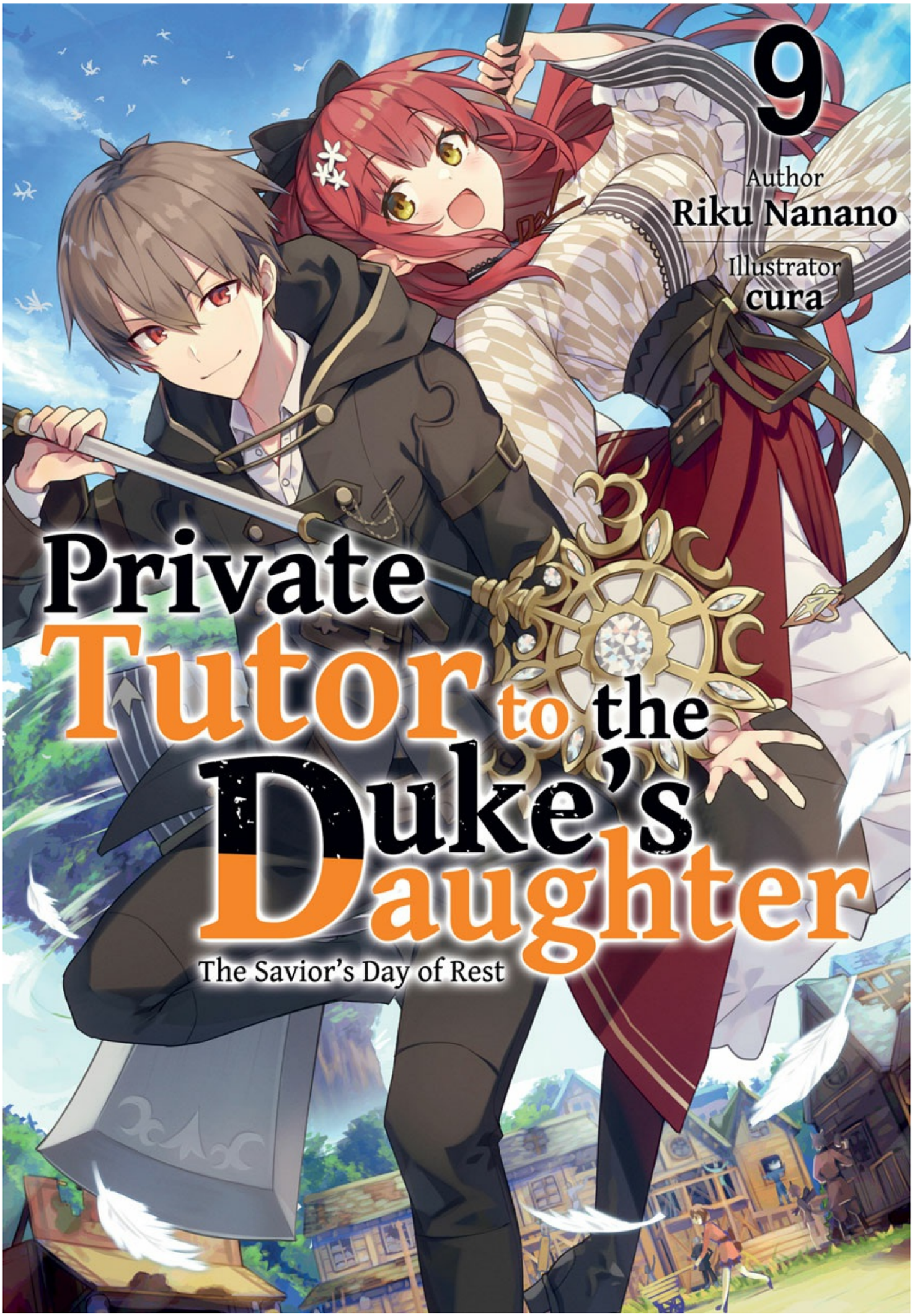

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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The Savior's Day of Rest


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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 9 [Complete]

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Prologue

"He's late," I fumed. "*Way* too late. If the professor expects people to come when he calls, he needs to work on his punctuality!"

"I fully concur, Lady Teto, but please remember that we are not alone," Mina Walker, the second-highest-ranking maid in service to the Ducal House of Howard, warned me in a whisper. The dukes' maids had been guarding me—Teto Tijerina—and my fellow research students since our arrival in the royal capital. The professor was the head of our department at the university, and one of the most accomplished sorcerers in the kingdom.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw a dozen or so knights in a mix of red and blue uniforms standing a short distance from us. They belonged to the Azure and Scarlet Orders—elite troops in the service of Dukes Howard and Leinster, respectively—and they were eyeing us inquisitively by the light of the portable mana lamps.

"Yes, Mina," I said ruefully, bowing to the maid. I was always struck by the way her flaxen hair curled outward, and I noted it again as I adjusted my black witch hat and tightened my grip on both the sleeve of my robe and my wooden staff.

We stood atop a low hill to the east of the royal capital. A dreary landscape spread out around us, with not a house in sight. In the night sky above hung a crimson crescent moon, joined by a comet and meteor shower, neither of which had supposedly been seen in two hundred years. Below us, the Great Tree at the center of the Royal Academy towered over the nighttime cityscape. I was sure that I saw more lights than I had a few days ago—tangible proof that life was returning to normal.

Just two days earlier, three of the kingdom's Four Great Ducal Houses—the Howards, the Leinsters, and the western Lebuferas—had joined forces to liberate the royal capital from a rebellion spearheaded by the eastern Ducal House of Algren. My fellow students and I had been eager to press on to the eastern capital at once, but Anko, the professor's black-cat familiar, had

dismissed the suggestion out of paw and ordered us to rebuild the city's magical defenses. Meanwhile, our allies had called on the demisprites' strategic teleportation magic to successfully storm the eastern capital. The insurrection was apparently over, although I didn't know the details—including what had become of my former upperclassmen Allen and Lydia, whom I greatly admired.

"Anyway," I murmured, toying with a braid that my roommate had done for me, "why seal off *this* place? The professor gave the order, didn't he?"

"I'm sorry to say that I don't understand it either," Mina replied. "It *is* strange, isn't it?"

So, despite her extensive wartime authority, the Howard maids' second-in-command didn't know what we were doing here. The professor must have summoned me alone because he couldn't risk his other students finding out about this. And that meant it involved a certain alumnus of our department, who had been caught up in the rebellion.

I tightened my grip on my staff. It had been a gift from Allen, the former upperclassman in question. He was also one of the best sorcerers in the west of the continent, and his partnership with Lady Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, had led some to nickname him her "Brain." He was stubborn, a little bit mean—and the kindest person you'd ever meet. We all idolized him. He'd always done so much for us, and I still remembered the secret promise that I'd made with the rest of the department—that one day, we'd find a way to repay him.

So, what am I doing standing around here instead?!

Just as I was working myself up into a fury, I felt a warmth on my left shoulder. "Anko?" I asked, taken aback. The feline familiar had hopped aboard me before I'd even realized it was there.

And if Anko's returned, then...

I heard the knights stir behind me, and the petite maid announced, "Lady Teto, it appears our wait is over."

I turned to see a bespectacled, scholarly man cross the cordon of knights, waving his right hand as he walked toward us. The professor was dressed for

travel in a gentleman's hat and greatcoat. When he reached us, he said, in his usual nonchalant manner, "Pardon my lateness, Teto. An insufferable conference ran long. Neither Walter, Liam, nor Leo has a proper sense of appreciation for my efforts! They demanded I come by forced march from the imperial capital, and what thanks do I get? A slew of accusations from Her Royal Highness and one unreasonable demand after another. Mina, thank you for guarding my students."

"No thanks necessary," the maid replied. "We're all delighted to look after such charming young ladies and gentlemen."

Despite the twinge of embarrassment that her remark inspired, I considered the professor's words carefully. Walter, Liam, and Leo were Dukes Howard, Leinster, and Lebufera; the imperial capital was the chief city of the Yustinian Empire to our north; and "Her Royal Highness" must have referred to Princess Cheryl Wainwright.

"Excuse me, Professor," I interjected. "May I have a word?"

"Hm? Yes, Teto. What would you like to say?" After a brief pause, he exclaimed, "Don't tell me *you* would like to express some gratitude?!"

"No, the thought never even crossed my mind."

The professor grunted as if struck. "T-Teto? Y-You *do* realize that I brokered a peace agreement with the Yustinian Empire and left Graham—Duke Howard's head butler—to finalize the treaty? I'd say that I've accomplished quite a lot."

"Not nearly enough. Please keep slaving away like a cart horse."

The professor stood speechless for a moment. Then he groaned, "Why am I cursed with such demanding students? That's one side of Allen's and Lydia's character that I wish you *wouldn't* emulate. Oh, that reminds me—I have urgent news for you."

Mina and I listened anxiously as he straightened up and said, "We've been in contact with the eastern capital. Allen and Lydia are safe."

I felt such a surge of relief that my legs nearly gave out under me. With a tender "Lady Teto," Mina stepped in to support me. Tears clouded my vision.

Thank goodness. Oh, thank goodness!

The professor adjusted his hat as he continued, “Railway lines and communication networks between the royal and eastern capitals are still under repair. Skyhawk Company griffins can compensate, but only in a limited capacity, so we’re still working to puzzle out exactly what happened. It sounds, however, as though Allen, Lydia, and Lady Tina Howard saved the eastern capital.”

Again, Allen?! Why does this keep happening?! And Lydia...should be fine, as long as they’re together.

I could feel Mina trembling as she propped me up. “Lady Tina, the fullest of full marks,” she murmured unsteadily under her breath. “The mistress would be over the moon if she were alive to hear this.”

Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard was the girl whom Allen was currently employed to tutor. As the daughter of a duke, she would have been accorded a lesser style abroad. Here, however, we called members of the Four Great Ducal Houses that guarded the north, east, south, and west of our kingdom “Highness” in deference to their relation to the Royal House of Wainwright. Rumor had it that Lady Tina had cast her first spell just a few months earlier, yet she had still placed first on the Royal Academy entrance exam this past spring. Well, if she’d learned from Allen, that was hardly surprising.

I steadied myself and said, “Professor, what about Gil?”

“He seems to be safe,” my mentor replied. “At least for the moment.”

Lord Gil Algren was my classmate, as well as an irreplaceable friend. I’d shared all the ups and downs of my university career with him and my roommate, Yen Checker. I couldn’t imagine him taking part in such a ludicrous insurrection. But he was still an Algren, so I doubted he could escape punishment entirely. I would need to consult Allen about that.

“Shall we go, then?” asked the professor. “No one else may proceed beyond this point. Mina, see to it that no one does.”

“Certainly, sir,” the maid responded. “You may depend on me.”

“Professor, does this have something to do with Allen?” I demanded.

Reluctantly, my mentor said, “It does. I’ve heard that a party of rebels came this way.” With a grave, sorrowful look I’d rarely seen on his face, he added, “If they set foot within, we have a serious problem—far worse than the recent Great Folly. Anko.”

The majestic black cat let out a meow. The next thing I knew, the professor and I were engulfed by a shadow at our feet.

“Teto, it’s all right now,” he said.

“O-Of course.” I timidly opened my eyes, then let out a baffled “Huh?” when I saw that we stood before a simple tombstone. The engraving read, “Here lies one who kept his word when it mattered most.” A glance around revealed a shadowy barrier of immense power, through which I could see the Great Tree. Considering that I could sense Mina’s mana...

“Anko raised a perception-blocking ward over a large area?” I wondered aloud. “And this is one of Allen’s spell formulae, isn’t it?”

The cat on my left shoulder meowed. Apparently, I’d gotten it right.

“The tombstone is Allen’s doing,” the professor added, nodding. “He complained that he couldn’t offer flowers and wine in the academy’s catacombs, where the body lies, as they are open only to royalty. Only the deceased’s effects are buried here.”

“What?” I was dumbfounded. Since when did the Royal Academy have catacombs? This was the first that I’d heard of them.

“Only national heroes are permitted a burial there. Although if Allen is to be believed, he was ordinarily about the least heroic fellow imaginable.”

“Then, Allen knew this person?” I asked slowly. Allen didn’t have many friends, owing to his low social standing as an adopted member of the wolf clan, others’ jealousy of his staggering achievements...and the fact that Lydia had stuck to him like glue all through university.

The professor nodded. “His name was Zelbert Régnier, Allen’s best friend and Lydia’s natural enemy. He courageously fulfilled his duty and saved the royal capital from a four-winged devil. Apparently, his last request was to have his

tombstone on this hill. And although the royal family objected, Allen absolutely refused to listen to them. As he put it, ‘My friend risked his life to keep the city safe. I’m duty bound to keep my word to him.’”

“That does sound like Allen,” I admitted. The great magician I so admired would never lose sight of what was truly important. “So, what are you worried could have— Professor!”

A chill ran down my spine as I spotted eerie charcoal-gray lines beginning to form a design on the surface of the tombstone. The mana they contained was so utterly malevolent that it made my flesh crawl.

“A symbol of the Church of the Holy Spirit?” I murmured incredulously. But the lines continued to intersect, spiraling over the stone...until they finally converged into a dreadful mass of enormous serpents, which glared down at us out of empty eye sockets. To my further shock, more leaden geometric shapes than I could count materialized in the empty air around it.

Shields?

The creature was an enigma. Still, one thing was certain. “I don’t know what you are,” I said, lowering the brim of my hat, raising my staff, and readying talismans in my left hand, “but this place means a lot to Allen. And I’m not softhearted enough to let you defile it and live to tell the tale! Bego—”

“Teto, stand back,” the professor commanded, with a force that took my breath away.

I paused in the act of spellcasting and retreated half a step. The next instant, the floating, shifting shield-shapes launched themselves at the professor.

“Hmm... So, they’ve added vestiges of Radiant Shield to the mix,” he mused. “In which case...”

“Watch out!” I screamed. But before the words were out of my mouth, an umbral ray had shredded the entire barrage—along with the main body of the creature, which fell to the ground in pieces. No blood spurted from its wounds. They instead pulsed with a darkly ashen light as the thing knitted itself back together.

“Resurrection too, I see,” came the cold analysis. “And judging by the form...”

The serpents rose and lunged again, with a speed and ferocity that caught me by surprise. I was scrambling to hurl my talismans when the professor raised one hand to secure his hat and snapped his fingers with the other. Instantly, a black cube engulfed the snakes, then shrank until it vanished completely.

A stunned “Huh?!” was all I could manage.

W-Was that a spell?

I remembered something that Allen had once told me—that the professor fully deserved his reputation as our kingdom’s greatest sorcerer.

Once I’d made doubly sure that the serpents were all gone, I turned to my mentor and cried, “Professor! Wh-What in the world was *that*?!”

“A parting gift from the church,” he replied. “The power of the great spell Stone Serpent. And I doubt they stopped here. They’ve uncovered Régnier’s last resting place!”

I was speechless. A great spell was a serious matter—far *too* serious for the ears of a humble student. And if the Church of the Holy Spirit was involved too, then—

I felt a new source of mana behind me.

