the screen—“what we call a magic formula, and that one defines the formula of our simple Water spell. You read that as ‘use Summon ability using the power of Intelligence.’” I face my audience again. “It’s really one of the simplest magic formulae. Summon is like the most basic of magical abilities. If a magic spell makes any kind of physical matter appear or materialize, it almost certainly involves Summon. Fire is Summon on Courage, Wind is Summon on Faith, and so on.

“And then there’s Amplify, which is used to make something become *more*—stronger, faster, larger. For example, a magician can increase the force of the earth gravity by using Amplify on Willpower. Or, a more common use case of Amplify is actually to make a stronger version of a Summon magic spell.” I nod to the man behind the projector again and the screen changes to display a new formula.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{FLOOD} &= \text{Amplify}(\text{WATER}) \\ &= \text{Amplify}(\text{Summon}(\text{Intelligence}))\end{aligned}$$

“Basically,” I explain, “Flood is just the stronger version of Water. So if you invoke Summon on Intelligence, but before releasing the magic from your hand you invoke Amplify on top of it, you will cast Flood instead of Water. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Well, in practice, chaining two different abilities like this is considered a high level technique.”

“Umm,” says another student while raising her hand, “I’ve always assumed that the stronger version of Water is Ice.”

“A common misconception. Ice is in fact a much more complex magic spell. It’s something we call combination magic or combo magic, because it involves more than one trait. To cast Ice, you have to combine Water, which is based on Intelligence, and Freeze, which is based on Courage.” I walk to a nearby whiteboard to write down the formula.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{ICE} &= \text{WATER} + \text{FREEZE} \\ &= \text{Summon}(\text{Intelligence}) + \text{Nullify}(\text{Courage})\end{aligned}$$

“As you can see from the formula, there are two invocations that are combined to cast the spell. Oh, Nullify is just the opposite of Amplify. It makes something become *less*.” Some freshmen start looking confused. “If that formula looks complicated to you,” I say with a smile, “remember that it is possible to cast a stronger version of Ice.” I write another formula on the whiteboard.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{ICE-STORM} &= \text{Amplify}(\text{ICE}) \\ &= \text{Amplify}(\text{Summon}(\text{Intelligence}) + \text{Nullify}(\text{Courage}))\end{aligned}$$

And then another.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{BLIZZARD} &= \text{ICE-STORM} + \text{WIND} \\ &= \text{Amplify}(\text{Summon}(\text{Intelligence}) + \text{Nullify}(\text{Courage})) \\ &\quad + \text{Summon}(\text{Faith})\end{aligned}$$

“But don’t worry about it for now.” I try to assure the poor freshmen, some of whom look like they’re already regretting taking magical science as their major. “It’s really not that complicated once you understand the basics.” Come to think of it, I’m also starting to be able to speak comfortably.

“Now,” I address them again, “what about machines? How are they able to cast magic? Let’s think about the stove you use for cooking at home. Your stove is a machine that casts Fire. All you have to do to cause your stove to cast Fire is touch it and focus on Courage. The stove takes care of casting the Fire; you don’t even need to worry that the fire would be too big or too small. What happens here?”

“Well, let’s recall again what happens when a Fire is cast.” I give a signal to the projector machine operator and the image on the screen changes again. It’s now displaying the magic formula of Fire.

$$\text{FIRE} = \text{Summon}(\text{Courage})$$

“When you cast Fire, you actually perform three separate acts. First, you focus on the Courage trait. What actually happens at this first step is that a portion of the Mana in your body is infused with Courage. Second, you invoke the Summon ability. What actually happens at this second step is that your body consumes the Courage-infused Mana to Summon the Fire. Third, you release the magic through your hand. What your stove at home does is the second and third steps: It Summons Fire using Courage-infused Mana and releases it. But machines can’t do the first step. That’s what your touching the stove and focusing on Courage is for. When you touch the stove and focus on Courage, your body infuses Courage into a portion of your Mana, and then this Mana, now infused with Courage, flows into the stove. And then the stove can perform the second and third steps automatically by itself.

“I’m sure our friends from the Department of Magical Engineering can give a more detailed explanation, but in general, that’s what any machine does. It takes Mana that’s already infused with one or more

magical traits by its user, and then invokes magical abilities using the Mana. A machine is just a way to automate the process of invoking Summon, Amplify, Nullify, Transform, or any combination of these magical abilities.

“There is just one unfortunate exception to this rule: No machines can process Mana infused with Compassion. It just doesn’t work. Compassion magic just doesn’t agree with anything other than living beings. Machines can’t cast Compassion magic. Likewise, casting Compassion magic on inanimate objects has absolutely no effect. They just don’t go together for some reason. We don’t know why. Nobody does.

