

The World 811

Chapter 811: Odd Pair To Odd Trio (3)

Rose had just announced, out of nowhere, that she wanted to run for the presidency too, and the moment the words left her mouth, I swear, I could almost feel an invisible hammer pounding at the back of my head. My temples started to throb like a warning that a headache was about to set in.

Of all the people here, I would never have guessed that she would be the one to say something like that.

"Hehehehe! With me as president, you'll all end up kneeling at my feet! And mark my words, I'd do a way better job than someone who just hides behind a pair of glasses! If you vote for me and make this happen, then we'll all get to have more fun at the academy! And I swear to all of you, I'd become someone truly worthy of it!"

Her voice rang out sharp and loud, slicing through the quiet morning air like an annoying alarm clock that just wouldn't shut up. She was really turning on that wannabe politician tone, and it was still ridiculously early. The headache in my skull felt like it was getting ready to explode.

Gabrielle showed up right around the same time I did. The moment she stepped closer, she spoke without any warning.

"What is she doing?" she asked, her voice so sudden that it made me flinch a little in surprise.

"Wha...!? Oh—it's just you," I muttered, trying to steady my heart that had jumped a beat. "As you can see... it kinda looks like she's lost it..."

"What exactly does she think she's accomplishing, doing something like this? As I've always suspected, her mind must be running on completely different gears than the rest of us. It's like she's incapable of basic reasoning," Gabrielle said, her tone cold and dismissive.

I thought, deep down, that the same could probably be said about her too... but I kept that thought buried and my mouth firmly shut.

"Well, whatever. I doubt she's going to manage anything meaningful anyway. I'm guessing she's only in this for the fun of it and probably doesn't even have a real plan. She's just wasting her time. She's not going to win," she added, sounding almost bored.

Well, funny thing was, just a few weeks later, reality proved Gabrielle completely wrong.

While Gabrielle struggled to get even a handful of cadets to stand still and listen to her long speeches, Rose's audience kept getting bigger and bigger. To the point where it wasn't just a crowd—it was practically a rally.

"This is impossible..." Gabrielle murmured one day, her usually sharp gaze fixed on Rose, who was surrounded by an eager mass of students hanging onto every careless promise she threw out.

Honestly? I could kinda see why it was happening. Rose was promising the cadets the kind of outrageous, over-the-top freedom that no one else even dared to mention.

Her campaign speeches sounded like random, half-baked nonsense spilling out of her mouth—but compared to Gabrielle's strict, almost suffocating vision of the academy, Rose's words felt like a sudden gust of fresh air, even if they made no sense.

They were nothing more than whatever popped into her head—but that wildness seemed to be exactly what drew people in.

And honestly, I couldn't understand why she was even bothering in the first place.

Or... maybe I could.

Maybe it was because Gabrielle, who Rose clearly saw as her personal rival, had thrown her hat into the ring first—and Rose, being Rose, couldn't just sit back and watch. She had to jump in too, if only to keep pace with her.

Plus, everyone knew Sir Richards, the current president, probably wasn't going to run again next academic year. That left Gabrielle as the main serious candidate.

But a lot of cadets were already fed up with Gabrielle's heavy-handed approach. So when Rose came along—someone who promised the exact opposite—they couldn't help but be drawn to her instead.

"This is stupid..." Gabrielle muttered under her breath.

Even though her voice sounded cool and controlled like always, I noticed, for the first time, a flicker of frustration flash across her eyes.

It surprised me. After spending months around her, I'd gotten used to her expression barely changing. But now, she actually looked... unsettled.

Rose seemed to notice too. In the middle of her rambling speech, she suddenly cut herself off and hurried over to us.

"Hey you!" she called out, her voice loud and smug.

"What?" Gabrielle shot back, barely bothering to glance in her direction.

"It looks like I'm getting a head start on you in this race! What do you think? You're scared now, aren't you?"

Gabrielle didn't even slow down. She didn't look at Rose and she didn't even say a single word—she just kept walking.

"Huh? Hey!"

The way Rose's voice cracked slightly in surprise, it sounded like it might have been the first time someone had completely ignored her like that. She actually looked stunned for a moment.

"What happened to her?" she turned and asked me, genuinely confused.

She really had no clue, did she?

I didn't bother answering and just left her standing there, staring after Gabrielle's back.

Day after day, the two of them kept this weird, silent war going with both chasing after as many followers as they could get, even though the election itself was still far off.

They were pushing themselves hard, almost like it was all they could think about.

Rose's following just kept growing and growing. Even though what she promised sounded like random, reckless things she blurted out without thinking twice, the cadets loved it.

She offered freedom—and even if it was reckless, it felt better to them than Gabrielle's suffocating vision, which seemed to tighten around everyone's neck like a noose.

Honestly? I felt bad for Gabrielle. But it was what it was.

And then, just when I thought it was all decided, something shifted.

Out of nowhere, Gabrielle started drawing in a crowd too—and not just a few.

The shock hit me so hard my eyes widened on instinct, and for a second, it felt like a sharp pulse of pain shot right through my head.

Chapter 812: Odd Pair To Odd Trio (4)

"H-Hey, what the hell is this...?" I whispered under my breath, my voice catching in surprise.

I couldn't help but stare, my eyes wide and blinking like an idiot. Out of nowhere, there was suddenly this whole crowd gathered around Gabrielle's speech. What the heck was even happening?

Just yesterday, she'd been talking to thin air with her practically arguing with the wind. And now? Now there were people actually standing there, nodding along, listening to every word she said.

The confusion kept scratching at the back of my mind like an itch I couldn't ignore, so I stepped forward, weaving between people until I got close enough to tap someone on the shoulder.

"Hey, what's going on here?" I asked, trying to keep my voice casual even though my heart was racing with curiosity.

"Oh... well, it seems this woman is talking about her vision if she wins as president. And honestly, it's kind of interesting to hear..." the cadet answered, her tone light but sincere, eyes fixed on Gabrielle.

I blinked, caught off guard. Interesting? Gabrielle?

What the hell could she have said to make people actually want to stand here and listen?

When Gabrielle finally finished speaking, she stepped back, and the small crowd started to break apart, murmuring among themselves. I still had absolutely no clue what words had pulled them in, so I had to go find out for myself.

"H-Hey... what did you do?" I blurted out as I walked over to her, my voice sharper than I meant it to be.

"Huh? What did I do?" Gabrielle turned to me, blinking like she genuinely didn't understand why I was asking.

"I mean... why do you suddenly have so many listeners? Just yesterday you barely had anyone," I pressed, my brows knit together. "Naturally, I couldn't help but ask what exactly you said to get them to actually stop and listen."