“Did you arrange all this?” the professor demanded with undisguised animosity. “If so, I *will* crush you.”

“Of course not,” came the reply. “I would have done it better. Besides, you must realize that was merely a greeting.”

The professor snorted.

The new arrival was the last person I’d expected. He was a monocled old man with a long beard as white as his sorcerer’s robe—the current head of the court sorcerers and leader of the conservative aristocracy, Gerhard Gardner. We all suspected him of standing between Allen and a court sorcerer appointment. So, what was he doing here?

I was still wondering when Mina entered the ward as well. “My sincere apologies,” she said, bowing deeply. “He claims to bear urgent tidings.”

“‘Urgent,’ are they?” the professor echoed, eyeing Gardner suspiciously.

There was nothing friendly about his tone. “Well, let’s hear them.”

The old man, however, was unfazed. “I come on behalf of His Royal Highness, Crown Prince John,” he said matter-of-factly.

The professor arched one eyebrow. Although Crown Prince John Wainwright was next in line for the throne, I’d heard that he preferred to stay out of public affairs.

“‘The royal capital needs a cleaning to welcome our new champion,’” Gardner recited clearly in response to a look from the professor. “I was never here tonight.”

His words hung heavily in the air until, at last, the professor demanded, “What brought this on?”

When he says “cleaning,” does he mean...

“I will merely perform my duties as a guardian and a Gardner. Marquess Crom and His Majesty, who remains in the west, have already given their approval. The barriers protecting the palace archive of forbidden books have been partially breached, and the archive’s contents have been ransacked. Prince Gerard, who had been relocated to the city, is missing as well.” After a brief pause, the court sorcerer pronounced, “These religious extremists are too dangerous to overlook.”

“So, the enemy of your enemy is your friend. And you’ll take the opportunity to rid your faction of good-for-nothings who didn’t even have the spine to declare for the Great Folly. Ha!” The professor looked down slightly and adjusted his spectacles. His eyes glinted ominously as he said, “Not a bad plan. The kingdom must change quickly—our enemy is pure evil.”

“I don’t share your views, and I remain convinced that barring that boy, Allen, from the court sorcerers was the correct decision. But national security is a far more pressing concern. And you can hardly recall him to the royal capital and show him what was done here, can you? At least not until we know more of our enemy and their intentions.”

I shuddered. Allen was the kindest person you’d ever meet. But by the same token, he could be your worst nightmare if pushed too far. When he was

furious, no one could stop him. And now his late friend's grave had been defiled. He would try to avenge that outrage, even if the whole kingdom were arrayed against him.

"I despise you!" the professor spat. Then, bitterly, he said, "I'll convince the three dukes. We'll need personnel, and also to put Princess Cheryl on a train to the eastern capital posthaste. She will most certainly be opposed."

"I despise you as well," Gardner retorted. "But dirty work is a duty of the old. On that one point, I trust we can see eye to eye."

The two renowned sorcerers glared at each other in silence. Then they sneered.

"Well then, I've delivered my message," Gardner declared. With that, he turned on his heel and left.

Allen, this is all way too much for me to take! I mean, I'm the only normal *person in the department!*

"Lady Teto," Mina whispered in my ear, "might I suggest that no sorceress who learned her craft directly from Mr. Allen can be considered precisely 'normal'?"

"M-Mina?!" I exclaimed, flustered but still keeping my voice low. "D-Don't read my mind like that!"

Anko let out an exasperated meow.

The professor, meanwhile, was deep in thought. "The question is how to keep Allen away from the royal capital once the chaos in the east has settled," he murmured to himself. "Of course! I'll simply send him abroad. But in that case, Lydia will have to be involved in..."

A spine-chilling grin spread across my mentor's face.

"I beg your pardon, Teto," he said, "but I'll require your cooperation. Kindly write Allen and Lydia a letter *each*."

Chapter 1

“Hmm... This could be going better,” I grumbled to myself as I lounged on the sofa, experimenting with a new spell formula.

I currently found myself in a private sickroom of the eastern capital’s largest hospital. The enchanted sword Cresset Fox and the enchanted rod Silver Bloom rested on a chair beside the bed. Three days had passed since the curtain had fallen on the Algren insurrection, and while I convalesced, life in the eastern capital was gradually returning to normal. My students, sister, and parents were off helping to rebuild the beastfolk districts.

A fox cub with a violet ribbon tied around its neck—Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals—was fast asleep on my lap. She was stuck in this form while she waited for her mana to recover. I stroked her, and her ears and tail twitched happily.

A pleasant summer breeze wafted in through the open window, bearing the sound of cheerful voices. “I wish I could lend a hand,” I murmured plaintively.

“Nothing doing!” came a bright, lilting reply. “Everyone agreed that you need to rest and recuperate, whether you like it or not! So for now, Allen, your job is to stay here and take it easy!”

I turned to the open doorway and saw a dazzling young woman wearing a black ribbon in her gorgeous scarlet tresses and a floral hair clip toward the front of her head. She was carrying a laundry hamper and beaming at me.

This was Lily Leinster, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three. She was also Under-duke Leinster’s daughter, which made her cousins with Lydia—my partner, who was undergoing a medical examination at the moment—and with Lydia’s sister Lynne, who was one of my pupils. Her outfit consisted of a pale-scarlet jacket patterned with interlocking arrows, which came from an eastern land; a long skirt; and leather boots. She looked lovely in it—but not at all like a maid.

Lily strode into the room and deposited her hamper on the bedside table,

then held up her right index finger and continued cheerily, “Remember, Allen, I’m older than you. And you need to listen to your elders.”

“Even if those elders got lost and bawled their eyes out at our first meeting?” I inquired. I had made Lily’s acquaintance five years earlier, when I’d been a student at the Royal Academy and Lydia had invited me to the southern capital for the summer. At the station, I’d run into a girl who was at her wit’s end despite being two years my senior, and together we’d gone on a little adventure. I had given her the hair clip as a memento of the occasion. And, needless to say, Lydia had been in a dreadful temper when, satisfied with our day’s work, we had reached the Leinster mansion that evening.

A dramatic transformation came over Lily’s face. “Th-That was just—” she protested, floundering for an argument. “I’d spent all my time in the under-duchy, so I wasn’t used to the southern capital, and— Oooh! Don’t you know you have to be nicer to your elders?!”

Pouting, she sat down beside me. With her came the fragrance of southern flowers and the fond memories it recalled.

“In any case,” I said, “I’m amazed that you actually became a maid. You must be well on your way to making your dream come true.”

Lily swelled with pride and laughed smugly, her displeasure forgotten. “Of course I am!” she proclaimed. “And someday, I’ll be *head* maid!”

“Best of luck. Although I suspect you’ll need to earn a maid uniform first.”

My elder let out a startled squawk and toppled backward, her hands pressed to her ample chest.

What an entertaining reaction. The rest of the maid corps must really love her —especially Anna.

While I indulged in that cozy reflection, Lily jolted upright and began pummeling my arm. “Allen!” she wailed. “You really! Are! Such! A! Meanie!”

“Ow!” I protested. “That hurts.”

With a loud harrumph, Lily folded her arms and turned away from me. I was delighted to see she hadn’t changed.

I crooked my right index finger, projecting the spell formula I'd deployed earlier into the air before us.

"Oh, wow!" Lily exclaimed. "That's *gorgeous*! What is it?"

"This formula comes from the Fire Fiend—I mean, Twin Heavens, Linaria Etherheart," I explained. "Although mine is a simplification."

Lily's eyes widened. Linaria Etherheart was the greatest swordswoman and sorceress in mortal history. She was also a descendant of one of the last witches. I had met the ancient legend herself inside a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea, where she had entrusted Atra to my care.

"I gave her my word that I would keep Atra safe," I confessed, stroking the fox cub's head. The band on my right ring finger flashed. "But...I broke that promise. Atra only came back to us because she had help from the great elementals within Lydia and Tina—Blazing Qilin and Frigid Crane. I can't count on another miracle like that. I need to get stronger."

"Allen..." Lily said. "Hyah!"

I cried out in surprise as she gave my arm a sudden yank, pulling my head down onto her lap.

"It's all right," Lily murmured, tenderly stroking my hair. "You did everything you could—more than you should have. Everyone knows that. So don't rush. Even if you can't do this alone, we can all pull through together. After all, you've got an unbeatable, charming maid on your side! Do you understand? If you do, speak up!"

Atra woke up and started squirming around on my belly. Her round, golden eyes looked into mine.

"I'll keep it in mind," I responded at last.

"As you should. And that goes for you too, Atra."

An adorable answering yip was followed by the thump of a wagging tail. Lily and Atra were great friends.

I sat up, eliciting a cry of protest from my elder.

"Your Highness," I informed her, "young ladies ought to be less free with their

laps.”

“You’re not supposed to call me that!” the maid whined.

Oh, I almost forgot.

“Lily,” I said.

“Yes, Mr. Meanie the private tutor?” she sulkily replied.

“Thank you.”

Lily blinked, wide-eyed. Eventually, she managed a stunned “Huh?”

“Lynne told me how much you did for Lydia while I was gone. I doubt she could have held on without you. I’m truly grateful.”

My partner was strong, well deserving of her moniker “Lady of the Sword.” Emotionally, however, she could be as fragile as any other young person our age—no matter how hard she tried to pretend otherwise.

For a moment, Lily was speechless. Then she took my hands in hers. “Allen,” she said, “I didn’t do anything special. I mean, I love Lydia to bits. And Lynne and I weren’t the only ones watching out for her—the maid corps, everyone at the house, and the mistress were all there for her too. And most importantly, she had you.”

“But I didn’t do any—”

“You did!” Lily cried, uncharacteristically serious. Perhaps this was Lady Lily Leinster in her natural state. “After we heard about the rebellion, Lydia didn’t let go of her pocket watch and ribbon for a moment! You kept her heart safe!”

I met her gaze and gave her a gentle smile. “I certainly hope so. Please don’t tell anyone about this conversation.”

“Of course!” she chirped. “It will be our secret!”

We exchanged a nod. I would take this to my grave—it would be so embarrassing if Lydia found out.

“What have we here?” a glacial voice interrupted.

Lily and I turned fearfully toward the doorway. There stood a young woman wearing one of my white shirts over her nightgown and clutching a

temperamental pocket watch. She was beautiful, although she had lost weight and her recently shortened scarlet hair still needed a trim. Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, was the eldest daughter of the duke who governed the south of our kingdom. And ever since she and I had enrolled in the Royal Academy, we had been an inseparable team.

"Hands," Lydia muttered, transfixing me with a murderous glare.



“What? Oh.” I remembered that I had been holding Lily’s hands this whole

time and hastily released them—provoking a soft “Aaw...” of protest.

Lydia glanced at the maid and said, “Lily, brew tea.”

“Coming right up!” Lily responded. Then she stood up with a little grunt, pondered briefly, and gave both me and Atra a pat on the head.

“Lily!” Lydia snapped in alarm.

“Well then, I’ll be back in a jiffy!” the maid practically sang, giggling as she fled the room. That left me, the dozing fox cub on my lap, and a decidedly miffed Lydia.

So, how do I talk my way out of this one?

“Don’t complain if you wake up with a sword through you one day, cheater,” she grumbled.

“I believe in my own innocence,” I ventured.

“No back talk!” Lydia snapped, pouting as she sat down beside me and pressed her shoulder against mine. “Honestly. Don’t you remember that you’re my—and no one else’s—personal serv—”

Lydia leaned in close to me, sniffed, then narrowed her eyes. “Tell me, why do you smell like Lily’s perfume?”

“Oh, you know,” I replied. “She sat next to me, so—”

“Liar,” Lydia declared, in a tone that brooked no argument. Her gaze made a silent demand.

I had learned that excuses tended to backfire at times like this, so I cast a levitation spell on Atra and patted my newly vacant lap. The willful young lady laid her head on it.

“Don’t think this will get you off the hook,” she said quickly. “Although I’ll commend you for giving your mistress what she wants.”

“Oh, so you wanted this?” I teased.

“*Excuse* me?! Of course I did!”

“Um... Was that anger called for?”

“You need to be more aware. Well?” Lydia gave me another demanding look.

Your Highness’s wish is my command.

“What did the doctors say?” I asked, running my fingers through her lusterless hair.

“That I seemed healthy,” she replied smugly. “Although I’ll be discharged on the same day as you.”

“I see,” I said slowly.

If the doctors had seen nothing out of the ordinary, that only meant that they had failed to find the root of the problem—not that I couldn’t guess what it was. In the final moments of the rebellion, the church inquisitor Lev had metamorphosed into the monstrous Stinging Sea and assailed the eastern capital. I had linked mana with Lydia—and with Tina Howard, who wasn’t here at the moment—to cast the great spell Lightning Flash, slaying the monster and saving the city. Tina had come through the battle unscathed, while I had collapsed from mental and physical exhaustion—the consequences of ignoring my limits once or twice too often. And Lydia—

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said, reaching up to touch my cheek. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

I squeezed her hand without saying a word.

Lydia was experiencing a severe form of mana depletion, limiting her magical abilities to slight strength enhancement. Her mana reserves were currently smaller than mine, and mine were already below the average. The doctors had declared this a temporary symptom, brought on by her extreme overuse of arcane power, although I found it difficult to feel confident in their diagnosis.

The results of the first examination had most perturbed not Lydia herself, but Tina and Tina’s personal maid, Ellie Walker. Lynne and my younger sister, Caren, had been shaken as well. Seeing how upset they all were had helped Tina’s elder sister, Lady Stella Howard, and me to remain calm. I doubted that I could have managed it otherwise. If Lydia never regained her command of magic, then—

A pinch on the cheek snapped me out of my reflections.

“Silly,” Lydia said. “I couldn’t be happier. I mean, I finally, *finally* get to be just like you. I’ll admit that it’s not always easy, but I have you here with me. So, what is there to worry about?” After a drawn-out pause, she asked, “Do you not like me without my magic?”

“I don’t think that’s a fair question,” I answered stiffly.

“Tell me!” Lydia whined, squirming on my lap like a little child. Atra woke up and started to imitate her while floating in midair.

Good grief.

I pushed Lydia back down, peered into her eyes, and murmured, “Magic or no magic, you’re still Lydia. I’ll always like you.”

“As you should,” she crooned, giggling. “Oh, but not being able to cast healing spells will be a problem.”

“That’s true. You fight at close range, so—”

“That’s not what I mean!” Lydia interrupted, sitting up and pressing her forehead against mine. Then she closed her eyes and took my right hand in both of hers. “I won’t be able to heal you right away when you get hurt. And you’re always so reckless.”

“And you’re not?” I countered.

“As long as I’m with you, no one in the whole world can beat *or* hurt me. That won’t change, even if I can never cast another spell! Am I wrong?”

I sighed and admitted, “No, you’re right about that.”

Lydia beamed and laughed in self-satisfied delight.

“Once we get out of the hospital, you should ask my dad to take a look at your watch,” I said, scratching my cheek. “And you ought to neaten up your hair. It’s so pretty, it would be a shame to leave it like that.”