“This, in my opinion, is such a shame, because healing magic, one of the most important magic types, is based on Compassion. Thirty years ago machines were invented and we’re now using machines everywhere, but our medical industry still can’t benefit from this technological revolution. Imagine how much better healthcare would be if we could figure out a way to automate healing magic by making use of machines!

“This brings us to my research. In my study, I’ve come across several reports of cases where inanimate objects were affected by this type of magic. For example, there was a report eight years ago saying that a seven-year-old girl had unknowingly cast Heal on her broken doll and managed to fix it. These reports suggest that on some circumstances Compassion magic can affect inanimate objects. And if that’s true, the reverse is likely as true.

“So to answer the question asked earlier: Yes, I’m saying that there may be a way to create a machine that works with Compassion magic.”

When I finally leave the conservatoire, it’s already almost sundown. Outside the gate, the street is crowded with people who have just finished work and are getting ready to go home. I cross the street to a nearby omnibus stop where many people are already lining up and with reluctance join the queue behind two dozen other people. A carriage whizzes by, at its back sit a man and a woman, while their Faithful driver stands in front, controlling the air around the carriage

to steer it. A few seconds pass and another carriage flies along the street. And then another. More people come and stand behind me, just when my surrounding is getting uncomfortably hot. At last the omnibus arrives. Its flying platform is designed to carry three dozen passengers at most, but there are now more people on it than there were students in the lecture hall earlier. They're factory workers—the proletariat, or “proles.” Silly me, of course the omnibus would be full at this hour. It always is. I don't find the idea of standing on a bus platform with more than four dozen other people terribly exciting, so I exit the queue and walk away from the omnibus stop.

I don't have anywhere I want to go, so I start wandering around the city. The city's modern look and its clean, almost shiny multi-storied buildings and brick paved streets are teeming with flying carriages, magicians everywhere, and magic machines installed on every corner. You can't see *Overture* as anything but a city of magic.

Speaking of machines, I'm still bothered by the seminar. What was that about, again? A machine that can work with Compassion magic? Are you kidding me? So there had been a report of a kid fixing her doll with Heal. Yeah, guess what, that's what we call an anecdotal evidence, or, to put it in layman's term, *unscientific*. Uh, “unscientific” is not exactly a layman's term, but my point is that it is crazy to form a hypothesis based on unproven reports. I mean, the first machine was invented three decades ago and for three decades we've known that machines don't work with Compassion and it's not like during these three decades our best magical scientists and engineers hadn't been *trying* to make them do. I can't believe Professor Poe made me take on this research as my final project *and* had me publicly present it in the seminar. A Compassion-based magic machine? Oh my goodness, how am I going to graduate now?

When I once again look at where I am, I find myself walking along a river, a stone's throw away from a big curved bridge that crosses the river. I head to the bridge and cross it. After arriving at the other end, I realize that I've never been in this part of the city. I continue strolling through a road that gets narrower with every block I pass. It's also getting dark, or rather, gloomy. Has the sun set?

I look around and catch a glimpse of a man in shabby clothing sitting on the dusty pavement near an intersection, his back rested against the wall of a dirty looking bookstore. I avoid directing my gaze at him, but as I walk past him, I notice he's missing his arms—both his arms. A feeling of pity for this poor guy looms over me. I now know why he is sitting on the pavement. Without hands, it is impossible to cast magic. Without magic, it is impossible to have any reasonable expectation of a good life. In this society, people like him are the lowest of the low. I would sooner die than be like him.

Seeing this amputee makes me understand where I actually am. This must be the area where the proles live. It explains why everything looks dreary and smells noxious and feels unclean. I turn around and retrace my steps. I have nothing against proles, but it doesn't mean I have to fancy being around them.

There is just one problem: I don't remember which turns I took. At intersections, I now pick roads purely on instinct, my only clue being that roads near main city area are supposed to be wider. Following this reasoning, I at last come across an open area with wide road. Unlike the dark alleys in the slum, this place is bathed in orange light from the setting sun. I'm relieved to have found my way back to the city. Thank my Intelligence.

Except the place doesn't look like the city at all. If anything, it is even more rural. I walk some more before spotting a site on which stand a number of large old buildings. From it comes the sound of machinery, of labor, and of magic being cast. I know I should be going back to find the roads that will take me back to the city, but somehow I am drawn to the site. When I finally stop walking, I'm already standing in front of its rusty gate. On it, a sign reads "Magical Mechanical Ltd."