Gabrielle tilted her head slightly, her glasses catching the light. "Why? Well, I suppose it's simply because I was making a great point," she said, her voice calm and almost dismissive.

"T-That doesn't bother you, though?" I shot back. "I mean, you were literally talking to no one before, and now you've got an actual group. I can't help but wonder what you said for them to want to hear more."

To me, it was weird. Her vision always seemed so strict and almost suffocating, so the fact that people suddenly liked it? It just didn't make sense.

She paused for a second, then let out a soft sigh. "I don't know, for the love of gods, I really have no idea," she said, her tone slightly sharper now. "Maybe you're underestimating me and thinking I can't convince people when I actually decide to try."

"No, that's not what I'm saying," I corrected quickly, shaking my head. "What I mean is, it's strange seeing people actually support your ideas, considering how strict they sounded before. That's why I'm asking—did you really not change anything?"

"Well," she admitted after a breath, "I did mention something about making life a little bit easier for the classes below Gold. Like giving them the same opportunities as those in Gold, and improving how they live... but that's about it."

What she said... honestly wasn't bad at all.

Actually, it was kind of surprising coming from her. It was a vision where students from lower classes had a real chance to rise up.

"I mean," she continued, pushing her glasses up her nose, "I think the system in this academy is somewhat corrupted. Because there are fewer opportunities for the lower classes, they can't catch up to the Gold class, let alone move up. That's why I want to fix that system as well as to give them the same chance to get promoted."

Listening to her, it actually started to click. Promotions to higher classes were insanely rare and almost like winning the lottery.

Sure, there were weird exceptions, like Rose, who somehow pulled it off—but most cadets never had a real chance.

It felt like, for the first time, Gabrielle's vision wasn't just strict rules and cold logic and it had something that actually made sense. And thinking about it, it wasn't hard to see why the lower-class cadets would start to rally behind her.

Of course, her draconian vision still sounded scary—but if I ended up next to her as vice president, maybe I could help soften it as well as guide her into becoming the kind of leader the council actually needed.

After that day, the atmosphere around the academy felt like it shifted. It was like watching a slow-burning cold war. Both of them kept pushing, day after day, gathering more and more followers on their side.

It was honestly fascinating.

It felt like I was living inside a real-life drama, one that played out right in front of my eyes. Two completely different people fighting for the same spot—and they were both so damn strange in their own way.

One had a vision that felt strict enough to choke the academy dry, while the other was running for no better reason than seeing the first as a rival.

And I couldn't help it—I was kind of hooked.

Days blurred into weeks, then into months.

And being around them so much, I started noticing little things about them I hadn't seen before.

Gabrielle, for one, didn't have parents. She lived somewhere near a Principality and was taken care of by someone who seemed to mean a lot to her.

Rose, on the other hand, turned out to be the daughter of a noble family—but she had this unexpected side to her. She actually loved romance books, and sometimes even squealed over theater adaptations.

They were both weirdly special. And even though I still wasn't completely sure how I felt about them, I realized I was starting to feel... warmer toward them.

Then, finally, the day of the election arrived.

There were four candidates total.

But, of course, only one could come out on top.

The votes were counted, tension heavy enough to taste in the air. Both of them kept glancing around, trying to hide how nervous they really were.

They'd spent so long building up to this moment—and finally, it was here.

But it was too bad.

Because when the final results came out... neither of them won.

Chapter 813: Odd Pair To Odd Trio (5)

Looking at the result board glowing under the faint light, honestly, the outcome wasn't all that terrible.

Gabrielle and Rose had nearly the same number of votes in the end, with Rose barely edging her out by just a few.

"Yes!" Rose practically exploded with excitement, her voice cutting through the heavy air like a whip. It was as if that narrow win was worth everything. "I won! You lost! I've got higher votes than you!"

Gabrielle, though, didn't even bother to look at her. She just kept staring at the numbers on the board, her eyes locked and unmoving with her shoulders tense like they were holding back something heavy.

Now that I looked closer, I could see it clear as day... the frustration hiding behind those normally sharp, unshakable eyes. And honestly? I got it.

All the long nights, all the stubborn effort she'd put in, the speeches she'd practiced until she lost her voice... it must've felt like it all turned to dust in the end.

The one who actually won was a third-year cadet, also from Gold Class. To be fair, it was still better than seeing the position fall into the hands of someone making empty promises, or worse, someone with that freaky, draconian vision for the academy. The winner seemed competent enough, at least.

Still, no matter how much sense it made, watching Gabrielle stand there frozen like that? It stung.

"I'm going back to my dorm now," she finally muttered, her voice flat, cold, but fragile underneath if you really listened.

She turned and walked off, and I just stood there, watching her back fade into the crowd of cadets slowly dispersing around us. I wished I could say something to stop her, but nothing came out.

"Hehehehe..." Rose chuckled beside me, her tone dripping with smug satisfaction. She stuck her hands on her hips, her chest puffed out. "I can practically taste the defeat on her! Finally, I beat her at something!"

I shot her a sideways look, my brow tightening a bit.

"How about you, Rose? You okay?" I asked, voice low.

"Huh? Why do you ask? I'm perfectly fine," she shot back, her tone breezy and too quick.

But even if she tried to play it cool, something about her felt off. Even if all this started as a prank or a joke to mess with Gabrielle, I couldn't help but think that deep down, Rose had hoped for something more, too—and felt a sting of frustration at coming so close yet falling short.

"Now then, shall we get something to eat?" she suddenly blurted, almost forcing the words out. "I'm so starving I feel like I could eat a horse!"

I watched her walk ahead, her hair swaying with each step. The bounce in her stride wasn't as real as she wanted it to look, with even her shoulders looked a bit heavier than usual.

I clenched my fist at my side, thinking for a second, then called out to her.

"Rose."

She paused, glancing back at me, a puzzled look crossing her face. "Hm?"

"Let's go see Gabrielle for a bit."

She raised a brow, confused at first, then threw her head back and laughed, misunderstanding completely.

"Ah! You wanna go rub it in her face, huh? See her loser's expression up close? Well, let's do it!" she said, voice practically bubbling with energy.

She sounded way too excited for something I didn't even mean. But as long as she followed, that was fine.

Together, we made our way to the Gold Class dormitory. The corridors were oddly quiet, and the faint squeak of our shoes echoed as we walked.

We stopped outside Gabrielle's room.

I knocked softly on the door. "Gabrielle, are you there?"

Nothing.