“True. I need to grow it out again, since a certain someone is just crazy for long hair. Oh, and you’ll be the one to fix it up.”

“Oh, really, I—”

“I won’t let anyone else touch it.”

“My, Your Highness is certainly fond of making unreasonable demands.”

“Only to you.”

I clearly wasn’t winning this argument. It was time to change the subject.

“By the way,” I said, “about that ribbon I sent you in the southern capital—”

A wail from Lydia drowned out the rest of my sentence. “Th-That was mean,” she grumbled petulantly. “Don’t bring it up. A-And anyway, you lost my staff too, remember?”

Evidently, she felt guilty about incinerating the ribbon.

Atra landed on the sofa between us and curled up. While we both petted her, I decided to get a nagging question off my chest.

“I’m told that you were going berserk until you fought the girls and they brought you back to your senses. Is that true?”

After an awkward silence, Lydia admitted, “It’s *half* true. As for the other half...” She held up the back of her right hand, which no longer bore the mark of Blazing Qilin. According to Atra, the great elemental had fallen into a deep slumber. “I could hear a girl’s voice frantically calling out to me. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘Our dear child is alive. You should be able to sense him.’ Incredible, isn’t it? Those few, simple words were like light—a single ray, piercing the inky darkness. It was such a vivid feeling. I’ll never forget it as long as I live—and even into my next life.”

“Then, all along, Blazing Qilin was trying to help you to—”

“All right! Serious talk is over!” Lydia declared. “Save all that for after we’re out of the hospital! You already gave my mother the Lalannoyan spell-pistol and the church insignia, remember? So the only thing you ought to be doing right now is spoiling me rotten. Nothing else matters!” A moment later, she added, “Are you *sure* you can’t get that ring off?” and started fiddling with Linaria’s gift, glaring daggers at it all the while.

I untangled her dull scarlet hair with my fingers while I mentally reviewed the problems vying for my attention. I suspected that Duchess Rosa Howard, the mother of my students Tina and Stella, had been murdered by sorcerous

means. And I believed that the curse that had held Atra in chains—one devised for use against the Etherhearts—was my key to finally cracking the case.

Then there were the Eight Great Elementals and the great spells. Although I had learned their names, I still knew virtually nothing else about them. Nevertheless... I looked down at Atra on my lap. I had promised these girls that I would save them.

I supposed that I'd also made some progress in the matter of the "defective key"—apparently a reference to myself.

And I couldn't forget the "Sage," who had bound Atra and battled Linaria, or the "Saint," whose title Lev had screamed. Both were cause for concern, but the Saint particularly unnerved me. Under cover of that farcical rebellion, the Church of the Holy Spirit had looted the remains of the Stinging Sea and some part of the Great Tree from the royal capital, as well as texts from the eastern one. Those thefts must have been their primary objective—which made their decision to imbue Lev with the power of Stone Serpent and transform him into a new Stinging Sea all the more baffling.

Could that part have been directed solely at me? No, that's ridiculous.

Lydia stopped prodding at the ring. "I can't get it off," she announced, pouting. "Listen, do you mind if I slice through it?"

"I most certainly do," I replied wearily.

"Unbelievable. You never let me have any fun." After a few moments, she added, "Don't go anywhere, okay?"

"I won't."

Lydia giggled and pressed herself against me.

Lisa had told me about the cursed children, and the news that Lydia had nearly become a devil weighed on my mind. That wouldn't happen again as long as I was with her—I wouldn't let it—but I still needed more information.

Apart from all of that, there were also the matters of the skeletal dragon and the "apostle" that Stella had encountered, Lalannoyan involvement, the possible alterations to Linaria's diary, the sea-green griffin habitat where she

and Atra had lived, the location of Shooting Star's grave, the safety of Felicia's parents, et cetera, et cetera. The list was endless, and I had no choice but to tackle it one step at a time. Later, I would need to draw up formal written requests for investigation. For the moment, however—

Through the window, I heard the crash of something collapsing in the distance and sensed a potent surge of mana. While I had no fears about Stella or Caren, I wondered whether Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were really making themselves helpful to the reconstruction efforts.

*

“There,” I said. “You’re all better now. That didn’t hurt, did it?”

“Nope! Not even a little! Thanks, lady!” The bright-eyed cat-clan boy jumped in place on legs that had been too injured to walk not long ago.

His mother, who had brought him to me, bowed. “Thank you,” she said tearfully. “We can’t thank you enough, Lady Saint.” How many times had I been called “Saint” that day alone?

Although the rebellion was over, it had left a horribly damaged city—and far more casualties than the eastern capital’s proper medical facilities could house. The Great Tree therefore still served as a makeshift hospital, and since I was versed in advanced healing spells, my best friend Caren and I had been treating the injured here for the past two days.

Unfortunately, a rumor about me seemed to be circulating, to the effect that “Lady Stella Howard is known as a saint in the north.” My sister Tina and her friends, who had gone to help the royal guard shift rubble, might have played a hand in that—they had been calling me “Saint” half-mockingly. If Mr. Allen found out, it would be just like him to ask whether he ought to join in.

Oh, but that might make a good excuse to strike up a conversation. I have so much to tell him once he’s released from the hospital. And I’d like to do some, um, fl-flirting as well.

“Hey, lady, your face is bright red!”

Wh-What am I thinking?! Th-That won’t do. It would hardly be proper.

I cleared my throat and said, “I’ve performed magical healing, but please take him to see a doctor as well.”

“Yes, of course,” the mother replied.

“Thanks, lady!” the boy repeated as they left the tent.

I waved slightly in farewell, then checked the small clock on my desk. Thank goodness; my shift was over. I stretched my weary limbs, reflecting that I’d grown used to wearing a white gown over my military uniform.

“Perhaps I should get myself something to drink,” I mused as I exited the tent, brushing aside the mystical glows that seemed to flit about whenever I worked

magic lately.

The Great Tree towered behind me, while gondolas and skiffs thronged the vast canal below, all fully loaded with crates and passengers. The plaza before the tree was equally busy with foot traffic. I saw beastfolk of every clan, elves, dwarves, and even many humans talking and laughing together regardless of race as they streamed off to various reconstruction projects.

I must make the streets of the northern capital look like this someday. It's my duty as Stella Howard, their future duchess!

In my mind's eye, I saw myself grown up and wearing an azure dress. Then I pictured my magician beside me—and squealed when someone pressed an ice-cold glass against my cheek.

"You must be exhausted, Stella. Here, I got you juice."

"C-Caren. Thank you. Are you on break too?" I asked, accepting the glass from a wolf-clan girl with silver-gray hair, ears, and tail. She wore a white gown over her Royal Academy uniform, and a floral demisprite beret perched atop her head. Caren was my best friend, the vice president of the academy's student council, and Mr. Allen's adoptive younger sister. During the recent insurrection, she had made quite a name for herself by escaping to the west alone and winning the Ducal House of Lebufera to our cause.

"Yes," she replied, "I think we've cured most of the minor casualties. Even my mom says so."

"I...I see." We clinked glasses, and I took a refreshingly delicious sip.

Mr. Allen's and Caren's mother, Mrs. Ellyn, was a tremendously kind person. Even after the rebellion had been crushed, she chose to remain at the Great Tree, using her rare amplification magic to assist the healers. And although I longed to call her "mother" like the rest of our group, I hadn't yet managed to muster the courage.

"I'd like to go visit Allen when we're done here," Caren added. "And Lydia too, while I'm there."

"That's a good idea," I responded slowly. My best friend was as kind as her mother and brother.

At the moment, only a select few people were permitted to visit Mr. Allen and Lydia. They were both terribly exhausted, and everyone would mob them if given half a chance. I was also concerned about Lydia's diminished mana, so the plan to raise Mr. Allen's social standing that I'd made with Tina and the others was temporarily on hold.

What he needs right now is rest—in body and *mind! We can take our time gathering intelligence about his exploits during the rebellion for future recognition.*

Caren sighed and said, "Knowing my brother, he'll accept all comers once they let him out of the hospital. When I went to bring him something last night, I found that family of sea-green griffins with him."

Sea-green griffins were fearsome magical creatures. I had been taught that they never took to people, but I could understand Mr. Allen being an exception. That said...

"Caren, you visited the hospital last night?" I demanded.

"Well, I *am* his sister," she replied defensively. "I just dropped off some books and notebooks he'd asked for on my way home from shopping."

"Oh, is that so? And here I thought you just wanted attention."

"D-Don't be silly. I mean, I *did* chat with him a little, but Lydia and Lily got in my way before— Stella!" Caren blushed furiously.

"Sorry," I said, giggling.

Oh, I have everything I could wish for. I never would have believed that I could become so content in just a few months. And I owe it all to... I touched the griffin feather secreted in my breast pocket and recalled the ambush that the Hero had led me into at Rostlay.

"I don't want to be famous," I had told her. "I want to be—"

"His wife?" she had interjected.

Oh...

Feeling my temperature rise precipitously, I downed my whole glass of fruit juice in one gulp.

“Stella?” Caren inquired, looking closely at me. “Are you all right?”

“I-It’s nothing!” I answered hastily. “I’m fi— Do you think the girls are really doing their jobs?”

“Oh, I was just hearing about them. It sounds like they’re hard at work.”

“You did?” I asked, puzzled. “Who told y—”

“That would be me, my lady,” a sprightly voice interjected as, without warning, a slender, chestnut-haired woman popped up before us. It was the Leinsters’ head maid, Anna. But what was she doing here? She was supposed to have accompanied Duchess Lisa Leinster to a council inside the Great Tree.

“Lady Stella, if you’d like to get in touch with Lady Tina, I have just the thing,” Anna continued, proffering a communication orb in the form of an earring. “The council is in recess after simmering with tension so long that it started to burn.”

“Th-Thank you,” I said, fastening the orb to my ear. “Tina? Tina, can you hear me?”

“Is that you, Stella?” Tina’s voice replied. “Sorry, but I’m a bit busy right now, so— Ah! Lynne! Ellie, not you too! I-It isn’t time to start yet! Oh, jeez!”

Via the orb, I heard boisterous cries from Lynne and Ellie, and the hearty laughter of knights. Evidently, the girls had turned clearing debris into a race.

“Tina, keep the horseplay within reason,” I cautioned my sister, who seemed none the worse for wear despite having linked mana with Mr. Allen.

“I know!” she responded. “But this is one battle I can’t afford to lose! We’re competing to decide who gets to sit next to Mr. Allen the next time he has visiting hours at— Lynne?! Firebirds are against the rules!”

Caren and I exchanged a look, then shrugged and grinned ruefully at each other. I felt a touch envious of my sister’s optimism.

Anna cast a sound-dampening spell with a snap of her fingers. “The restoration of train tracks and lines of communication between the royal and eastern capitals is proceeding smoothly,” she said. “At the soonest, the first troops may reach us here early next week. Dukes Howard and Lebufera will furnish the main force, while the armies of Duke Leinster and his vassals will

return to the southern capital. We've received word that the royal capital will be garrisoned by local nobles who fled the occupation."

All three dukes are leaving the capital? That doesn't seem right—it's hardly at peace yet.

"I know peace negotiations are progressing in the north," I said hesitantly, "but how do things stand on the southern and eastern borders?"

At present, the kingdom faced direct threats on three fronts: the Yustinian Empire to our north, the League of Principalities to our south, and the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit to our east. The empire and the league had both mounted failed invasions. The knights, meanwhile, had massacred beastfolk in the east. I'd heard that Mr. Allen had fought them here, as had Lydia and Lynne's elder brother, Vice Commander Lord Richard Leinster of the royal guard. They had since retreated to their own territory and settled into a standoff on the eastern border with the Shooting Star Brigade—a legendary fighting force which had won international renown two hundred years earlier, during the War of the Dark Lord.

"With the professor's help, we seem to have concluded peace with the empire," Anna confirmed, frowning. "The venerable mistress and Miss Fosse have performed admirably in the south. However...public opinion within the league is apparently divided."

It took two to wage war. And hostilities, once begun, could not be ended so easily. Caren's and my other best friend, Felicia Fosse, was caught in the thick of that dilemma. Although physically frail, she was mentally the strongest person I knew. I had no doubt that she was pushing herself to her limits and beyond.

"What were you all talking about inside the Great Tree?" Caren asked.

"The principal subject was how best to revitalize the city," Anna replied. "Concerning Mr. Allen's treatment, Lord Rodde, the Archmage, expressed concerns that he would not be decorated. The various chieftains belonging to the Shooting Star Brigade had their own opinions as well. Everything must wait until the hospital discharges him."

Caren and I looked at each other in silence and clenched our fists.

As the adopted son of a wolf-clan family, without even a surname, Mr. Allen was at the bottom of the social heap. According to Caren, not even the beastfolk acknowledged him as one of their own. So, although he had graduated from both the Royal Academy and university second in his class and accomplished a long list of great deeds, a sturdy, invisible wall barred his path. The Royal House of Wainwright was working to address that lack of opportunity, while the conservative aristocracy—terrified by the prospect of truly accomplished and capable people like Mr. Allen—had rebelled against the reforms...and been utterly trounced for its pains.

I could reasonably claim that the foundation for Mr. Allen's elevation was in place. He, however, would doubtless wish for a rise not in his own status, but in that of the beastfolk as a whole.

I turned to Caren.

"Don't stare at me like that, Stella," she grumbled. "But it will be harder than you think. My brother digs his heels in over the strangest things." Under her breath, she added, "And if he stays a commoner, s-so much the better for me."

"Ah, youth!" Anna chortled, beaming.

I glared at Caren, but before I could say anything else, the girls' tense voices burst from the communication orb.

"Stella!" Tina cried. "If you're free, we could really use your help!"

"L-Lady Stella, it's an emergency!" added Ellie.

"Some of the petrification lingered, and it's spreading!" Lynne elaborated. "We need you to purify it!"

The monstrous Stinging Sea had been imbued with the power of the great elemental Stone Serpent. I'd assumed that Lightning Flash had obliterated both completely. But if some had endured...

I shot looks at Caren and Anna, both of whom nodded.

"Tina, Ellie, Lynne," I said into the orb, "I'll be right with you."

"Yes, ma'am!" they chorused in response.

I feel tired, but masters of purification magic are few and far between. I can't

rest yet!

I discarded my white gown on a nearby chair, set down my glass on a table, and said, “Anna, Caren, follow me!”

*

“So, Stella performed the purification?” I asked my pupils.

It was evening, and they sat across from me while I rested on a bench in the hospital courtyard, with its profusion of verdant trees and vivid flowers. At present, we had it all to ourselves. Lydia had left for another examination, and she’d taken Lily and Atra with her, although I could sense the invisible ward that the maid had placed around the courtyard.

“Yes, sir!” replied a girl with a snow-white ribbon tied at the back of her faintly azure-tinged platinum hair—Lady Tina Howard. Her right hand shot up as she spoke, and the azure ribbon tied around her wrist swayed, as did an erect lock of her hair. “Then we swept everything away with magic! Stella and Caren are at the Great Tree, reporting what happened.”