Magical Mechanical a.k.a. *MM* is a name I know too well. At home I always read that name printed on my coffee machine. At the academy I read it on the lab equipment. In winter I see it on my room heater. In summer on the room cooler. All year on the pocket watch.

I see. This must be a factory where machines are assembled.

I start circling the factory, cautiously moving along its fence. I don't know what it is I'm looking for, but I keep surveying the complex. After



a while I find a small opening that leads to a small backyard behind one of the buildings. I enter slowly, but stop when I see someone—a girl. She's around my age, perhaps younger, dressed in a factory uniform. Her shoulder-length hair is disheveled, but not unsightly. A small braid runs behind her right ear, but not the left—the asymmetry somehow suits her. She is sitting at an old piano.

She reaches out to the piano with her right hand and gently presses a key right in the middle of the keyboard. Silence. She presses another. More silence. The piano doesn't make any sound. It must be broken. She sits there motionless for a couple more seconds, then produces a small vial of bluish liquid. I've seen that liquid enough times to be able to tell what it is right away—*curcuma zanthorrhiza*, or “temulawak,” as it is called in its native land, or “Mana potion,” as it is called here in Overture. What is she going to do with it? As I wonder about that, I see her take the cap off the vial, bring the vial to her lips, and empty it. Having drunk the Mana, she brings both her hands slightly above the piano, palms facing down, as though giving it her blessing. I feel Compassion building up.

No... no way. She can't be thinking of... No. Nobody can fix a broken thing with healing magic. Compassion magic can only affect living beings. One can heal a man or woman or child or animal, but not a piano!

And then my vision is engulfed in white.

Chapter 3: A Girl in Desperation



“Please, please, please, give me another bottle of Mana, pretty please?” I plead to my supervisor in my cutest voice—well, my best approximation of cute, or at least what I think boys consider cute.

Even so, the expression on Mr. Naleton’s face doesn’t change in the slightest, maybe because he is a middle-aged man well past puberty. “Like I said, Miss Shelley, the rules state that every worker receives a bottle in the morning and another at lunch break. What did you say happened to the ones you had, again?”

“I drank the potion as soon as I got it in the morning, but lost the one from the lunch break. I remember putting it beside the furnace but I can’t find it now.”

“Why didn’t you drink it right away?”

“Well, I was—”

“Wait.” Mr. Naleton’s eyes widen. He leans forward and lowers his voice. “Do you think someone took it?”

“N—No! No...” I take a step back while shaking my head. “I wouldn’t think that.”

Mr. Naleton straightens his posture again and crosses his arms. “So, where’s your potion?”

Ugh. He *really* doesn’t want to give me that bottle of Mana, does he? Stingy! Cheapo! If it has come to this, I have no choice but to play my trump card. You should never underestimate a girl in desperation, Mr. Naleton!

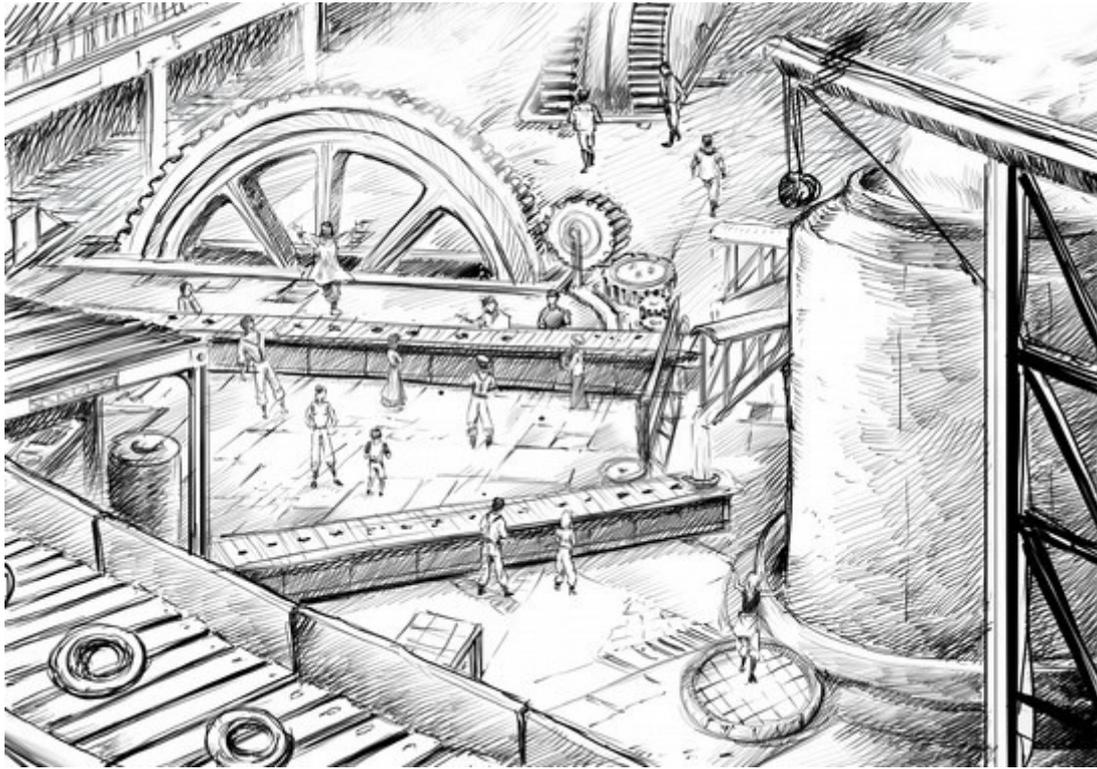
I bow down my head and stare at my feet. “I’m sorry, Mr. Naleton,” I say in a shaky voice before pausing for a few seconds. My boss’s face is beginning to soften up, showing the sympathy he is feeling for the