I knocked again, a bit louder this time, my knuckles rapping against the wood. Still nothing. There was no voice as well as no footsteps inside.

She must've been feeling so crushed that she couldn't even bother to answer, or maybe she just didn't want to see anyone at all.

"It seems like she's pretty busy..." I mumbled, crossing her arms. "Well, we could just go out on our own, I guess."

Then, without warning, Rose stepped forward, pushing me aside like I weighed nothing.

She lifted her foot, her expression turning oddly determined—

"W-Wait! What the hell do you think you're doing?!" I hissed.

"I'm gonna kick her door in and drag her ass out!" Rose shouted, voice low but fierce.

And then, before I could even blink, her foot smashed into the door.

The wooden door banged open with a loud crack, the hinges groaning under the force.

My mouth dropped open so hard I felt my jaw lock for a second. What the fuck was she thinking, doing something like this?

"Huh? W-What?"

Inside, Gabrielle sat frozen on her bed, already changed into her pajamas, her eyes wide in shock.

"W-What did you do to my door?!" she gasped, voice breaking.

"I'm gonna fucking drag your ass out!" Rose barked again, stepping forward like she meant it.

"G-Gabrielle, please..." I jumped in, my voice softer as I reached out and took her hand. "Come with us."

Weirdly enough, she didn't throw up a barrier or push me back. Maybe she'd finally lowered her walls around me, or maybe, in some small corner of her heart, she'd been hoping someone would come for her and to pull her out of that frustration before it swallowed her.

Whatever the reason, I held her hand tight, and tugged her forward.

"Let's go!"

"W-Wait! What about my door?!" she cried, her voice cracking between panic and disbelief.

"We can fix that later!"

"T-There's no way! The dorm mother's gonna kill me!"

But even with her protests, we got her out of that room, down the hallway, and into the cool night air.

Where we ended up wasn't some fancy place—it was a spot I'd been to more times than I could count.

"A pub?" Gabrielle muttered, looking around with wide eyes.

"It's a pub that serves food and alcohol," I explained, trying to sound casual but my heart still pounding from earlier. "Even if you two didn't win the election, I don't think that's a reason not to celebrate. Which is why... we're gonna smash our brains out tonight!"

"But cadets aren't allowed to drink," Gabrielle protested softly, her voice unsure.

"It's fine," I shot back, giving a small grin. "It's not like we're really breaking the rules if no one catches us, right? So tonight, we're ordering mountains of food and drinking till we drop!"

She opened her mouth to argue, but the words caught in her throat. Maybe she realized what we were really doing—for her.

And so, we ordered.

Plates piled high with steaming food came to our table. The first sip of alcohol felt like fire sliding down my throat, loosening something tight in my chest.

Rose kept running her mouth, half-gloating, half-teasing, crumbs spilling as she talked about how she'd finally beaten Gabrielle.

Gabrielle, her face flushed red from just a bit of alcohol, snapped back at her, the two of them bickering louder with every round.

Watching them argue like that, laugh through mouthfuls of food, and forget the election for just a moment... honestly, it made something warm flicker deep in my chest.

For the first time that day, it felt like everything was going to be okay—even if just for tonight.

Chapter 814: Friends (1)

It had been two years since then, and now we were on the edge of stepping into our fourth year at the academy.

At this point, Gabrielle seemed more determined than ever with her eyes having that quiet fire whenever she talked about running again, like she'd already carved it into her bones that she was going to win this time.

Rose, though, didn't bother to step onto the podium. She didn't try to run and didn't write speeches. But that was fine. By now, the three of us—Gabrielle, Rose, and me—had become so close that words like "candidate" and "rival" felt almost silly.

Some people still gave us weird looks when they saw the three of us together, like we were some strange constellation that shouldn't exist. And maybe they had a point. I mean, we really were the kind of group that made people tilt their heads and whisper.

But to us, it felt normal. Rose, Gabrielle, and I... deep down, we were just regular girls, even if everyone else thought we were something else entirely.

I could understand why people thought that, though. From the outside, we must've seemed hard to figure out. It was like puzzle pieces that shouldn't fit but somehow did.

"It seems like you're handling your campaign pretty well," I told Gabrielle as we walked side by side, the late afternoon sun streaking the stone path with gold. "And with the election coming up so fast, I'm guessing you're already starting to lock things down."

Right now, she was neck-deep in campaign prep. The election was only two months away, and every day she seemed to be either planning, talking to students, or buried in paperwork.

Back then, she'd struggled so hard just to think of ways to win people over.

To win, you had to be a people pleaser—even if just a little.

But that was never who Gabrielle was. She'd always had that strict, almost severe vision of how the academy should be run, and naturally, most students didn't want to vote for someone who seemed so unbending.

That's why, over these last few years, I kept trying to help her see which things mattered to fight for—and which ones she could soften on.

Both of us had joined the student council too, and being there gave Gabrielle a real chance to earn trust, especially among the lower years.

Now, with us moving into our fourth year, she'd be aiming to take the president's seat—and I'd be by her side as vice president. And there was a good chance Rose might fill a spot too, since Gabrielle honestly didn't know how to fill out the rest of the council.

That's why if Gabrielle lost now, it'd be her last chance. Fourth year would be our final year in the academy.

She absolutely had to win.

But honestly, looking at her now—so focused it felt like she was burning a hole in the ground with every step—I wasn't that worried.

Gabrielle had built a solid following after serving on the council during our second and third years. And on top of that, the current president was openly backing her, which practically sealed the deal.

At this point, it'd take something wild and unpredictable to knock her down—and the chances of that were so tiny it felt like worrying about lightning striking twice.

While I was matching her steps, trying to keep up with how deep in thought she was, Rose was already leaning against the wall outside the council office, arms folded and staring off into space.

"Why're you standing there waiting for us?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Shut up. Can't I?" she shot back, her voice carrying that stubborn edge but with something soft buried underneath.

"It's not like that," I said, letting out a little laugh. "Alright, since tomorrow kicks off a new week, let's go to the pub and get ourselves smashed again."

"That's why I was waiting," Rose replied, and that grin of hers spread like sunlight breaking through clouds.

So, the three of us headed out together, our footsteps falling into an easy rhythm.

It had become almost a ritual for us—going to the pub at the start of every week, letting go of rules, pressure, and everything else we carried.

Gabrielle didn't even bother protesting about breaking academy rules anymore. Seeing her ease up like that, letting herself bend just a little, felt strangely heartwarming.

After a while, we reached the familiar old pub, the worn sign swaying slightly in the breeze. We stepped inside, the smell of wood, spilled ale, and fried food wrapping around us like an old coat.