“Indeed, dear brother! Lady Stella was most dashing!” a red-haired girl in a military uniform and cap—Lynne Leinster—chimed in, raising her hand as well. Both she and Tina were daughters of dukes, entitled to the style “Highness,” and for the past several months, I had been their private tutor. They seemed far more dependable than they had before the rebellion, having acquitted themselves well both on the field and behind the lines. Except...

I rested my pen on my notebook and said, “Tina, are you certain you’re not trying *too* hard?”

The girl genius, whose miraculous weather forecasts had contributed to victory on the northern front, immediately became evasive. “N-Not at all,” she said, blatantly avoiding my gaze. “I could do so, *so* much more for—”

“Dear brother, I think that Miss First Place is doing more than enough,” her companion interjected, with an unconcerned air.

“Lynne! What treachery is this?!”

“I’m merely telling the truth. Would you want me to lie to my dear brother?”

Tina let out a frustrated groan, then fell silent. It seemed I was right—she had been pushing herself a little too hard. I would need to let Stella and Caren know later.

Just then, a blonde girl in a maid uniform emerged from a stone gallery, bearing a teapot on a wooden tray. This was Ellie Walker, another of my students and the heir to a renowned northern family, who was both Tina's personal maid and oldest friend.

"A-Allen, sir," she chirped, approaching in high spirits, "I brewed iced black tea!"

Yes, there's that sense of déjà vu. I think I know exactly what will happen next.

Sure enough, the excited Ellie let out a little cry and tripped just as she began to run.

"Whoa there!" I said, casting a levitation spell on the tray and catching the maid before she fell. "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yessir! Th-Thank you very much," Ellie replied. Then she giggled and practically sang, "Allen, sir!"

The young noblewomen rose, silent and stone-faced.

"Ellie," Tina began icily.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Lynne demanded as they tore the angel from my arms, heedless of her little shriek when they laid hands on her.

"Lady T-Tina, Lady L-Lynne," Ellie protested, babbling. "I d-did no such—"

"No excuses!" the pair shouted.

Their best friend and elder by a year screamed again, and all three girls began a game of tag. I reflected on how glad I was to see them so animated while I brought the floating tray to rest on a table. After pouring four glasses of iced tea, I deployed a spell formula that I was working on in the air before me.

This simplification of the witch's exquisite, glass-like formulae was both sharp and artistically beautiful. Mastering it would dramatically boost my spells' power. But I had no confidence whatsoever in my ability to wield it in combat—I would more likely cut myself than my opponents. The least mistake would

cause the formula to misfire, and my recreation was still far from perfect. Linaria had been the pinnacle of mortal achievement; no average sorcerer could follow in her footsteps.

"Tina, Ellie, Lynne," I called to my students, who had stopped chasing each other in favor of a staring contest. "Sit down. I have something to show you."

"Yes, sir!" came the cheerful chorus of replies as the trio swiftly resumed their seats. Then they saw the spell formula, and their eyes widened.

Tina voiced an inquisitive "Sir?" Lynne, an equally curious "Dear brother?" and Ellie, an admiring "How lovely."

"For better or worse," I explained, handing them each a glass, "I've touched the true essence of magic. Ellie, you first."

"Y-Yessir!" The angelic maid shot to her feet.

I displayed a new spell formula before the girls. Tina's and Lynne's eyes went even wider. Ellie covered her mouth in astonishment, then said hesitantly, "A-Allen, sir, c-could this be..."

"Yes," I replied, nodding. To my immense satisfaction, the girls had clearly been studious while we were apart. "This formula is for a true flight spell. I trust that you've been doing the exercises I wrote in your notebooks—"

"Every single day," Ellie confirmed.

"Splendid. Then, with training, you should be able to cast this. Only a handful of sorcerers on the continent have mastered flight, so you may find your name in a history book someday."

"O-Oh, b-but I owe it all to you, Allen, sir," Ellie bashfully protested, her hands on her cheeks.

"Is the lightning element still giving you trouble?" I asked, noting the conflicted looks on Tina's and Lynne's faces with wry amusement.

The maid hung her head. "Yes, sir," she answered dejectedly. "It s-scares me."

I dispelled the formula and said, "Ellie, are you afraid of Caren?"

"N-No, sir. Ms. Caren doesn't scare me. She's ever so nice, and I think of her

as, well...another big sister."

"Then try thinking of her when you cast a lightning spell. Once you've learned to use all eight elements, I'll teach you one of my best tricks."

"One of *your* best," Ellie echoed, taken aback. "I...I won't let dou yown! Oh..." She buried her face in her hands, having tripped over her words at the crucial moment.

Goodness, it feels good to be back.

Next, I called on the red-haired noblewoman.

"Lynne."

"Yes, dear brother?" she responded. "I've learned to wield the Scarlet Sword!"

I suppressed a groan. The Scarlet Sword, like Firebird, was the Ducal House of Leinster's secret weapon. Not even Lynne's brother Richard, the vice commander of the royal guard, had managed to acquire it.

"Sir," Tina sullenly interjected, "I don't recall seeing a secret art in *my* notebook."

Ignoring her for the present, I admonished Lynne, "You shouldn't be in such a rush to improve. And that goes for you too, Ellie. Learn at your own pace."

"That's one piece of advice I won't take, not even from you, dear brother," Lynne responded flatly. "Compared to Lady Stella, I'm positively sluggish."

So, she's measuring herself against Stella.

"My sister is flying through the assignments in the second notebook you gave her as fast as the first set," Tina grumbled, returning to her seat with several tea cakes on her plate. "And why was everything in mine so basic?! This is favoritism! It's not fair!"

"What you need, Tina, is better control of your own mana," I informed her.

Fuming, the platinum-haired noblewoman crammed a tea cake into her mouth and grumbled, "You're such a big, stupid meanie, sir."

"L-Lady Tina, you're eating more than your share!" wailed her flustered maid.

I hadn't been teasing, however. With latent mana to surpass Lydia's, staggering stores of knowledge, and—above all—single-minded dedication, Lady Tina Howard was unmistakably brilliant. The only thing she needed was to make up for lost time.

"What would you like to learn next, Lynne?" I asked her red-haired peer, who was giving the future great sorceress an exasperated look.

"I'd like to work toward dual-wielding Scarlet Swords," she replied at once, tapping the scabbard of the blade she'd inherited from Lydia. She seemed practically an adult.

I know I could say the same of Tina, but she's growing too fast for her own good.

"All right," I said. "That might be a good idea."

"Thank you. Dear brother, may I tell you my ambition?"

"Your ambition?" I repeated.

Lynne was not a boastful child. Her sister Lydia was the current Lady of the Sword. Her mother, Duchess Lisa, was among the finest swordfighters on the continent. And her grandmother, Duchess Emerita Lindsey, known as "Scarlet Heaven," was its most renowned sorceress. Perhaps being surrounded by such imposing figures at home explained why Lynne was so reserved—for a Leinster, at any rate. What must "ambition" mean to her?

The red-haired young noblewoman pressed her left hand to her chest and declared, "I want to learn to do everything that my sister can. Then, if something like this ever happens again, I'll be able to... I realize it will be difficult to do alone, but with your help, dear brother, and..."

Lynne faltered and glanced at her fellow pupils.

"Lynne? Is there something on my face?" Tina asked, touching her face.

Her blonde maid looked equally nonplussed, then let out a little "Oh" of realization.

So, what would be difficult for one might be possible for three. I recalled my underclassmen at the university. Hadn't they improved together as well?

I held out my left fist. Lynne did likewise, and we touched.

“Well put,” I said. “Together, we’ll bring down Lydia.”

My words took a moment to sink in. Then Lynne responded, “Yes, dear brother!”

I was just basking in the warm, fuzzy feeling when Tina let out a groan. “Sir! Lynne!” she snapped. “Don’t go off into your own little world!”

A malicious light kindled in Lynne’s eyes. “You have that wrong,” she said, deliberately fanning the flames. “This understanding isn’t just between my dear brother and me; Ellie is in on it with us.”

“What? E-Ellie?”

“W-Well...” the maid responded evasively.

Tina teared up, shocked by this reaction from her best and oldest friend, and turned to me for succor. “Sir,” she pleaded forlornly.

All the rest of us burst out laughing.

“Wh-What’s so funny?!” Tina demanded, gesticulating wildly. “You’re laughing too much! Especially you, sir!”

“Naturally,” I responded gravely, straightening up in my seat. “I’ve missed the amusing faces you make.”

“Be serious!” Tina folded her arms, turned away, and said stiffly, “You’re unbelievable, sir. I want nothing more to do with you!”

Ellie and Lynne met my gaze.

Ah.

“It looks as though we’re running short of tea,” I announced. “Ellie, Lynne, would you please fetch some more?”

“Y-Yessir.”

“Of course, dear brother.”

The pair left the courtyard. Once I was certain they were inside the hospital, I cast a sound-dampening spell around us and said, “Tina, are you really feeling

quite well? If you're experiencing any fatigue, tell me."

"I'm fine," she answered slowly, turning back to face me. "Lydia is much worse off."

I saw pure concern in her gaze. Despite their bickering, Tina was a kind girl, and she greatly admired Lydia.

"Is she suffering from the same thing as this girl?" Tina asked, showing me her right hand. The mark of Frigid Crane, one of the Eight Great Elementals, appeared faintly on its back.

"I don't know," I replied, "but Blazing Qilin seems to have fallen asleep after expending too much power." I reached out and touched the azure ribbon on Tina's right wrist, causing a formula to appear on its surface. "I imbued this with a calming spell, but I suppose that may not have been necessary. Your Highness is stronger than I realized."

Tina hung her head, and her little body shook. "I'm not strong at all," she demurred, clenching her fists. "Remember what I told you the night after we slew the Stinging Sea? All I had was naive faith in you, sir—in the magician who gave me magic. That isn't strength." When she looked up, there were tears in her eyes. "In the royal capital, when I saw Lydia sprout those black wings, I knew I had to stop her. But at the same time...I was so, *so* jealous. I was painfully aware of how single-mindedly she cared for you."

"Tina..." I said slowly. Her admission had left me at a loss for any other reply.

The young noblewoman untied the azure ribbon and handed it to me. "Would you do my hair?" she asked.

After a moment, I answered, "Of course." Taking the ribbon, I magically purified it and began weaving it into the front of Tina's hair. Beautiful flowers of ice filled the air—signs of elation, I supposed.

When I finished, Tina giggled shyly and said, "I appreciate it...Allen." Her voice was soft yet charged with determination as she seized my right hand firmly in both of hers and pressed it to her chest. Then, as if reciting a prayer, she continued, "I'll say this as many dozens or hundreds or thousands or millions of times as it takes. I'll work even harder than ever before, and one day, I'll be

worthy of you. So please, watch me. I won't lose to Lydia, and not to Stella or Caren or Ellie or Lynne either!"

The icy blossoms responded to Tina's emotions by whirling with greater intensity. Soon, they enveloped the whole courtyard in a brilliant display.

Well, I'll be. She truly is a marvel.

Although thrilling to Tina's untapped potential, I dispelled her ice with a wave of my hand. Then I touched my fingers to the back of the young genius's right hand and said, "In that case, make it your next goal to sense her—to sense Frigid Crane. The great elementals have wills of their own. I believe that as you grow, you'll learn to manifest her and, eventually, discover a way to set her free."

Tina reached out and clutched my sleeve. "Will you do that with me?" she asked.

"Of course. Don't tell the others, but I'm working on a new spell just for you."

"For me?!" she exclaimed. "Oh, sir!"

"Whoa there," I said as she flung herself into my arms. She must have been starved for attention too. I was just about to give her a hug when...

"All right, that's quite enough of that."

"You aren't playing fair, Lady Tina."

Lynne and Ellie sprang out from behind a stone column and hauled the squealing young noblewoman off me.

"I show you a bit of consideration, and *this* is how you repay me?" griped her red-haired peer. "And I refuse to accept being last on that list!"

Tina was stunned for a moment but soon retorted with a smug chuckle. "Where else would I put you, Lynne? You're forever the little sister! I bet you've never even called our tutor by name! And Ellie, even *you* never leave off the 'sir'!"

Both girls staggered, caught off guard by this unlooked-for counterattack.

Good. We're back to life as usual.

“They sure do love you, Allen,” came a laughing remark from behind me.

After a moment of alarm, I responded, “I wish you wouldn’t tease me, Lily. What’s become of Lydia?”

The maid—who was supposed to be accompanying her cousin—had snuck up on me with a glass teapot on a tray.

“We split up after her exam,” Lily replied in her usual lilting manner. “Lady Lynne asked me for a fresh pot of tea. And apart from that, I’ve been working hard too!”

I didn’t know quite what to make of that.

Lily cast a levitation spell on the tray, pressed her hands together, and repeated, “I’ve been working hard too! Lend me an ear.”

I had a bad feeling about this, but ignorance would be as dangerous as knowledge. Steeling myself, I leaned one ear toward Lily.

“My father has been such a bother lately,” she whispered, “always nagging me to quit being a maid and take a husband. So I got fed up and told him, ‘I’ll marry anyone who beats Mr. Allen.’”

Immediately, I delivered a stern verdict:

“Lily, I find you guilty as charged.”

“But you spoil the young ladies!” she fumed. “Treating me differently just wouldn’t be right!”

“Your argument is invalid! I’ll report you to Anna!”

“You’re horrible!” she wailed, evidently alarmed.

“We’ll put it to a vote. Tina, Ellie, Lynne, wouldn’t you agree that I’m in the right here?”

The girls stopped fooling around and responded with a unanimous “Yes, sir” as they circled around behind Lily.

“M-My ladies?” the maid asked nervously. “I-Is something wrong?”

“You’re too close!” Tina and Ellie shouted as one. Lynne, meanwhile, asked, “Lily, what did you just whisper in my dear brother’s ear?”

Lily gave a strained laugh. Then she cried, “Oh! I just remembered some work I’ve got to do!” and took off at a run with the trio in hot pursuit.

Ah, peace.

“What a racket,” Lydia remarked, returning from her examination with Atra cradled in her arms. She wore one of my white shirts over her nightgown—as had become her habit—and was completely at her ease.

“Welcome back,” I said, lowering the tray that Lily had left floating onto the table. “How did it go?”

“I’m the picture of health,” she replied.

“Atra, is that true?”

The fox cub hopped onto my right shoulder and rubbed her head against my cheek.

Lydia circled around in front of me. “Don’t you trust me?” she demanded, pouting.

“The Lady Lydia Leinster I know always downplays her problems.”

“Now, *there’s* the pot calling the kettle—”

We both stopped and squinted up at the sky. Something was descending toward us.

“That’s a sea-green griffin,” Lydia said, giving voice to my thoughts. “And this mana belongs to...”

“Stella and Caren,” I finished for her. “Is something the matter?”

Atra poked my cheek with her forepaw. I took that as a “yes.”

“You lot!” Lydia barked at the girls, who were still chasing Lily. “Stop goofing off and call a doctor! Lily, prepare healing spells!”

“Right!” the trio responded, dashing off into the hospital.