helpless young girl before him. At least, that's how I imagine the face he's making. I can't actually see it because I'm still looking down at the floor. When I look up again, I make the most doleful look I can. I stare right at his two eyes, my eyelids glistening and my pupils dilated with longing, eyebrows raised and tilted to the forehead, my lips half open as if about to let some words out but lacking courage to do so, and my cheeks pink in shame (I can't look at my own cheeks and as far as I know I have never once blushed in my life, but pink is how I visualize them). "I promise I'll work reaaaaally hard today. Please?"

My boss gapes at me almost in disbelief. At last he nods a few times with his eyes closed. "Fine," he says with a sigh before opening his eyes again, "but only this time, you hear?" He turns, walks to a cabinet at the back of his office, and opens it. From inside the cabinet he fetches a vial of clear blue liquid. He walks back and hands me the vial.

I take it without the least of hesitation and joy soon returns to my face. I smile brightly and exclaim with genuine gratefulness, "Thank you, Mr. Naleton!" Then, at his "Yes, yes, now go away" hand gesture, I turn to the door, step outside his office, and slip the vial of Mana potion inside a pocket on my work apron.

The factory is where tons—literally—of machines are manufactured every day, from household appliances to machines for public utility, but the section where I work deals with what people call "the boring stuff." We make chassis for various kinds of machinery and assemble components from other sections into these chassis to produce final products. Meanwhile, "engines" like the Mana absorption engine and the magic casting engine are made elsewhere and brought here for the final assembly. But hey, even working on the not-boring stuff still mostly involves casting the same magic all day every day, so how exciting can it be? That's just how work in a factory is. You come in the morning, drink a bottle of Mana, use it all up by casting the same magic until lunch break, have lunch, gulp down another bottle of Mana, and continue casting that exact same magic again until the end of the shift at sundown. And that's how I am about to spend my afternoon. I stare



at the huge empty furnace in front of me while I'm focusing on Courage.

"So, Elise, did the boss give it to you?" A voice has interrupted my thought. I look to my left and find a seventeen-year-old girl—two years my senior—dressed in the same factory uniform I'm in staring at me.

"Had to use my feminine charm but yes, Jude, he did." After saying that, a clanging sound from the furnace calls my attention. I see that the furnace is now filled with chunks of metal (I think they are aluminum? Or is it zinc?) that have been dropped by a machine on the upper floor straight to the furnace. I reach out with one hand. Summon. A fire bursts inside the furnace and the chunks of metal are quickly swallowed by the flames.

Jude giggles in response to my answer. "I thought he was going to cut your wage to pay for it."

"Yeah... thought the same thing," I say while nodding to no one in particular.

"Just don't make it a habit."

"I know."

A minute later the metal has turned completely into burning liquid. A small door at the side of the furnace opens and the liquid streams down through some kind of pipe that distributes it to several molds in different shapes, one of which is right beside Jude who by now has finished gathering Courage in her hand. Once her mold is full with hot metallic liquid, she places her hand two inches above it. “Nullify,” says Jude softly as she casts a spell and soon after heat starts gradually leaving the liquid, slowly transforming the metal into a chassis part in the shape of the mold.

At the same time, more chunks of metal are being deposited in my furnace. I cast Fire again. “You know,” I say to Jude, “my parents used to say that I have great talents in magic.”