We found our usual spot, tucked into a corner where the light was low and laughter from other tables blended into a warm background hum.

Then, without hesitation, we started drinking. The sharp bite of alcohol burned our throats, loosening words and laughter in its wake.

"Hahahahaha!"

It was halfway through our second round that the memories started bubbling up.

"I still remember that!" Rose blurted out, nearly spilling her drink, eyes bright with mischief. "When we came back to the dorm, the dorm mother was glaring at us so hard, hands on her hips like she was about to scold us into dust! Gods, it was hilarious!"

Rose broke into cackles, the sound so loud people at nearby tables turned to look.

"It wasn't funny!" Gabrielle snapped back, her voice cutting through the laughter. "Do you even realize how much trouble you caused? We got detention, had to fix the door you kicked in, and we were reported for drinking too! My ranking dropped back then. And you even got demoted to Silver Class!"

She was talking about that time when Rose had kicked Gabrielle's door clean off its hinges.

"It was funny, though! You can't deny it!" Rose insisted, wiping tears from her eyes.

"You've gotta admit," I added, chuckling despite myself, "the way she just stormed in like that was kinda epic. And hey, Rose clawed her way back from Silver to Gold Class in just a few months, so what's the harm? And Gabrielle, you bounced back to top one again."

"W-Well, yeah... it was surprising she managed it so fast. But if she hadn't, then what?" Gabrielle muttered, her voice softening just enough to show something real.

"Aww...~ Were you that worried I'd be stuck in Silver Class and you'd miss me? That's actually kinda sweet, Gabrielle," Rose teased, her grin lazy but gentle in its own strange way.

For a second, the noise of the pub felt like it faded.

"I mean... I-I wanted to graduate with you two... and become Magic Knights together..." Gabrielle mumbled, her head dropping a little, cheeks flushed red from the alcohol—but with that unmistakable blush that had nothing to do with drink.

Chapter 815: Friends (2)

We stared at her for a second, and I mean, really stared, then Rose and I turned to look at each other, blinking dumbly as if we were still trying to process the words that just came out of Gabrielle's mouth.

Then, out of nowhere, laughter burst out of both of us, echoing around like we'd been holding it in forever.

"W-What is it? Why are you two laughing?! Is what I said really that funny?!" Gabrielle snapped, glaring at us so hard it could've burned a hole through our heads—but the effect was completely ruined by how her cheeks were burning bright red, almost glowing under the lamplight.

"No, it's just... it's funny, because it's coming from you!" Rose was practically gasping between peals of laughter, clutching her stomach like she couldn't hold herself together anymore. "I-I mean, with how stiff you always are, I never in my life thought you'd say something so damn sweet—it's actually hilarious! Ahhh~ my stomach hurts~! I can't...! I really can'tttttttt~!!!"

She was laughing so hard I thought she might actually pass out, tears sparkling at the corners of her eyes.

And me? I couldn't stop either. The laughter kept bubbling up from somewhere deep inside, spilling out until my vision blurred with tears.

"You know," I managed to say between ragged breaths, wiping at the tears dripping down my cheeks, "I really never thought you'd be the one to say you want the three of us to graduate together and become magic knights. What brought this on?"

Gabrielle hesitated for a beat, her eyes darting to the ground, her voice turning softer. "W-Well, I feel like I've changed so much these past few years... because I met you two," she murmured, each word sounding heavier than usual. "I think... I would've stayed stubborn as hell, hard to bend, too foolish to even think of compromising. Probably would've stayed stuck there forever. B-But..."

She trailed off, the last word hanging in the air like unfinished music.

Rose and I exchanged a silent look, our laughter fading into curious grins, and in perfect sync we leaned forward and teased, "But?"

"W-Well..." she started again, her shoulders tensing as she spoke. "After meeting both of you, I feel like... I've changed. I mean, I was never the type who'd bend easily, right? And lately, yeah... people have been acknowledging me more... but if it weren't for Irene pushing me, I'd never have even become someone like that. And without Rose always trying to outdo me... I think I've grown to appreciate doing normal things more."

"Hey, what the hell's that supposed to mean?" Rose shot back, glaring so hard her brow furrowed into sharp lines.

"I think what she means," I jumped in with a laugh, "is that because you're always doing crazy, abnormal shit, she's come to like normal stuff more."

"Oh yeah? You wanna get punched, huh?!" Rose barked, fists tightening like she was ready to swing.

"Hey, hey—calm down!" I chuckled, throwing my hands up in mock surrender. "I'm pretty sure she meant it in a good way. I mean, in her own weird way, she's basically thanking you. So that's gotta count for something, right?"

Rose let out a heavy breath, her glare softening bit by bit. And after a few seconds, she huffed one last time and dropped back onto her seat, though her eyes were still sharp.

Honestly? It still amazed me. This was the same Rose I used to know with her being an eccentric, romance-crazed, so stubborn she'd try to punch through literal walls if she thought it'd help. And yet, after everything, she'd mellowed enough to sit back down instead of throwing a punch.

"Well," I continued, letting out a small sigh, "it's only natural for us to want something like that. Besides, at this point, it feels like we're practically guaranteed to graduate as Gold Class. We've made it through almost four whole years already, and we've kept our spot in Gold Class the whole time. I don't think anything could happen now that'd kick us out."

We'd held onto those ranks since near the start, fighting tooth and nail. And honestly? I couldn't imagine anything dragging us down now, not after everything.

"Well, I still can't help but worry a bit about Rose," Gabrielle spoke up again, her tone tightening just a little. She turned her gaze to Rose, eyes narrowing. "Your rank's been stuck on the lower end of Gold Class for quite a while now."

"You can't really blame her, though," I cut in, my voice turning a bit firmer. "The academy doesn't just grade us by strength. You've gotta balance everything, like brains, strength, and attitude. If you wanna move up or even hold your spot, it's about more than just power."

It was true. The academy's whole system measured so many things at once, half of which we barely even saw coming. And Rose... well, everyone knew she wasn't exactly the academic type.

"Hey, wait—are you calling me stupid?!" Rose snapped, whipping her glare back at me, her voice sharp as a blade.

"Look, at least you've got the strength to keep your rank up, so what's the big deal?" I shot back quickly, hoping to steer her off before she really exploded.

And as soon as I threw that compliment in, like clockwork, her scowl softened into a smirk, her chest puffing up a little.

"Hmph! Of course I'm strong. No way my rank's gonna drop on me."