“Coming right up!” Lily added, starting to deploy her curative magic.

I could see the griffin clearly now. There were two girls on its back, and one of them—dressed in white military garb—hung limp. The other, who held the

reins, was of the wolf clan and wore a Royal Academy uniform. Amid the fierce gusts, I called her name:

“Caren!”

“Allen!” she shouted back. “Stella...Stella is...!”

*

I groaned and opened my eyes to find that I had been tucked into a large bed. Beside it, a dim mana lamp illuminated a chair, on which lay my wand and rapier. Beyond the window, night had fallen and the stars were twinkling.

Am I in the hospital?

I heard rhythmic breathing and turned. A breathtakingly beautiful young woman with short scarlet hair—Lydia—was sound asleep beside me. Atra the fox cub was curled up at my feet.

"Um..."

I helped Caren and the girls purify lingering petrification from the Stinging Sea, and then...

Quietly, I slipped out of bed. In place of my military uniform, I wore white sleepwear.

"Who changed my clothes?" I wondered aloud. Then I spotted a letter wedged under the mana lamp. It was in Caren's hand.

Dear Stella,

The doctors diagnosed you with overwork and prescribed several days in the hospital. I thought I was going to have a heart attack when you collapsed in the middle of giving a report. The Leinster maids and I will look after the girls, so get some rest!

Yours truly,

Caren

(Fuming that her best friend won't rely on her.)

PS: Ellie and I changed your clothes. Were you hoping it was Allen?

"Oh, honestly, Caren," I grumbled.

Evidently, I had fainted. After facing a skeletal dragon in Rostlay, I had left the north to fight in the royal capital. Then, before I'd had time to catch my breath, a strategic teleportation spell had sent me east. Here, I had stopped Lydia,

contended with the Stinging Sea, and cleansed petrification in the aftermath of the war. Perhaps all of that had taken more out of me than I'd thought.

I neatly folded the letter and placed it on the table. Atra drowsily twitched her tail—perhaps she was having a pleasant dream. I chuckled at her antics as I stepped out into the hallway. The door had been left open—presumably so that I could visit Mr. Allen next door as soon as I woke up.

While I took in the sublime harmony of water and insect song, a thought struck me—could this be my chance to see Mr. Allen in his sleep? I leaned my hand on a window frame and shook my head to clear it.

St-Stella! Wh-What's gotten into you?! Th-That's hardly appropriate behavior for...for...

I felt for nearby mana. Although Lily had been on duty here for the past several days, I didn't sense her presence. So, after a few moments of silent deliberation, I made up my mind and strode toward the sickroom next door to mine.

St-Stop! This isn't right, Stella! my inner angel pleaded. *If you go through with this, then—*

Now, Stella! my inner devil interrupted, stifling her. *Such golden opportunities to see Mr. Allen sleeping don't grow on trees!*

I...I only wanted a peek.

Mr. Allen's door was open too. Stealthily, I peered inside.

It was empty. The mana lamp on his round bedside table cast a warm light on notebooks and antique tomes.

I entered and approached. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed folded laundry on a shelf, and a low gasp escaped me. My attention was riveted to one of the white shirts that Mr. Allen always wore. When I stretched out a trembling hand toward it, my inner angel and devil erupted into another argument.

Don't be rash, Stella!

It's now or never, Stella!

Once again, the devil triumphed. Hugging the shirt and giggling, I reflected

that I was most certainly not cut out for sainthood. Yet what a simple woman I was—this one little act filled me with joy.

Then I recalled Caren mentioning that she used these shirts as sleepwear when she spent a night at Mr. Allen's lodgings in the royal capital. She called it her "sisterly duty."

I gasped again and cast a furtive glance around. I was alone. But...But even so...

As I struggled with myself, my inner angel and devil emerged for a third time. *Put it on!* they cried in unison.



I slipped into the shirt. It was...so much *bigger* than I'd imagined. My cheeks

burned even hotter at this fresh reminder that Mr. Allen was a man. Glowing mana escaped me. I had just gripped both sleeves and was about to bury my face in them when—

"Stella?"

To my shock and alarm, Mr. Allen stood in the doorway, dressed in his pajamas and carrying a tray.

"Uh, well, that is, you see..." I babbled, feeling myself blush furiously. "W-Wearing this is just so calming that— Oh..." To my dismay, I'd let the truth slip out.

What a disaster! Oh, if only I could turn back time!

A chuckle interrupted my mortification. I looked up to see Mr. Allen coming toward me.

"Lydia and Caren say the same thing," he remarked. "The night air is chilly, so by all means, wear that in lieu of a jacket. Are you feeling all right? You seem to be experiencing a slight mana surge."

"I'm quite all—"

Before I could finish speaking, a breeze blew in through the window and made me sneeze.

H-How will I ever live this down?

"I was just thinking of brewing hot tea," Mr. Allen said, as if nothing had occurred. "Have a seat."

Bashfully, I responded, "All right," and obediently moved to the sofa. Although I couldn't suppress a thrill as Mr. Allen turned his back to me and began making tea in the kitchenette, I lowered my gaze to his round table.

The books were two thick, scholarly volumes of considerable age—*The Sea-Green Griffin: Its Life and Habits* and *A History of the War of the Dark Lord*. I glanced over a notebook instead and found that it was crammed full of the most intricate spell formulae imaginable.

"What is all this for?" I asked.

“Just a bit of research,” Mr. Allen replied. “Stella, did you know that sea-green griffins only live near the Great Tree? Atra and I need to pay the person who gave me this ring another visit, but it seems that will be easier said than done.” As he turned to face me, the ring in question gleamed on the third finger of his right hand. It belonged to Linaria Etherheart, a legendary sorceress who shared my mother’s surname.

While I struggled to regain my composure, Mr. Allen cleared the table and set a tray on it. “Those notes are new assignments for all of you,” he said, “so please don’t mention them to my mom or Caren. They’ve gone to such lengths to keep my visitors to a minimum, and they’d be upset to find me working.”

“Oh, really” was all I could find to say. I wished that he would rest as much as anyone. But at the same time, I couldn’t help swaying with joy.

“Tina and Ellie told me about everything you’ve been doing,” Mr. Allen continued while pouring the tea. “It’s no wonder the Royal Academy made you student council president.”

“Oh, no, I’m nothing special,” I demurred, lowering my gaze and gripping my sleeves.

“Also, I’m so sorry to have worried you. I’m fine now.”

Struck speechless, I flung myself into Mr. Allen’s arms.

“Whoa there. Stella?”

He’s warm. Warm and alive.

“I was worried sick,” I said, my voice shaking disgracefully as the feelings I’d been bottling up gushed forth. I couldn’t stop them. “I was even more distraught than Tina and Ellie when word reached us from the eastern capital. I just couldn’t bear not knowing, wondering if the worst had happened to you!” Tears soaked my borrowed shirt, and more luminous mana escaped me. “I wished I could have skipped out on war with the Yustinians and gone straight to the eastern capital—to save you! But...I knew the truth. I knew that I wasn’t good enough to fight alongside you yet, that I’d only get in your way. So, in the end...I chose to stay.”

My words hung in the air for a long moment...then Mr. Allen murmured my

name.

I looked up. The teapot and cups hung magically suspended in midair. “But even though I made up my mind not to go,” I continued brokenly, “I felt as though something dreadful were going to happen. So, *so* many times, I wanted to abandon everything I’ve held dear—the kingdom, my house, my sisters. But that only made me all the more certain.”

I wiped my eyes, looked my magician in the face, and swore, “Next time, Mr. Allen, I’ll protect you. My mind is made up!”

He blinked in surprise. Soon, however, he calmed my mana and said, “You’re too much for me, Madam President. But if I ever find myself in a tight spot again, I’d appreciate your help.”

“You can count on it!” I responded, with an emphatic nod.

Oh, this might be my chance to get some special attention.

“Stella?” Mr. Allen asked, looking puzzled as he lowered the pot and cups. “Is something the matter?”

I steeled myself, seized the hem of his shirt, and looked up at him. “M-Mr. Allen,” I stammered, “I...I’ve, um, worked hard.”

“Yes, you certainly have,” he responded, still uncomprehending.

Oh, why won’t he take a hint?

Frustrated, I screwed up my courage and pressed on. “S-So, well, I’d like a r-reward.”

“Yes? And what did you have in mind?”

In a flash, I recalled the fantasy I’d had at the train station in the northern capital, and the thought slipped straight out of my mouth.

“Wh-When we get back to the royal capital, I...I’d like it if, just for a day, you would be my, um, b-butler.” My cheeks must have been red as apples as my words trailed off.

“Did the girls tell you about that, Stella?” Mr. Allen groaned, setting the teacups on saucers. “I swore I’d never dress like that again.”

“Then, you won’t do it?” I pleaded, clutching at his sleeve.

Without another word, he handed me a cup and saucer, which I took. The tea’s floral aroma soothed my nerves as we drank in tranquil silence. I felt elated.

At last, Mr. Allen set down his cup, sighed, and said, “How could I say no to that look? Very well, I’ll do it, since it’s you who asked.”

“Y-You really mean—”

“Not so loud,” he cautioned, covering my mouth. I detected a faint presence.

“Stella,” he continued, winking as he took his hand away, “I think you’d better rest now. Otherwise, a certain noble lady eavesdropping from the next room may charge in here with her sword drawn. And the same goes for her self-proclaimed maid.”

“What?” I gasped. Lydia was awake? And Lily was here too?

“She may not show it,” Mr. Allen whispered in my ear, “but she’s grateful to you for bringing her back to her senses.”

Some of my doubts cleared. But at the same time, I felt a pang in my chest. Mr. Allen shared a powerful bond with Lydia, and he trusted Lily as well.

“Thank you very much,” I said, placing my cup on the table and bowing slightly. “I hope you’ll take some rest soon as well. I’ll tell the others if you don’t.”

“That’s quite a threat. It’s off to bed for me. Good night, Stella.”

“Good night, Mr. Allen.”

I returned to Lydia’s sickroom and burrowed under the covers. Someone seemed to be out in the corridor—probably Lily. Atra crawled into the blankets with me, and I felt the fox cub’s warmth as I closed my eyes.

Quiet enveloped the room, broken only by the sighing breeze.

Suddenly, without turning to face me, Lydia said, “Just so you know, he’s mine, and he always has been. Look elsewhere.” Her tone was dispassionate,

yet it carried firm conviction.

She's probably right, but...but that won't stop me!

"I know. As things are, you're the only one worthy to stand beside him," I replied, clenching the hem of the shirt I'd put on in spite of myself. "But giving my heart to him is my decision. I won't back down."

I felt Lydia shift slightly. Was she...laughing?

"Oh," she said at last. "Give it your best shot, then—not that I think it will do you any good."

"I intend to do just that."

This time, I felt certain. She *was* laughing at me.

"You throw me off my stride," Lydia complained when she was done. "Were you always like this? Well, maybe I shouldn't be surprised—you *are* Tiny's sister. Oh, and that reminds me." To my confusion, she turned her back to me before concluding, "Now we're even."

I recalled what Mr. Allen had just told me. She *was* grateful, in spite of everything. That was why she hadn't interrupted us and why Lily had been away from her post. I imagined how jealous she must have felt during our tête-à-tête—and burst into a fit of giggles.

"What?" Lydia demanded. Her voice was low and menacing, but I wasn't the least bit afraid.

I rolled over to face the Lady of the Sword, who was glaring at me in the dark room. "Lydia, I'd like us to stay friends," I told her. "We may be...r-rivals in love, but I still have the utmost respect for you."

After an awkward pause, she replied, "I'll think about it."

Realizing that she felt shy, I closed my eyes again. This time, I meant to sleep.

*

"Well then, Caren—Lydia and I will go make tea," Stella concluded.

"Keep a close eye on him and make certain he doesn't try to work," Lydia added. "Come along, Atra."

“I will,” Caren assured her, and the trio left the hospital room—Atra riding in Lydia’s arms. I couldn’t help noticing that both young ladies wore my white shirts over their sleepwear, and I wondered if I would ever get those back.

While the sounds of their footsteps and conversation—and of Atra’s excited yips—faded into the distance, Caren squinted at me. My sister carried a bag of fresh clothes for me, which she had made this early-morning visit to deliver. And because she and the girls would be joining in the reconstruction effort again later, she wore her Royal Academy uniform. A floral demisprite military beret perched on her head, and a dagger hung at her hip in a pale-violet sheath.

“What did you say to Stella?” she demanded. “And why is she wearing one of your shirts?”

I slowly broke eye contact, noting that the round table near the couch was cluttered with papers, notebooks, envelopes, and pens. “We only had a little chat yesterday evening,” I replied. “The shirt, she refuses to give back.”

Caren let out an unhappy groan and deposited her burden on the couch.

A pleasant, early-summer breeze wafted in through the window. Far overhead, a flock of sea-green griffins circled.

“Allen, stand up,” my sister quietly insisted.

“Hm?” I rose, and she circled around behind me. A stunned exclamation escaped my lips as she draped my old sorcerer’s robe about my shoulders. It was as good as new, although I had last seen it in tatters.

“Mom and I mended it together,” Caren said, letting her head fall against my back. “I’m glad—it fits you perfectly.”

“I see,” I responded slowly. Helping to rebuild the city all day must have kept them both busy enough without taking on more projects.

Caren pressed her head harder against my back and clutched the hem of my robe. “Lydia and Stella have all the luck,” she wheedled. “I...I want to speak with you about so much too. And don’t forget, you’re *my* big brother.”

“Caren.” I turned around and gave my sister a hug. Peering into her wide eyes, which hadn’t changed since we were children, I said, “Don’t worry. I’m

swamped now, but we'll talk all you like once things calm down."

"I can't trust you," she whined, burying her face in my chest. But her tail wagged happily, as did the ear poking out from under her beret. "You always say that, but you never stop being busy."



“By the way, Caren, have you given up on finding your school beret?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I got this one from Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe.”

A present from the Flower Sage, the great sorceress who led the demisprites and had served as one of four squad leaders under the legendary Shooting Star? My sister was incredible. But she might still need a hat that matched her uniform.

“In that case, would you like my old school beret?” I offered without much thought.

Caren’s eyes lit up. “You’d give me *yours*?” she asked as her ears and tail picked up speed.

“I’ll give it to you once we’re back in the royal capital. It’s still in good shape. Of course, if you’d prefer a new one—”

“It has to be yours!” she interrupted. “Please sit down.”

I took a seat on the couch. Caren immediately sat beside me and plunked her head down on my shoulder.

“I-If you insist,” she said rapidly, “then I’ll assume sisterly responsibility for your old school beret.” To my great relief, her mood seemed to have improved.

“Restoration work around the city is proceeding at a steady pace,” she continued in a somewhat more somber tone. “Stella and the headmaster cleansed all the lingering petrification, and most of the streets and bridges are usable again. Human support has been enthusiastic too.” She paused, then, “I guess we weren’t the only ones who found strength in the Great Tree. I never realized that.”

“The humans care for it too?” I mused. “Well, what do you know.” The rebellion had been a catastrophe, but I hoped that it would lead to stronger bonds between beastfolk and humans—bonds that would prevent tragedies like what had befallen Caren’s and my childhood friend Atra.