“You *are* talented.” She looks at me with half amused, half irritated expression and continues, “Look at you handling that big furnace while the rest of us have these molds.”

“Yeah, maybe, although I have a feeling that my parents weren’t talking about melting metal.”

Now the substance on Jude’s mold has become a solid chassis part, ready to be used for the final assembly of a machine. She takes the chassis part out of the mold and puts it on a conveyor belt nearby which then delivers it to a mechanical system, to be assembled together with other parts and engines to produce a new machine. This preconfigured mechanical system is made up of gears, belts, roller chain, and a bunch of other things whose name I don’t know, and the whole thing can be operated simply by rotating the first gear, which is easily accomplished by another worker who is continuously casting Wind on it.

“Uh-huh, I’d assume they hadn’t,” Jude replies.

“That’s what all parents say about their kids. Even when a baby has only just turned one, her parents would say, ‘Oh-em-gee, oh-em-gee, I can feel Courage from my little baby girl!’ Hello, parents? News flash: Feeling magical traits from your kid is perfectly normal. In fact, you should be *worried* if you didn’t!”

Jude lets out a cheerful laugh as she casts another Freeze spell on her mold. “Ah, well, none of it matters to us proles anyway. Even if you

could cast the strongest magic in the world, that wouldn't mean anything if you didn't have money to buy Mana potions."

I cast another Fire. I don't know how many times I've done this same thing since morning. "We do get supplies of Mana from the factory—"

"But only enough for factory work."

"—and eating food, drinking water, and even breathing air do restore some Mana..."

"But not by much."

"...but not by much," I concur. "Our life sucks, doesn't it?"

"Just be thankful," Jude tells me with a warm smile. "There are people with worse fate than yours. For example, those without a job can't—"

I look at her. "Why do people always do that?"

She stops her speech, honestly puzzled by my question. "Always do what?"

"Saying, 'It's okay. Others have it worse than you.' Why do people always say that? Is knowing that life is even crappier than I thought supposed to make me feel better? What do I say here? Yup, now that I realize just how much more messed up this world really is, I feel soooo great!"

Jude gawks at me with a funny expression, like she wanted to laugh but laughing felt wrong. She doesn't even look mad. It's more like her eyes were saying, "Really, Elise?"

We've both gone quiet. When my furnace makes metal clanging sound again, we both chuckle and return to work.

The end of the shift. I glance outside the factory building to see the road and some small buildings painted orange by the setting sun. I slip my left hand in my apron pocket. The vial is still there.

"Are you really going to do it?" I turn to where the voice came from and see Jude getting ready to leave for home.

"Yeah."

"You know it's not going to work, right?"

I don't reply.

"You know there's no happy ending in this, right?"

“Happy end— Where did that phrase come from, ‘happy ending’? I’m just going to try something out. It won’t be a big deal even if it fails. Sheesh. But yeah, why not? I’ll even make my own happy ending if I have to.”

“No, Elise”—Jude smiles—“happy ending is a luxury”—but her smile looks sorrowful—“and the thing about us proles is that... we can’t afford luxuries.”

I watch silently as she leaves the factory.

When I can no longer see her, I too make my way outside, but instead of exiting out the gate, I make a right turn. After circling the factory, I arrive and find what I was looking for. An old piano is abandoned in a backyard. I approach the piano slowly. My family had this same model when I was a small child, which I used to play many times. Hey, my parents even said I was pretty good at it, but we know parents say that about everything their kid does.

I sit at the piano. I found this poor piano here by accident about a month ago. Nobody knew who owned it. Since then I have been coming here after work almost everyday just to be near the piano because I find it relaxing for some reason. Unfortunately, though...

I touch the middle F key with my finger and press lightly on it. Silence. I try an octave higher to the right. More silence. Yup, this piano’s still broken.

Am I really going to do it? I take out the small vial of blue liquid from my pocket.

I’m sorry for lying to you, Mr. Naleton. I actually drank the potion from lunch break. I’ll find a way to make up for this somehow.

I gaze at the drink in my hand again. Yes, I’m going to do it. I carefully take the cap off the vial and drink the Mana potion. I stretch out my arms, let both hands hover over the piano keys with palms facing down, and close my eyes. If anyone saw me right now, she’d think I was in the middle of doing mental preparation before performing a sonata.

You see, I’ve been making good use of my Courage to cast Fire all day, but everybody knows that all normal human beings are gifted with two magical traits. I am no exception. It’s just that my other trait is completely useless in a factory work.

Compassion...
Transform...
Amplify.

Thank you for reading! We're developing a visual novel based on this universe and these characters, to be released in early 2015.



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