"But still," Gabrielle added, the shine of her glasses catching the light as she looked serious again, "you should still be careful. Maybe think ahead, just in case something unexpected comes up."

She was right. Even if the chance of falling was low, it didn't mean it was impossible. Anything could happen, like bad luck, stupid mistakes, or something we couldn't even see coming.

"You're not the only one I'm worried about, though," Gabrielle added quietly, her gaze shifting toward me.

"Huh?!" My voice caught for a second, caught off-guard.

"Irene, your rank's been slipping ever since first year," she said, voice level but firm. "You used to be in the top twenty, remember? But now, you're down to fifty-sixth. I really think you should do something before it drops even further."

Chapter 816: Friends (3)

Now that she'd mentioned it, I had to admit—she was right.

Back at the start, my rank was actually pretty solid. Top twenty, even. I remember seeing my name sitting at rank fourteen on the first list posted outside the main hall, feeling my chest swell with pride. It felt like proof that all those late nights, bruises, and sore muscles had meant something.

But now? Well... now I was all the way down to rank fifty-six. And yeah, sometimes it would bounce up a bit, but it wasn't like some huge comeback and more like a half-hearted hop. And every time I slipped again, it felt like I dropped even lower than before.

It reminded me of trying to jump on sand, where the harder you pushed, the deeper you sank. No matter how hard I tried to force myself higher, the ground kept shifting, sliding away under my feet, leaving me stuck in the same place—or worse, falling further back.

"Well, it's not really that bad, is it?" I said, scratching the back of my neck and trying to laugh it off. "I mean, I'm still doing okay, I guess. But maybe I'm just the type that even if I keep pushing myself, I can't completely stop my rank from slipping down a bit. Still, I don't think I'd fall so far that I'd get kicked out of Gold Class. Rank fifty-six isn't exactly the bottom, right?"

It wasn't great, but it wasn't terrible either. Being fifty-six out of a hundred or so cadets wasn't something to brag about, but it wasn't disaster territory. And hey, I was still ahead of Rose, who sat stubbornly around rank seventy-nine. If she wasn't panicking, why should I?

"I think you should still be worried," Gabrielle pressed, her voice low and steady, eyes narrowing a little as she fixed them on me. "Especially now that we're about to start our fourth year. I've seen a lot of Silver Class cadets coming up strong lately—and with the changes I helped set up with the president, giving everyone equal chances to improve, some of them could break into Gold Class sooner than you think. Even if there's only a year left, that's enough time for someone hungry enough to climb past you."

Her words hit heavier than I expected, sinking into my chest like a stone.

I could tell she wasn't just throwing out random warnings—she'd been watching, noticing, and probably thinking about it for a while.

And yeah, maybe it looked like I wasn't taking things seriously. But deep down? I was. Really. Even if it didn't show on paper, I had been grinding away and pushing myself every day. It just hadn't turned into the kind of jump in rank Gabrielle wanted to see.

From the way she was staring at me, I could tell she saw it as a real risk. Something that could mess everything up if I ignored it.

But inside, I still felt like... it wasn't quite that bad.

"You don't have to worry," I told her, forcing a smile even though a tiny part of me wondered if I should worry. "I think I'll be able to manage somehow." Then I let out a breath and tried to steer us back to something lighter. "Anyway, feels like we're getting way too serious for tonight. Why don't we just keep drinking?"

It worked. Sort of. The air shifted, and the heavy feeling loosened up a bit—but I caught the flicker in Gabrielle's eyes, the tiny crease in her brow, like she wasn't fully satisfied dropping it there.

But really, there wasn't anything she could do to fix my slipping rank.

That was on me. And even if it meant staying stuck at the same rank until graduation, all I could do was keep pushing, one foot in front of the other.

Time seemed to blur a little, and before we knew it, election day had come.

The great hall felt charged, like the air itself was humming. All the cadets gathered, their conversations dropping to whispers as Gabrielle stepped up to the podium.

She stood tall, shoulders square, chin lifted with her nerves hidden under that iron composure of hers. A soft glow pulsed at her throat where a spell crystal hung, catching the light and carrying her voice across the hall.

And then she spoke.

At first, I braced myself for something strict, something that would sound cold and harsh. Because that was the Gabrielle I'd gotten used to. She was a bit too rigid and a bit too sharp-edged.

But as she kept talking... it shifted.

She started laying out plans—not just for us in Gold Class, but for everyone. Plans that would open training grounds to all classes, not just the top ranks. Ideas to improve living conditions, like finally giving Bronze Class their own bathrooms so they wouldn't have to trek across campus at night.

The hall got so quiet it felt like the air itself was holding its breath. Even the usual restless cadets at the back had gone still, leaning forward to catch every word.

"And I would also like to propose," she continued, her voice ringing clear and steady, "a stronger push for equal opportunity across all cadets, regardless of class. To make training fairer and more effective—not just for Gold Class, but for every single student here. For too long, the system favored the top, while the lower classes were left to stagnate. I promise, if you vote for me, I'll change that. I'll see it through—not just as a council member, but as your president."

The words weren't fancy. They weren't sugar-coated. But somehow, maybe because it came from her, they felt real. Heavy, in fact. Like something that could actually happen.

When she stepped back, silence hung in the air for a breath, then slowly the hall stirred again.

Other candidates came up after her, but it was obvious no one was really paying attention anymore. You could see it in the way people's eyes drifted, whispers picking up around the room. It was like the decision had already been made the moment she stepped down.

And then, the voting started.

It didn't take long before the results came back—and it wasn't even close. A landslide. Gabrielle had won over almost everyone.

And just like that, she became the next council president.

Chapter 817: Friends (4)

We ended up celebrating Gabrielle's victory right there in the council office, and honestly, the air felt almost electric with relief and excitement.

Gabrielle herself was practically glowing. Her smile looked so wide it could split her face in two, and her eyes were sparkling like someone who'd just pulled off a miracle.

And really, it wasn't like it came out of nowhere. I mean, she had every damn reason to be this happy, considering the insane amount of effort she'd poured into trying to win this presidential run.

I still remembered how crushed she looked when she lost before with how her shoulders slumped and how empty her voice sounded, like all her hard work had been worth nothing. And now, here she was, standing tall, smiling like the world had finally given something back. Winning must've felt like the universe finally saying, "Yeah, it wasn't for nothing."

And well, she deserved that.

The current president—who still held the title until Gabrielle officially took over next academic year—stepped forward, giving her a soft, genuine smile.

She congratulated Gabrielle warmly, her voice tinged with something like bittersweet pride. She was honestly happy that Gabrielle got to live out the dream she'd been chasing ever since her first year, and she also thanked her quietly for standing by her side during her own time leading the council.