“I hear that the three dukes in the royal capital are hurrying to repair train tracks and communication networks between there and here. Lydia demolished them.”

“Yes, Lily told me. What is Lisa up to?”

While teetering on the brink of becoming a devil, Lydia had apparently laid waste to quite a lot on her way to the eastern capital. Yet her rampage had caused not a single fatality. She must have remembered how emphatic—perhaps excessively so—I had been on that point.

"Lisa is staying at our house," Caren reported. "The council is still deadlocked, and we're no closer to finding the traitor chieftains, Nishiki of the ape clan and Yono of the rat clan. Toneri and his cronies are under house arrest—they sent that false message to New Town because they hoped they'd get titles out of it." A note of anger entered Caren's voice and lightning crackled as she delivered this last item, but after a pat on the head from me, her mana began to settle.

"Oh," she added hesitantly, "and about Deep Violet and the Radiant Shield dagger..."

"Didn't you return the former to Gil?" I asked, puzzled. The enchanted halberd Deep Violet and the potent lightning magic it contained had belonged to generations of Algren dukes. The Hero, Alice Alvern, had discovered it in the ruins of the Algren mansion and entrusted it to Caren after they had put a stop to Lydia's rampage. I had since asked her to return it to Duke Algren's fourth son, Gil Algren, who had been Lydia's and my underclassman at the university.

"He wouldn't accept it. Lisa is holding on to it for now, along with the dagger."

"That pigheaded dolt!" I cursed. Gil was probably still beating himself up for attacking me. Once I was out of the hospital, I would need to have a word with him. He was too conscientious for his own good.

While I was making plans, Caren's attention wandered to a letter on the table. "Are you writing to Felicia?" she asked.

"Yes, it seems as though she's pushing herself far too hard in the southern capital."

The shy, bespectacled Felicia Fosse was a close friend to Stella and Caren. She was also a financial wizard who held the post of head clerk at "Allen & Co."—the name she'd given to a joint commercial venture by the Ducal Houses of Leinster and Howard. She had withdrawn from the Royal Academy to obtain that position and had become embroiled in the rebellion as a result.

If only I hadn't invited her to work with me...

"Don't make that face, Allen," my sister chided me, squeezing my hand.

"But Caren—"

"Felicia is tough. And she doesn't blame you for roping her into this mess. She's just trying to do all she can, as well as she can. Although I won't deny that she's overdoing it."

"Thank you, Caren," I said, touching my forehead to hers. "I've got the nicest sister in the whole wide world."

"Naturally. I'm the only one with you for a brother!"

We shared a chuckle. We'd gotten taller and mastered all manner of spells, but our sibling bond was as strong as it had ever been. That might not be much, but it meant the world to me. Caren must have felt just as glad, because she beamed at me like she had as a child.

"Now, put your hand right here," she said, seizing my hand and placing it on her head. "Little sisters get spoiled, and big brothers do the spoiling. That's the way of the world."

*

Dear Felicia,

Now that the Skyhawk Company's griffin mail service has been partially restored, I can finally write to you. Caren and I are fine, and so is everyone else. (Stella is in the eastern capital with us. Tina might even be a bit too *lively.)*

Let me guess what you're thinking right now: "Allen, tell me what's going on!"

I know just how you feel. Unfortunately, I haven't been let in on the whole picture either. According to Caren and Stella, who are sipping tea beside me, I "need to focus all my energy on resting" and "ought to relax my mind as well as my body." I can't refuse such firm advice from the leaders of the Royal Academy student council (and the Lady of the Sword is glaring quite rudely at me as well).

But enough beating around the bush. I plan to set out for the southern capital as soon as the situation here stabilizes. Please don't do anything reckless until I arrive. Do you remember what you promised me when you took up your duties?

Put your health first. Remember to eat and sleep. Don't take books or papers to bed with you.

Last but not least, thank you. If you hadn't taken charge of logistics for the Leinsters and the other southern houses, the insurrection might have dragged on a good bit longer. Your dedication saved the beastfolk of the eastern capital—my family. I'm grateful for all you've done, and I promise I'll never forget it.

Yours truly,

Allen

(Under pressure from two dukes' daughters and one little sister to reveal what he's writing.)

PS: Don't bother trying to work in secret. I've asked Anna to warn Emma about that.

As best I can tell from the fragmentary intelligence I've gathered, the League of Principalities hasn't been behaving consistently. That probably speaks to internal disagreements. So please, leave the hard parts to people who outrank you, and focus on your own job! I'll see you in the southern capital.

Chapter 2

“Tell us, Graham, what is passing in the minds of Walter Howard and the ever-elusive professor?” we inquired. “Why offer a white peace after victory, and then change negotiators before it’s even sealed? Oh, and spare us the excuses you feed the public. Everyone here knows how matters truly stand.”

“Doubtless all is as Your Imperial Majesty imagines,” Graham “the Abyss” Walker replied gently from his seat before us. Duke Howard had endowed his aged head butler with full authority to conduct negotiations.

We sat in the innermost courtyard of our palace in our imperial capital. Apart from ourselves—Yuri Yustin, reigning sovereign of the Yustinian Empire—Moss Saxe was also in attendance. Our grand marshal hung back, his arms folded behind him and the enchanted sword Castle Breaker hanging from his belt. A taciturn woman with long hair as white as her dress amused herself with small birds while her timeworn longsword rested on a chair. She was the former Hero, Aurelia Alvern. Graham completed the company. All save ourselves were superhuman freaks. We longed to wash our hands of the whole business, yet needs must.

So, bitterly, we glared at the living legend and said, “We desire no such evasions, Graham. You and we are hardly strangers. Speak plainly. Or assassinate us on the spot, if you feel so inclined. You returned our dim-witted offspring Yugene, and, true to form, he is conspiring rebellion with our least canny aristocrats. We are tired! We admit that we and Moss have gotten up to a bit of mischief since we were youths together. Of course, seventy—nay, eighty percent of that wrongdoing can no doubt be laid at Moss’s door. But—”

“Sire!” exclaimed our bosom friend. “This is slander! Don’t believe him, Graham!” Despite his advanced years, he hadn’t changed one jot.

With a languid wave of our hand, we continued, “But be that as it may, we are now seventy-three. It hardly seems fair that we should be condemned to set things right in our dotage. If you feel for our plight, do not hesitate to strike at our thin and feeble throat.”

“But sire,” our grand marshal interjected, “your neck is plump as can be.”

“Oh, be silent, Moss!” we snapped. “Give us some peace!”

Out of the corner of our eye, we glimpsed a little bird fly away.

“Your Imperial Majesty jests,” Graham demurred with impeccable decorum. “I would never dream of turning my hands against a descendant of the Archer, one of the renowned saviors who brought an end to the Continental War.”

By all accounts the first Yustinian ruler was a fearsome marksman, capable of shooting the very stars from the sky. We had earned something of a reputation as a bowman in our younger days, yet...

“Any virtue in our blood is long since exhausted,” we replied, chuckling at our own pretensions. “Yana is the only one of us left who might acquit herself well in a real battle.”

“Her Imperial Highness, Princess Yana Yustin and Master Huss Saxe are currently taking their leisure in our northern capital, as Your Imperial Majesty requested,” Graham informed us. “I am told that they’ve quite enjoyed sightseeing excursions in recent days.”

We sniffed loudly. Our southern army had met the kingdom’s forces, under the command of Duke Howard, in battle at Rostlay in southern Galois—once an imperial province and later a site of our humiliation. The result, as we had predicted, had been a crushing defeat. Our forces had routed, and its commanders—our son and heir Yugene, our late sister’s granddaughter Yana, and Moss’s grandson Huss—had become prisoners of war. Howard had attempted to return all three immediately, but we had accepted only our foolish offspring.

“Graham Walker,” we commanded, straightening in our seat, “Emperor Yuri Yustin is asking you a question. Speak your mind!”

The old retainer nodded and proffered us a letter. Its back bore the Howard seal. “You may find this enlightening, sire,” he said.

Carelessly, we tore it open and ran our eyes over its contents.

What?!

“What is the meaning of this?” we demanded when we were master of ourselves again.

“I don’t quite follow you, sire,” Graham responded.

“Our army lost—lost so miserably that future historians will lambaste us for it. The youngsters in the army seem to believe they still have us fooled, but we know that our southern forces are in shambles. And we couldn’t quickly pull reinforcements from our other fronts, even if we felt so inclined—especially not from the north or east.”

“I am well aware, sire. You regard the Lalannoy Republic as a foe that ripped its way free of your own empire’s womb. Withdrawing troops from its borders would surely be a difficult decision. And I hear that Lalannoy is so single-minded in its devotion to military expansion that, if not for Grand Marshal Saxe, it might easily launch an invasion of its own. I believe you had a spot of trouble along the border the other day?”

We felt a faint chill. Not even we or Moss had known of that skirmish with the Lalannoyan rebels until shortly before this secret meeting.

“Therefore,” the butler continued, sipping his tea, “I regret to inform you, sire, that my liege lord, Walter Howard, could take his pick of your southern lands if he so chose. I strongly suspect that your imperial army could commit only a gradual trickle of troops in response, and I fear that such dribs and drabs would find our forces rather more than their match. My, what splendid tea leaves.”

We felt a sudden rush of fatigue. Geographically, our empire had no choice but to station the bulk of our troops along the rebel Lalannoyan border. Our people overvalued armies that had not seen a major war in the past century. The fools—our crown prince among them—had trusted the Algrens’ honeyed words, although that house had nearly doomed humanity during the War of the Dark Lord. And the detestable Church of the Holy Spirit had put them up to it. Meanwhile, our thoroughly corrupt bureaucrats sought to exploit our old age and failing health, focused only on profiting from their positions.

The wise learned from history and never ceased to apply themselves. Fools scorned history and rested on their laurels, drunk on ego and overweening

pride. Small wonder that victory eluded us.

“We are aware,” we replied at last. “Our defeat is assured so long as we cannot commit Moss and our main army to the fight. Hence our confusion. Why? What makes Duke Howard so desperate for a white peace? And...”

We placed the letter we had been given on the table. It consisted of a single, simple sentence:

The zealots of the Holy Spirit must be purged.

“Why do Duke Howard, the professor, and your whole kingdom perceive them as such a grave threat?” we pressed Graham.

“Your empire, the League of Principalities, the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit, and even the Lalannoy Republic took the recent insurrection as a signal to intervene in our affairs,” the butler replied. “And one factor links them all.”

“That pestilential church?” we mused slowly. “Moss.”

“I shall cleanse the army with all haste, sire,” our grand marshal swiftly responded.

Those nitwits couldn’t open their mouths without babbling that “the Holy Spirit wills” something or other. Could they truly have—

Then, we realized. The Yustinian Empire, the Wainwright Kingdom, and the League of Principalities were the greatest powers on the continent. And all three—four, counting Lalannoy—had been dancing to the church’s tune. If someone had planned all this before the war— No, the idea was absurd. No mere mortal could perform such a feat.

“Aurelia,” we inquired, turning to the white-haired beauty who had held her tongue throughout the discussion thus far, “have you anything to add concerning this peace?”

“An Alvern does not involve herself in mortal quarrels,” she replied in a voice practically devoid of emotion. “Storms may buffet the empire, but we shall do only our duty. The current Hero, who is away in the east, would say the same.”

We scowled, discomfited. The Alverns were a house of Heroes—it could rain blood in the imperial capital, and they still wouldn’t lift a finger.

Thoroughly fed up with the whole business, we looked out at our courtyard, from which the brief summer was already departing.

“We accept your terms,” we informed Graham. “Should civil turmoil trouble our empire in the near future, however, we would thank you not to intervene.”

“I understand, sire. I shall certainly make your wishes known to my master,” the butler replied, with a reverent bow. He was no fun at all.

Suddenly, we recalled one of Moss’s reports. The kingdom, it seemed, had witnessed the birth of a new legend during its recent rebellion. And the Howards sought knowledge of the great spells.

“Actually, we would like to request one alteration,” we said.

Graham narrowed his eyes. “And what would that be, sire?”

We sensed Moss shift into a combat stance behind us as we replied, “We wish to cede Shiki, on the border of Galois, to the kingdom.”

“Sire—”

“Enough,” we interjected, cutting Graham’s protest short. “We know that a bald request will not convince you.”

Shiki was largely a land of dense forest, sparsely populated by an ethnic minority and boasting no resources to speak of. Ceding it would not lessen our empire’s might in the slightest, yet it *would* provide our disloyal subjects with a perfect casus belli. Such as them were loath to part with so much as a smidgen of our soil. We could safely regard all who objected as our enemies.

At the same time, vacating our borders with the Duchy of Howard, which was fast becoming a burden, would buy us time to set the south in order. Government demanded gold, time, and effort, and while the Howards occupied themselves ruling their new province, we would revolutionize our empire. Once we had secured our footing, our heirs would challenge the Howards once more. Naturally, these machinations were not lost on Graham, but we had a bit of family history up our sleeve.

“Shiki,” we informed him, “is the land where our ancestor shot down Falling Star. If you seek the great spells, it may furnish you with a clue.”

“Indeed?” The Abyss arched one eyebrow, evidently taken aback. After a brief silence, he responded, “I cannot answer now. Would you consent to prolonging these negotiations, sire?”

“Very well.”

Despite its place in legend, a thorough investigation of Shiki had assured us that it contained nothing of value. If the Howards took it, so much the better. If not, we could make use of it as leverage in further negotiations.

“Graham,” we said, resting our corpulent frame against the back of our seat.

“Yes, sire?”

“How would you like to work for our empire? We’ll increase your salary two—no, tenfold and create you any title of your choice short of elevating you into our imperial house.”

“I respectfully decline,” the butler replied. “Besides, sire, you are tempting the wrong man.”

In spite of ourselves, we turned to exchange a look with Moss. Even Aurelia seemed startled for once.

“Ha!” we scoffed. “You’re the backbone of the Howards! Men of a higher caliber could hardly—”

The eyes of Graham “the Abyss” Walker were not smiling.

“Who is this freak of nature?” we demanded, scowling. “We are not long for this world—give us something to remember you by! We take it that this involves the rumored wielder of a new supreme spell. Do you refer to the Howard ‘saint’ supposed to have slain a skeletal dragon and purified Rostlay?”

“I cannot name names, but we are all deeply in this person’s debt. So deeply, in fact, that lands would be small recompense. I trust, sire, that you have heard of Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard?”

“The girl without magical aptitude?” we inquired slowly.

“Supreme magic is now hers to command.”

Moss groaned. Aurelia’s eyes narrowed a fraction. In our mind, dots began to

connect. And they formed a picture of this new champion who had risen in the midst of rebellion.

“We see,” we said at last, sighing heavily. “This explains much. However, Graham, you have made one miscalculation.”

“You don’t say, sire. And what, pray tell, might that be?”

“You know that as well as we do.” We chuckled. The Howards had won continental fame for their shining feats of arms in the War of the Dark Lord, and in this recent campaign, they had made it known that they were still the “gods of war.” If they felt such an obligation to this person, then...

“Conceal the name if you like—as with the legends of the past, it will be on tongues throughout the continent in due time. We need only live long enough to hear it. And in the meantime, we shall give our empire a good spring cleaning.”

*

Lightday marked one week since the start of my hospital stay. I felt much recovered—ready to leave at any time. And yet...

“I can’t seem to get permission,” I grumbled, sitting on a roofed wooden bench in the spacious courtyard garden. People seemed convinced that I would work myself to the bone.

I laid down my pen on the table and stretched. Verdant foliage mitigated the summer heat, and the profusion of blooming flowers soothed my mind. It was a tranquil afternoon.

Stella—whose hospital stay had been prolonged due to the unexplained growth of her mana and the ill-health that accompanied it—had gone to fetch drinks with Lydia. Atra had become quite taken with her and followed everywhere she went. Although her condition worried me, I thought that taking some time out like this occasionally might do her good.

“Is something worrying you, Allen?” a lilting voice intruded on my thoughts. “Here, I brought you a fresh notebook.”

“Thank you, Lily,” I replied.

“Don’t mention it! After all, I *am* a maid!” She sat down directly across from me and pored over my notes with great interest. “Are these assignments for the young ladies?”

“Right in one. Everyone keeps telling me to rest, my parents won’t even visit for fear of disturbing me, and my other callers are kept to a minimum, so I have more time on my hands than I know what to do with. And my students are such fast learners that I’m running out of exercises for them.”

At present, I was tutoring four girls—Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and Stella—all of whom had solved every problem in the notebooks that I’d given them before the outbreak of rebellion. Although their growth thrilled me, I would be a laughingstock if I failed to keep pace with them.

Lily rested one elbow on the table and her chin in her hand. “That must be so hard on you,” she commiserated. “By the way, I’d love to update my spells too!”

“Were you even listening?” I asked wearily. “And in any case, you’re already

more than a match for me.”

The Leinster Maid Corps was a strict meritocracy. No amount of personal or familial connections could secure a position as its number three.

“I want something neeew!” Lily whined, puffing out her cheeks like a sulky child. “It doesn’t even have to be one of your experiments!”

I sighed. “Oh, very well.” With a wave of my right hand, I deployed the current iteration of my fundamental spell formula. Lily ran her eyes over it, and a grin soon spread across her face.

“Thanks so much! I’ll try it out later.”

“Please do. I think it’s a significant improvement on what I was casting five years ago.”

“I’ll bet!” Lily giggled with exuberance.

“You know, you’re the only one who’s mastered my formulae as is. Not even Lydia or our schoolmates from the university have managed that.”

My spell formulae differed from the norm in that they left considerable blank space for the elementals to work in. As a result, they were somewhat less stable than their conventional counterparts and required adjustments to suit each individual caster. Lydia, our former underclassman Teto, and even Ellie—who was probably the closest to me in terms of magical control—were no exceptions. Only this maid, who had already started practicing spells while I watched, could cast my formulae without modification, and I had no idea why. She had originally picked them up just as quickly during our adventure in the southern capital, although we hadn’t even linked mana. It was a mystery.

“In exchange for the lesson, would you tell me what you know about the present situation?” I asked quietly. “I can only learn so much in the hospital—although I’ve no doubt that’s deliberate.”

“It sure is! Just a smidgen, okay?” Lily assumed her “number three” face and continued, “For all intents and purposes, the Ducal House of Algren and the other major noble houses of the east are no more. Without the protection they provided, the maid corps’s second-in-command and the Shooting Star Brigade can’t afford to leave the eastern border.”

No wonder Lily was the only ranking maid I'd seen. Although the rebellion had been put down, problems evidently still abounded.

"Have the Knights of the Holy Spirit made any moves?"

"None. They've stationed troops, but we haven't heard a peep from them otherwise."

"And did you remain here as a bodyguard as well as a caretaker?" I asked earnestly, dismissing my spell formula. Lily hadn't left the hospital once during our stay—meaning that she had most likely been assigned as Lydia's personal protector.

The maid propped up her chin with her other hand as well. "Absolutely!" she cheerily confirmed. "I was just sick with worry, so I volunteered for the job!"

"Well, her mana still hasn't recovered, so I can't blame you."

Lydia's condition hadn't changed and showed no sign of improvement. I could understand why Lisa would feel nervous.

Lily continued to stare at me, her expression unaltered. I reached out to her hair.

"Allen?" she asked.

"Your hair clip is crooked," I explained. "There. That's better."

Lily blinked in surprise, then began swaying happily. "Thanks so much!" she exclaimed, with a musical laugh.

I couldn't suppress a smile of my own as I steered the conversation back to more serious matters. "I'm still amazed that the Ducal House of Lebufera and the other western houses joined the war. And even more so that legends like the Emerald Gale and the Flower Sage returned to the front lines."

The Lebuferas and their vassals had spent the past two centuries staring down the demonfolk across Blood River. Under normal circumstances, they would never even consider marching on campaign. And Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, had led them two generations before the current duke. A seasoned veteran, she had fought in the War of the Dark Lord as a trusted lieutenant of the wolf-clan champion Shooting Star and even personally

exchanged blows with the conflict's namesake. I'd heard that the beastfolk had called her to action by invoking the Old Pledge left by Shooting Star. Presumably, they had wished for the liberation of the eastern capital.

"Umm..." the maid interjected. "Actually, Allen—"

"Watch your tongue, Lily," Lydia cut in, matched by Stella's somewhat softer "Lily, no."

The two of them had returned with a glass pitcher of fruit juice and several cups, which they placed on the table before seating themselves on either side of me. They wore everyday clothes—in scarlet and azure, respectively—which had arrived from the royal capital the day before. Griffin-based shipping must have been gradually returning to normal.

I hope that the same holds true for the postal service. Has my letter reached Felicia yet?

Atra bounded onto Stella's lap in fox-cub form and happily plunked herself down. What a little darling.

Lily leaned in close to Lydia and Stella and began a whispered conversation.

("Can't I tell him, my ladies? Allen ought to know that they asked the Lebuferas to save him."

"Of course not. We should wait for a moment when it will really hit home. Now, what were you two talking about?"

"Mr. Allen would worry if he knew. And yes, please fill us in later."

"Y-You're both scaring me.")

What couldn't this highborn trio share with me? I shot Lydia a curious look, but her expression gave nothing away, and her answering gaze said only, "Pour me a drink!"

"Have you heard anything else about the war?" I asked Lily while I filled Lydia's juice glass.

"Well," the maid replied, "as for the Yustinian situation in the north... Lady Stella?"

“I believe we’ve concluded peace. And since the professor handled the negotiations, I suspect the terms were favorable.” With a glance at Lydia, Stella added, “Our most pressing concern might lie...in the south.”

“We’re handily winning the actual war,” her scarlet-haired peer reported nonchalantly. “What else would you expect, with my grandmother commanding the front lines and my grandfather in charge of the rear? We still have Sasha and Felicia at high command too.”

I had once been fortunate enough to meet Duchess Emerita “Scarlet Heaven” Lindsey Leinster and Duke Emeritus Leen Leinster in the southern capital. Both had been extraordinary. Add to them Felicia and Lady Sasha Sykes, Richard’s fiancée, and I didn’t see how the Leinsters could lose this war at home or abroad.

“Yet the fighting continues,” I murmured, handing Her Highness her glass. “Lydia, it doesn’t sound as though Duke Liam will be visiting the eastern capital, does it?”

“No. And although the Dark Lord’s armies haven’t tried anything, the western border is still at half strength, so I suppose Duke Lebufera will return to his own lands soon as well,” she replied. “Okay, that’s enough doom and gloom.”

“Please rest your mind as well as your body,” Stella added. “And I, um, hope you’ll do that with m-me.”

“Stella?” Lydia growled. “You’ve got some nerve.”

“I spoke from the heart.”

“Allen!” Lily chimed in. “About that formula you showed me—”

“Wait your turn!” her fellow noblewomen snapped in unison.

The courtyard abruptly became much noisier. If three of them were this rambunctious, I would have my hands full once we left the hospital.

Between the depletion of Lydia’s mana, the irregularity of Stella’s, and Gil’s future, the demands on my attention kept multiplying. But wasn’t that always the case? At long last, I had returned to normalcy, I reflected as I rested my head in one hand and watched Their Highnesses go at it.

*

“I’d say that about does it. Wouldn’t you, Stella?”

“Yes, Lydia, I would. Lily, fetch the coats.”

“Coming right up! Stop that, Mr. Allen! Hold still now!”

Resignedly, I groaned, “Have it your way, then.”

It was the next evening, and no sooner had the elven head physician finally granted me permission to end my hospital stay than Lydia, Stella, and Lily had turned me into a dress-up doll in my own sickroom. At such times, resistance only made things worse.

Lydia and Stella had received permission to leave as well. That said, neither one of them was yet fully—

“What are you brooding about?” my partner demanded, derailing my train of thought with a pinch on the cheek.

“I can’t help it,” I protested. “You and Stella are still—”

“That doesn’t matter. After all...” Lydia touched her forehead to mine, eliciting a startled cry from Stella and an excited squeal from Lily. “I have you. Well? Am I wrong?”

After a moment of stunned silence, I mumbled, “Oh, er, no.”

“Answer promptly!”

“L-Lydia!” Stella intervened before I could find anything more to say. “W-We ought to get changed too.”

“True,” Lydia admitted, stepping away from me. “Lily, help us dress.”

“Sure thing!” the maid responded.

“M-Mr. Allen,” Stella added, looking up at me. Then, almost inaudibly, “I...I’d also...”

“Stella?” I replied, staring back while I waited for her to continue.

The student council president’s face reddened before my eyes. Then she grabbed my sleeve and stammered, “Uh... Th-That is... Oh...”

“Don’t dawdle, Stella!” Lydia snapped from out in the hallway.

“R-Right! W-Well then, Mr. Allen, I’ll be right back.” With a start, Stella shot out of the room. Her lovely long platinum hair, tied with a snow-white ribbon, caught the light as it fluttered behind her.

I had already finished putting my room in order, so I found myself at a loose end. My only remaining luggage consisted of the sword Cresset Fox and the rod Silver Bloom, which rested on a chair, and a bag containing my changes of clothes. The enchanted weapons I deposited in a holding spell that I’d devised in imitation of Anko. Although it was convenient, I could only retrieve objects that possessed mana of their own. And while I had succeeded in formulating the spell, I had yet to decipher the principles involved. Perhaps I would ask my former underclassmen to look into it when next I saw them.

Atra was sitting on the bed, so I scooped her up in my arms as I moved to the window. Then I cast levitation on myself and, with a little grunt of effort, hopped up onto the roof. The fox cub turned to look at me, ears twitching.

“Don’t fall, now,” I warned her as I alighted on one knee and sat down to survey the twilit cityscape. Fire-gutted and smashed-up houses still dotted the eastern capital. We had probably demolished some of them ourselves when we cast Lightning Flash. In the distance, the station bell rang. I would never tire of the Great Tree’s beauty at sunset.

Suddenly, Atra started scampering around me.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

The fox cub clambered nimbly onto my right shoulder and yipped once. “Look up,” she seemed to be saying.

I did so, and soon spotted a furball frantically flapping its wings—the sea-green griffin chick whose acquaintance I’d made and who had previously visited me in the hospital. Despite my confusion, I assisted the little creature with wind and levitation magic. Soon, its wingbeats grew steady, and it landed in my arms.

The chick shook itself and chirped contentedly. The fox, however, studied it intently for only a few moments before yelping vociferously, as if to say that this was *her* spot. Once I set the chick down on the roof, the pair began

frolicking like good friends.

And where the child goes...

I sensed mana high above and looked up again to see one long-necked sea-green griffin and two common griffins. And on the sea-green griffin's back rode Caren, dressed in a pale violet samue—a plain, yet comfortable, jacket and trousers worn for everyday work.

I magically suppressed the blast of wind that accompanied their landing, taking care that neither Atra nor the chick toppled off the roof as I stood up. The mother griffin extended her neck, so I held the chick out for her to take while my sister dismounted.

"What brings you here, Caren?" I asked.

"We came to pick you up!" she declared.

"But I planned to walk home. It's not far, and—"

Before I could finish, cries of "Sir!" and "Dear brother!" came down to me on the evening air. Atra slipped out of my arms and resumed her place on my right shoulder as the griffins carrying Tina and Lynne made an orderly landing on the roof. The young noblewomen sprang off their mounts, wearing pale azure and pale scarlet samue, respectively.

"Tina, Lynne," I said. "You're here too? Thank you. But where did you get those clothes?"

Tina gave a smug little laugh. "But of course!" she proclaimed, a lock of platinum hair standing to attention as she swelled with pride. "Don't you realize you're the savior of the eastern capital, sir? You'll be mobbed if you walk the streets!"

"What?" I protested. "No, that couldn't—"

"It is!" she insisted with a vehemence that brooked no argument.

"Dag presented us with the samue," Lynne added. "Because we'll 'need some everyday things,' he said. I believe he reached out to the other beastfolk on our behalf."

"Dag did?" I asked, wide-eyed. I glanced at Caren, and she nodded.

I pictured old Dag. The former deputy chieftain of the otter clan was like a grandfather to me. I would need to thank him as soon as I could manage.

From below, I heard Lydia's gruff "Hey" and Stella's call of "Mr. Allen!"

"Oh, forgive me," I responded, casting a levitation spell to help them join us on the roof. They were out of uniform and dressed in white, with scarlet and azure accents, respectively. Both also carried small purses.

"Meanie!" Lily fumed. "Why did you leave me out?!" With a loud "Hiyah!" she leapt out the window, carrying my bag. Then, to our collective astonishment, she cast Heavenly Wind Bound—an experimental, bi-elemental advanced spell for which I had merely shown her a formula during my hospital stay. Kicking off thin air, she completed a twirl as she landed on the roof.

Atra and the griffin chick wiggled their ears, tails, and wings in excitement. Lily was a bad influence!

"How do you like *that*?" the maid crowed. "Did you miss me?"

Tina, Lynne, Stella, and Caren turned to me with accusatory expressions. But before they could voice their complaints, Lydia and I both responded, "Just don't let her get to you."

There was nothing else to say—the speed at which Lily replicated spells was simply astonishing.

Atra hopped down from my shoulder and ran to the maid.

Tina, meanwhile, got over her shock and gave my hand a tug. "Come on, sir!" she pressed. "Hop on my griffin and—"

"Tina, you should ride with me," Stella interrupted, taking her sister by the hand and flashing a smile that only Caren and I could see. Our resident saint knew how to be considerate.

"St-Stella?! L-Let go of me! I...I want to ride with Mr. Allen!"

"Enough of that. You need to learn when to stand aside," Stella chided a struggling Tina as she made for one of the military griffins.

"Really, could she be any more childish?" Lynne nervously cleared her throat and continued, "D-Dear brother, if you would accompany m—"

“Lynne, we’re leaving,” Lydia announced.