"Thank you, president," Gabrielle said, her voice a little shaky but her smile unwavering.

The other council members followed, offering their congratulations one after another, some clapping her on the shoulder, others giving small, respectful nods.

And me... well... Of course I congratulated her too. I mean, hell, I'd already told her how happy I was for her a bunch of times before.

Because I really was. I meant it.

What none of us knew—least of all me—was that this moment right here would quietly mark the start of my own downfall. The moment when my place in the Gold Class rankings would slowly start slipping away.

After all that, there was no way in hell we wouldn't go and throw our own little party. So Rose and I dragged Gabrielle off to the pub, just like we always did.

We sank into the familiar old wooden seats, the dim light of the pub flickering over our tired but happy faces.

We talked about the dumbest things and the smallest things, like how we hated the taste of the academy rations, or which professor had the most annoying habit as well as laughing until our sides hurt.

Every sip of alcohol burned its way down my throat, leaving a warm haze blossoming in my chest and crawling up to my head, making everything feel lighter, a bit dizzy, but strangely comforting.

And then, finally, Gabrielle set her glass down, fingers tapping against the rim. Her eyes were calm but serious, and it felt like the air itself tensed up around us.

"Now then," she began, her voice just loud enough to rise over the hum of the pub, "with all of that finally in the bag... I wanna tell you both something."

It felt like the words had been sitting heavy on her tongue all night, waiting to spill out. I was honestly a little surprised she didn't wait till tomorrow—but there was a strange relief in hearing it now.

"I told you both that once I won, I wanted you on the council, right?" she continued.

"Yes," I said, leaning in with a grin. "What? You thinking about our positions now?" I teased, trying to keep the mood light.

But Gabrielle shook her head slowly, and that tiny shake felt heavier than it had any right to.

"No," she said, voice softer. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can give you a spot on the council."

The words dropped between us like a stone sinking into water.

My mouth went dry. Rose fell silent too, her playful expression fading. We locked eyes for a brief second, sharing the same silent surprise.

It wasn't anger but well... just a sudden emptiness. Especially after how much she'd kept telling us before that she wanted us there beside her.

"I-It's not that I don't want you both," she added quickly, the words stumbling out. "And it's not that I think you're incompetent. But I feel like... if I really wanna do what I promised everyone, I need members who'd make the council work more efficiently."

I listened, heart beating a little harder, not sure what to say yet.

"I feel like, if I want to actually keep the promises I made earlier, I need a solid plan and people who can help make it happen. That means picking those who can make the academy run better—not just my friends."

Hearing her say it out loud, it honestly made sense. It really did. But well... it still hurt. Just a little stab of something sharp, deep down.

And judging by the tight, thoughtful look on Rose's face, she felt it too.

Still, there wasn't any room for blame. We weren't mad, because deep inside, I also knew there were probably people who could do the job better.

Plus, being in the council for a year was already more than enough. Part of me had been thinking it might be good to step back, too—because, gods, it was hard to keep my rank from slipping when I had to juggle all the council work.

"Well, I'm fine with it," Rose finally spoke up, shrugging lightly. "I don't really think I'd fit in the council anyway. So thank goodness you're not picking me. Even if you did, I'd probably just mess around and not do a damn thing useful."

"That's so typical of you," I told Rose with a little laugh, shaking my head. Then I turned back to Gabrielle. "I get what you're saying. And if you think this is what's best, then do it. Honestly, I'm fine with it. Not being on the council means I can finally focus on training and studying—and maybe stop my rank from crashing any lower." I let out a small chuckle. "So in a weird way, it's kind of a relief."

When we said that, Gabrielle's face softened into a smile so warm it almost melted that heavy feeling from earlier.

It wasn't the smile of someone happy to shove us out of the way—it was the smile of someone grateful we understood, and relieved we didn't hate her for it.

She was just trying to be the best president she could be.

"Well, enough with the serious stuff!" I suddenly blurted out, raising my half-empty glass. "Let's keep celebrating, yeah?!"

"Yes..." Gabrielle breathed out, still smiling, with her shoulders finally relaxing.

And so we did. We kept drinking and laughing until the lights blurred and the air felt heavy with warmth.

Eventually, Rose ended up completely knocked out drunk, and Gabrielle and I had to half-carry, half-drag her back to her room at the Gold Dorm with her snores echoing all the way down the hall.

Chapter 818: Friends (5)

The next academic year rolled around, and Gabrielle finally took her seat as the president of the council, stepping into that role with an air of quiet authority that made it feel almost like she'd been born for it. She'd already handpicked every single person she wanted at her side, crafting the council exactly how she'd envisioned it.

Watching from the outside, I felt... strangely relieved that my name wasn't on that list. Looking at them all standing there with them all being confident, sharp-eyed, and clearly talented, it really hit me just how badly I'd have stuck out among them, like a dull stone in a pile of polished gems.

And then, among those names, my eyes landed on someone all too familiar.

My fiancé.

Well, fiancé only by arrangement. Something decided quietly by our parents behind closed doors, not something I'd asked for—or wanted, really.

We hadn't really talked beyond stiff, awkward small talk during family dinners arranged so we could "get closer." Those moments always felt forced, like we were acting out a script neither of us had written.

His name was Sesiliian.

A man from the Silver Class, with a face that looked carved to be handsome and a voice smooth enough to make people pause mid-sentence. He wasn't the strongest out there, but he didn't need to be. His charm and connections did most of the heavy lifting, and people were drawn to him like moths to a flame.

It was even said that his voice alone could make women blush and squeal, though I'd never let myself fall for that. Even if I had to admit—he did have that certain something that pulled your attention whether you liked it or not. But deep inside, there was always something about Sesiliian that set my

nerves on edge. Something I couldn't quite name. Maybe it was just me resenting the whole engagement, or maybe it was something real. Well, I didn't know, and eventually, I just pushed it aside.

But credit where it was due—Gabrielle choosing him was a smart move. He had the right presence for public events as well as the right words to smooth over rough edges.

And the rest of the council, I couldn't say other than it was stacked. Strong, quick-witted cadets from the second-year Gold Class, first-years who'd already made a name for themselves—and even one unexpected pick from the Bronze Class.

Gabrielle said it herself that she wanted a broader perspective, and this Bronze Class cadet had a talent with numbers that would've made anyone look twice.

In what felt like no time at all, Gabrielle was becoming the president everyone talked about in hushed and impressed voices. Even the staff were praising her for the changes she brought, and the improvements started to ripple through every class—from Bronze to Gold.

But as she rose, our time with her began to slip quietly away.

"She's really busy, huh?" Rose said beside me one afternoon, her voice carrying a dull note of disappointment. She was lounging on a weathered bench, arms flung behind her head, a piece of grass lazily dangling between her lips.

I shrugged, staring out across the training yard where cadets sparred under the afternoon sun. "Well, I guess that's the downside of being president," I muttered back, trying to sound lighter than I felt.

"Yeah, right," Rose sighed, tilting her head back to watch the sky. "Looks like it comes with all these perks, but damn... the price must be heavy. Honestly, if it were me, I'd have exploded from stress by now. And to top it off, she's still number one in Gold Class, like it's nothing."

Even with the weight of the entire council on her shoulders, Gabrielle hadn't slipped from her top spot. Not once.

It was almost scary, the way she kept it all balanced so perfectly, I mean.

"Gabrielle really is amazing, huh?" Rose murmured, quieter this time, almost like she was admitting something to herself.

There was a faint ache in her voice, and I could feel it too. It was like watching someone drift further and further away, not because they wanted to, but because life kept pulling them forward.

"She is..." I agreed softly, though the words felt heavier coming out than I expected.

Time moved on, and before we knew it, midterms had crept up on us.

Preparation felt almost mechanical by now with an endless hours of drills, late nights hunched over notes as well as the stale scent of ink and sweat clinging to our uniforms. It didn't feel like I'd improved, but as long as I could keep from slipping, I told myself it'd be okay.

The academy didn't just look at raw strength or intelligence, either. We were tested on everything, like written exams that made our heads spin, physical tests that left muscles aching for days, as well as coordination drills that demanded absolute focus. All of it measured, scored, and compared to decide if we were worthy to stand among magic knights.

When it was all finally over, exhaustion weighed so heavy it felt like my bones had turned to lead.

Then came the moment everyone dreaded and waited for in equal measure and that was the new rankings.

We gathered around the board, with the air so thick with nerves you could almost taste it.

"Ha..." Rose's voice cracked beside me, eyes wide as they locked onto the list.

"I got... demoted?" she whispered, as if saying it out loud would make it feel less real.

Demotion. Back to Silver Class. The same place she'd started in her first year.

But I couldn't even reach out to her.

Because my eyes had frozen on my own name.

Rank 89.

Over twenty places lower than where I'd been before.

Which meant... I couldn't even pretend I was safe anymore. Graduation at the Gold Class wasn't guaranteed.

And as the truth settled heavy in my chest, it felt like the floor itself had shifted under my feet.

Chapter 819: Graduation Disaster (1)

Rose had come back to the Silver Class.

After spending almost three long years in the Gold Class, it was like everything she'd built up just vanished overnight—and she found herself right back where she started.

Now, there were seven new Gold Class cadets who'd managed to climb up from Silver, including one who'd been demoted before and somehow managed to fight his way back up again.

And honestly... well, seeing that made something sink deep into my chest. I couldn't pretend I felt safe anymore... well, not with how low my rank had gotten in the Gold Class lately. For the first time, it hit me that I had every reason to start really worrying about where I stood.

I guess it took Rose's fall to finally make me see it clearly. That there really aren't any guarantees in life. That what I'd been holding onto could disappear, just like that. And realizing that... left me feeling strangely hollow. Alone, even.

It didn't take long before Gabrielle caught wind of the news about Rose being sent back down.

She actually went over and spoke to Rose, telling her there was still a chance—if she just really focused, she could make her way back into Gold Class.

Of course, we all knew that just "putting your mind to it" wasn't enough on its own. But Gabrielle offered, saying if Rose wanted, she could train her and help her fight her way back.

But Rose shook her head. She told Gabrielle she should focus on her real goal and that was becoming the best student council president the academy had ever seen.

It honestly surprised me how mature Rose had gotten.

"Well, it's not like I ever actually wanted to be a magic knight that badly," Rose said, her voice calm. "So even if I can't get back into Gold Class, it's fine. There's nothing I can do about it now. I'll just become an adventurer instead."

"What are you talking about?" Gabrielle snapped. "You literally have a shot to get back into Gold Class and earn the highest title you could ever reach—and you're just throwing that away to become an adventurer?"

"Well, yeah. But did I ever say I'd give up?" Rose said, her eyes steady. "I won't just sit here and rot in Silver Class. I'll bounce back. I promise."

Gabrielle fell silent after that. And then, when the two of us were walking back to the Gold Dorm, it felt off. It had always been the three of us walking together, but now... it was just me and Gabrielle. Rose wasn't there, and that empty space felt heavier than I expected.

And then Gabrielle spoke.

"How about you, Irene?" she asked, her voice quiet but serious.

"What? What about me?"

"Do you think you'll be able to graduate from Gold Class with me? Or... do you already have another plan in case it doesn't work out?"

I didn't know what to say. That was the kind of question that makes your chest tighten, because you know it's something you don't want to think about.

"Why are you acting like it's guaranteed I'll drop down to Silver Class?" I asked, my voice coming out sharper than I meant.

"It's not just a possibility anymore," Gabrielle replied, her tone steady. "It's a reality already. And if you don't take it seriously now, it'll be over before you even realize it."

For the first time in almost three years, something in me flared up.

It didn't feel like she was trying to warn me... It felt like she was already sure I was going to fail. Like she'd already written me off.

"I don't like the way you're saying it, Gabrielle," I said, my voice low.

"What do you mean?" she asked, frowning a bit.

"It feels like you're saying it's guaranteed I'll be demoted," I shot back.

"I am saying that, basically," she answered bluntly. "That's why I want you to take it seriously now—so it doesn't happen."

"I don't need you to tell me that, Gabrielle," I snapped. "You should know by now it's obvious I'm taking this seriously."

Gabrielle stopped walking and she just stood there staring at me. But I kept moving. For the first time in years, I walked the rest of the way to the Gold Dormitory completely alone.

The months started flying by, faster than I could even keep track. And even though I hadn't been demoted to Silver Class yet, it wasn't like I was moving up, either. I could feel it, like I was slowly and steadily slipping back.

Rose hadn't managed to climb back to Gold Class either. She'd been stuck in Silver for a while now.

And honestly... Well, I think I finally understood why.

It all came back to what Gabrielle had done and that was the implementing equal opportunities for growth among all cadets.

Because of that, the cadets who'd never really had a chance to show what they could do before finally started to shine. And now, it was taking real effect. People who'd been stuck in Silver for so long were breaking through to higher classes.

But then there were cadets like us.... those who were the ones who'd hit our peak early on, or who'd stopped growing for some reason. No matter how hard we trained, it felt like we couldn't improve anymore. And slowly, some of those people ended up falling behind.

It looked like Rose might have been one of them. And deep down, I couldn't shake the fear that I was, too. Because even when I gave it everything, I couldn't seem to break past where I was stuck.

But I don't really blame Gabrielle. What she did helped a lot of cadets, and it made the academy stronger overall.

And I really do feel happy it worked.

Even if it means I might be the one getting left behind... I don't want to lose the part of me that can still feel happy for everyone else.

Chapter 820: Graduation Disaster (2)

Rose and I decided to meet up again and have a drink together.

Back then, it was something we used to do without even thinking, almost every weekend like it was just part of who we were. But now... Well, now it felt like something we had to force ourselves to remember to do, as if the weight of everything kept pushing us apart.

"So, how's it going on your end?" I asked her, my voice coming out softer than I meant, as I traced circles on the table with my fingertip. The glass felt cold in my other hand, the condensation dripping onto my skin.

"Well, I'm honestly pretty bummed out," she said, her tone so casual it felt almost unreal. "I don't think I can climb back up the ranks anymore... since I keep slipping, even in Silver Class."

She spoke like it was nothing. Like she'd long accepted it—or maybe had decided not to let it hurt anymore.

"You sound weirdly calm about it. Why's that?" I asked, tilting my head slightly, trying to read the expression on her face.

"Well, I think being a magic knight isn't really for me," she said, letting out a small breath that fogged up her glass for a moment. "Not because I'm not good enough—but because it doesn't feel like I'd even fit into that world. And... honestly? Once I fail to become one, my family will probably cut me off. But... I think I can live with that."

Her voice didn't crack, and her eyes didn't falter—but there was something heavy behind her words.

I knew Rose had always been living under the weight of her family's expectations, but I never thought she'd speak about it like it was something she'd already made peace with. Whatever relationship she

had with her parents... it must've been strained enough that being disowned felt like something she could carry.

"Still... I don't get why we can't move forward anymore," she continued, her gaze drifting off into the dim light of the tavern. "I mean, I made it to Gold Class back in first year. So why can't we do it again now? Why do I keep slipping further instead?"

Her words felt heavy in the air, even if her tone stayed light. It was like she was trying to convince herself it didn't matter—but it did.

She really was thinking it through. Maybe it was better she didn't see the truth of it... that Gabrielle's equal opportunity system had helped so many break through their ceilings, while we, the ones who'd hit our peak too soon, were left slowly rotting away on the side.

Now that we were in fourth year, it was clearer than ever. So many had discovered new potential, breaking through limits we couldn't even see anymore. And the people who had always been at the top? We were starting to slip... and it was happening right in front of our eyes.

"I'm betting it's just a matter of perseverance," I told her, the words tasting hollow even as I said them.

"Yeah, probably," Rose replied, her lips curling into a small, resigned smile. "I mean, I was lazy as hell in the early years. Maybe that's why it's coming back to bite us in the ass now."

She grabbed her glass and downed it in one smooth motion, the liquid catching the faint lamplight before disappearing down her throat.

"Puhaahhh~! Alcohol really is the best," she sighed, her shoulders relaxing for just a moment.

"It really is..." I echoed, my voice almost a whisper. "But... I wish Gabrielle was here with us tonight."

Our eyes both drifted to the empty seat across the table. That spot used to feel alive that was filled with laughter, teasing, and arguments. Now it was just an empty chair, and it felt heavier than anything.

"Well, Gabrielle's probably just busy, you know?" Rose said, her fingers idly spinning her empty glass. "Or maybe... she doesn't wanna hang out with a loser anymore."

"Loser?" I repeated, blinking at her.

"I mean, me," she clarified, her voice staying calm but with something flickering underneath. "I got demoted to Silver Class and haven't been able to climb back. Maybe she thinks I'm a loser now. Maybe that's why she doesn't drink with us anymore. Don't you think?"

Hearing Rose say that about herself made my chest tighten.

"I don't... really think Gabrielle would see you that way," I said, my voice steady but gentle.

We sat there in silence, the faint hum of voices around us feeling distant. Just us, the clink of glasses, and the flickering lantern light dancing on the table.

Then Rose looked at me.

"What about you? Are you gonna be okay? Last I heard, you're only about ten ranks away from slipping."

I let out a small breath, my fingers tapping against the rim of my glass.

"Well... I'm doing everything I can," I admitted. "But it feels like everyone else keeps climbing, and I'm stuck fighting to keep from falling. It's... overwhelming, honestly. Still, I'm giving it everything. And now, all I can do is wait for graduation and hope... pray, even, that I'm still in Gold Class by then."

Then I looked up at her, a small smile tugging at my lips.

"And... of course, I want you to be there too. Both of us, standing together as magic knights. Gabrielle would be so happy to see us. Then we'd go out, celebrate, get some beer, and drink ourselves stupid. Doesn't that sound kinda fun?"

"It really does," Rose said softly, her gaze softening. "You know... back when Gabrielle said she wanted the three of us to graduate together, I was so happy. But I was too embarrassed to say it, so I just teased her instead."

"Gabrielle still feels the same, I'm sure of it," I told her, trying to let that hope sink into both of us.

Rose refilled her glass, lifted it up, and swallowed it down in one big gulp, the alcohol burning away whatever doubt she had.

"Alright! I'm gonna try even harder to get back into Gold Class! I'll do everything I can!" she declared, her voice echoing with determination.

I couldn't help but smile at her energy.

Somehow, even now, her spirit hadn't died out. If I could go back and tell my past self that I'd end up drinking and laughing with someone like Rose, I know my old self would've thought I'd gone completely insane.

But what my past self didn't understand... was how it felt to have real friends. Friends like Rose and Gabrielle—people who burned bright in their own ways, even when things were falling apart.

I wanted to graduate with them, side by side, as magic knights.

So after that night, I kept trying. Gave everything I had to keep up—to hold onto my rank.

It took nearly all my strength, sleepless nights, doubts that clawed at my mind, and so many moments I wanted to give up... but finally, graduation day came.

Before that day, I managed to keep my rank. And so, I felt a bit of hope that maybe, just maybe, I'd still be in Gold Class.

Then the final results were posted.

We all gathered, hearts pounding, breath caught in our throats, to see what fate had decided.

All of us, cadets who'd fought, hoped, and bled for this moment...

All of us stood there, staring at those final words that would decide everything.