“D-Dear sister?! B-But I hoped to ride with my dear brother!” Lynne wailed as she was dragged off by the hand.

“Sh-She always picks t-times like this to act mature,” Caren muttered. Lydia was quite fond of her.

After slapping her own cheeks, my sister turned to me with perfect composure and said, “Now, let’s go, Allen. Don’t let go of me during the ride.”

“Um... Perhaps I could sit in front of—”

“*Allen*?” Caren repeated, enunciating each syllable as she took a step closer and stood on tiptoe. Our noses seemed in danger of colliding. “I didn’t quite hear you.”

I raised my hands in token of surrender and replied, “Yes, ma’am.” Against my adorable little sister, I stood no chance of victory.

“Allen, I’ll walk with Atra!” Lily called, her hand in the air. She had perched the fox cub on top of her own head. “I want to try out my new spell!”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to ride?” I asked, provoking a sharp “Allen?” and an even sharper glare from Caren.

Oof.

“See you later! Ready or not, Atra, here we gooo!” the maid cried as, with a surge of mana and a lilting laugh, she took a great leap off the hospital. Then she was bounding from rooftop to rooftop, covering distance at an incredible pace—and seemingly unbothered by the spell’s terrible mana efficiency.

Caren leaned her head on my shoulder and murmured, “I never know what to make of Lily.”

“Neither do I,” I admitted, “but I know her heart is in the right place.”

A sudden gust buffeted us as the two military griffins took off and began circling as they gained altitude.

I gave my sister’s head a pat. “Shall we join them?”

“Yes. Let’s go, Allen.”

*

Even from the air, it was obvious that the beastfolk district of Old Town, where my family lived, had suffered considerable damage. I was gloomily wondering how long it would take to rebuild when Caren turned to me excitedly and announced, “We’re almost there.” Thanks to wind magic, we had no difficulty hearing each other.

“Yes,” I agreed, hugging the fluffy chick.

Our home was soon in sight, looking not much worse for wear. Caren and I had fought church inquisitors there on the first day of the insurrection, but even the holes left by that encounter seemed to have been patched up. A large table, at least a dozen chairs, and an iron griddle rested in the spacious inner courtyard. The Leinster maids who had remained in the city were darting to and fro among them. I spotted Anna, but my parents, Lisa, and Ellie were nowhere in sight.

Lydia and Stella had already landed their griffins, and Lily had arrived ahead of us as well. How had she traveled so quickly?

In the meantime, the mother griffin flapped her wings and gently touched down. She even made a point of crouching so that we could dismount more easily. I deposited her chick on her back, and Caren and I both thanked her before alighting onto the ground. The fox cub immediately leapt at me.

“Whoa there, Atra!” I exclaimed. “Did you enjoy your walk?”

She nuzzled her head against me, which I took as a yes. Then, having made her report, she clambered aboard the mother griffin and began playing with the chick.

Tina and Lynne approached, waving their hands.

“Sir!”

“Dear brother!”

Now, what have we here?

I surveyed the garden courtyard. Sumptuous dishes covered the table, interspersed with various drinks in glass bottles, and the maids were still

working with lively enthusiasm. My voice came out somewhat strained as I murmured, “What on earth...?”

“You have to ask?” Caren replied, snuggling up to me.

“We’re celebrating your recovery!” Tina announced proudly.

“My dear mother and yours have outdone themselves,” added Lynne. “They’ve been planning this party with my dear sister and Lady Stella.”

“What?!” I turned to Lydia, who had just joined us with Stella in tow. What was the meaning of this?

“Well, you would have called the whole thing off if we’d told you,” she replied.

“You know, Mr. Allen, the original plan called for something far grander,” Stella chimed in.

“You don’t say,” I responded slowly, at a loss for further arguments.

Out of the house came an aproned wolf-clan man wearing small antique spectacles—my father Nathan. Ellie was with him, dressed in her maid uniform, and they both carried large platters.

Our eyes met. My dad gave me a slight nod and proceeded calmly to the griddle—where, apparently, he would be doing the honors. Ellie, however, raced over as soon as she set eyes on me. Although I watched her with bated breath, she reached me without stumbling.

Tina, Lynne, and Caren exchanged looks and began muttering among themselves.

“I knew it.”

“Yes.”

“This calls for an inquiry.”

“W-Welcome back, Allen, sir!” Ellie exclaimed. “Oh, um... L-Look at this!” She held up the platter for my inspection. It had on it an enormous fish, roasted whole and coated in an appetizing translucent sauce.

“This is quite the feast,” I said. “Did you cook it, Ellie?”

“Yessir! With your mother, Duchess Lisa, Anna, and the Leinster maids! I also got a lot of advice from Lily when I went to visit you!”

The unalloyed purity of her affection comes through clear as day. At all costs, I must protect this angel!

While I steeled my resolve, Lily waved enthusiastically from where she had been setting the table. “Allen! Praise me t—”

“That’s quite enough.” Anna cheerfully intervened before she got any further.

So, two of the Leinster Maid Corps’s top three are in attendance. If I include those stationed on the eastern border, then— No, best not to think about that. It will only increase my anxiety.

“Thank you,” I told Ellie. “This is lovely. Now, why don’t you put it on the table?”

“Yes, sir!” the angel chirped and set off in high spirits. Tina, Lynne, and Caren were still muttering.

“I’ll cook tomorrow,” Lydia announced, taking custody of my left arm.

“A-And I’ll, um, help,” Stella added diffidently, plucking at my sleeve.

Getting two daughters of dukes to cook for me would be beyond the pale. But before I could say so, a petite wolf-clan woman and a scarlet-tressed beauty emerged from the house, dressed in matching aprons. An air of tense expectation fell over the courtyard. My mother Ellyn and Duchess Lisa Leinster had arrived.

Lydia and Stella gave me space, and the girls took a step back.

My mom’s eyes widened when she saw me. Then she approached at a brisk pace and squeezed me in the tightest hug she could muster. That done, she ran her hands over my head and face. Once she was satisfied that I was all there, she smiled and said, “Welcome home, Allen. Are you in any pain? You’re not trying to tough it out, are you?”

“I’m fine, mom,” I reassured her. “And I’m, well, sorry I—”

“None of that.” She tenderly rubbed my head. I could feel everyone staring at me...but I made no protest. “Now, give me a smile. Don’t forget, we’re here to

celebrate.”

I nodded and mumbled, “Right.” Only after I donned an awkward smile did my mom release me.

Then it was Lisa’s turn to give me a tender hug and murmur, “Allen.” I could sense the six young ladies’ collective shock, but I was powerless to move.

Meanwhile, my mom exclaimed, “Goodness! And who might you be, you dear little thing?” Evidently, she was talking to Atra. Given how restricted my visitors had been at the hospital, I supposed that this must be their first proper meeting.

The former Lady of the Sword and current Duchess Leinster squeezed my hands. “I’ve been forced to rely on you again,” she said, tears in her eyes. “I appreciate all you’ve done for Richard—and for Lydia. Truly, thank you for saving my children. Lisa Leinster will always remember this debt.” With a chuckle, she added, “I wonder if I’ll ever be able to repay it in my lifetime.” Lisa cared deeply for her son and daughters.

“I should be the one to thank you,” I responded. “I truly don’t know what I would have done without Richard’s help—although I’m certain that he’ll be furious at our next meeting. And it was the girls who saved Lydia.”

“Not at all,” Lisa demurred. “Wouldn’t you agree, Lydia?”

“Yes, I would,” her scarlet-haired daughter, who had been watching from the sidelines, answered hesitantly. Then she blurted out, “B-But mother, l-let go of him already! He’s *mine*!”

“I wouldn’t be so certain of that,” Lisa teased, laughing off this explosion.

Lydia groaned, fuming. The girls blinked, taken aback by this rare sight of the Lady of the Sword on the losing side, and then burst into stifled laughter.

“W-Watch it!” Lydia glared at the girls, then rounded petulantly on Lisa. “I...I said, let go of him! Jeez!”

I really am home.

“All right!” my dad hollered. “Everyone take a glass.”

Leinster maids set about uncorking the drink bottles.

“Here you are, Duchess Lisa, mother, Mr. Allen, Ms. Lydia,” Ellie chirped, handing us glasses of white wine—and then distributing fruit juice to her fellow students while she was at it. Truly, she was the very model of a maid.

Once he was certain that everyone had been served, my dad raised his glass. “I won’t bother with a formal preamble,” he said. “Our son is back home with us, safe and sound. Thank you all so much. Cheers!”

“Cheers!” we all echoed, raising our glasses and draining them as one. The cheers and applause that followed were entirely spontaneous.

After the toast, we settled in for a convivial party. The three younger girls arrayed themselves before the griddle.

“Ellie, Lynne,” Tina remarked, “these meats and vegetables are delicious! What varieties do you think they are? I must ask mother la— Ah! I...I wanted that piece of meat!”

Lynne retorted, “First come, first— Th-That fish was mine!”

“You said it yourself—first come, first served!”

“P-Please, d-don’t fight!” Ellie wailed while her friends butted heads.

“Take your time,” my dad chided them. “There’s plenty to go around.”

“Okay,” the girls chorused obediently.

A short distance away, a nervous-looking Stella sat chatting with my mom. “U-Um...” she began. “You see, mo—*ahem*, M-Mrs. Ellyn!”

“Yes, Stella dear?”

“O-Oh, well... Th-This dish certainly tastes lovely!”

“Thank you,” my mom replied, letting out a musical laugh. “It’s been one of Allen’s favorites since he was a child, and...”

The two of them ought to get on splendidly. Lydia and Caren, on the other hand, were glaring at each other over Ellie’s fish platter.

“I hope you’ve done some soul-searching after all the anxiety you caused,” the latter was saying. “And remember: *we* won that fight at the Algren

mansion.”

Lydia expertly cut a slice of fish. “Is that any way to speak to your sister-in-law, Caren?” she asked, offering the portion to my sister on a small plate. “And was gaining a momentary advantage over me when I was at my absolute weakest really enough for you?” She paused to sigh. “What a shame.”

“I don’t *have* a sister-in-law!” Caren snapped, letting sparks fly as she accepted the plate. Then, in a more subdued tone, “Are you feeling all right?”

“Silly.” The scarlet-haired noblewoman answered my sister’s genuine concern with fearless confidence. “Why wouldn’t I be? But I see you’ve finally learned some respect for your sister-in-law. You’re so much more lovable when you open up and admit these things.”

“I-In your dreams, maybe! Allen is mine, and you can’t have him!”

“Yes, yes.”

“One ‘yes’ is enough!”

I took a seat, grinning ruefully, and Lily sat down beside me. Atra, who had been frolicking with the griffin chick under the table, clambered up the maid’s skirt and curled up in her lap.

“When did you two become such fast friends?” I asked.

“Since you took to napping with Lady Lydia in the afternoons,” Lily replied, with a lilting laugh.

I immediately raised my voice to drown out her words. Fortunately, no one seemed to have noticed.

“Don’t put too many strange ideas in Atra’s head,” I warned her for good measure.

“And what’s *that* supposed to mean?!” Lily fumed.

“Exactly what it sounds—”

“Allen?” she asked, nonplussed, as I surreptitiously reached down as low as I could.

I felt a slight weight on my palm, and when I raised my hand again, a tiny

black kitten rested in it. An envelope appeared from thin air.

“A message from Anko?” I murmured.

“Alleeen?” Lily whined, but I opened the envelope regardless and ran my eyes over its contents. The kitten leapt out of my hand and made for Lydia.

The letter came from Teto Tijerina, who had been Lydia’s and my underclassman at the university. She wrote that she was in the royal capital, where she and the other students from our old department were guarding Princess Cheryl Wainwright. *The professor is in the* northern *capital*, her message continued. *Her Royal Highness will set out for the eastern capital as soon as the trains are back up and running.*

I would have preferred Teto to give this whole troublesome business a wide berth. Nevertheless...

“If the professor...” I muttered, racking my brain. “No, it must have been Anko. In which case—”

My speculation ended in a startled cry as Lily covered my eyes without warning. The last thing I’d seen, in the corner of my vision, was Lydia receiving her own letter from the kitten.

“L-Lily?” I stammered. “R-Really, there are—”

“This is what happens to boys who won’t listen to their elders,” she crowed, laughing. In a whisper, she added, “And we don’t get many chances to talk, just the two of us.” An unexpected needy streak was yet another trait that she and Lydia had in common.

I raised my hands in surrender. “Very well, then. Shall we talk?”

Lady Lily Leinster removed her hands and rested her head on one of them. “I’m glad you understand,” she replied, nodding contentedly. “And teach me a new spell too—some type of fire barrier would be lovely!”

“I can’t refuse a maid.”

*

“Easy does it,” I murmured, lowering Lydia onto the bed. She wore a disarmingly innocent smile and squirmed ticklishly when I brushed her cheek.

Tina lay beside her, sleeping soundly—and presumably dreaming, since she mumbled, “Sir, Ellie, Lynne.” I also heard the regular breathing of sleepers from the other large bed, where Ellie, Lynne, Stella, and Caren all lay side by side. Atra and the messenger kitten were curled up at their feet. A smile spread across my face.

I tucked in the blankets over Lydia and Tina, then stood up. In the light of mana lamps, I could see that the courtyard was deserted. Even the sea-green griffins had gone home.

The second half of the party had been utter chaos. My sister and students had gotten drunk—from imbibing either by mistake or in excess—and ganged up on me.

“Siiir,” Tina had drawled, “what do...what do you think of meee?”

“Allen, sir,” Ellie had chimed in, her speech only slightly slurred, “I...I’ve been good! And I’d like a compliment.”

“Dear brother,” Lynne had added haltingly, “please spare some attention for me.”

Slowly, Stella had begged, “Mr. Allen...l-let me rest my head on your lap too.”

“You’re too soft on Lydia and Stella, Allen!” Caren had barked. “I’m your sister, so you’re duty bound to be softer on me than anyone else! Now, let the rubbing begin!”

Only Lydia had looked happy amid the tumult—having immediately laid her head on my lap and fallen asleep. Nearby, Anna restrained and cheerfully chastised a fuming Lily.

“Oh, goodness,” my mom had cooed, accompanied by a soft laugh from Lisa. Atra, the griffin chick, and the messenger kitten had been frolicking on their laps while the maids exclaimed over the scene—and committed it to video orbs.

“I...I can’t take it anymore.”

“Th-Their cuteness knows no upper limit.”

“Do you think they’d spend some time on *my* lap too?”

“I may have just won the cuteness category at this year’s Video Awards!”

Really, it had been complete havoc. Still, my mom’s singing had been lovely. I could believe that she’d once been the best songstress in the clan.

I groaned and stretched. Carrying six girls to bed, each one cradled in my arms, had proven somewhat tiring.

Lily popped her head out around a bend in the hallway. Her hair was down, and she wore a white nightgown. She held a little wicker basket packed with red wine and assorted nibbles.

“Allen, I picked these out myself!” she announced. Then, almost as an afterthought, “But you really ought to go to bed soon.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the basket. “I’ll go to sleep as soon as I’ve written to an old schoolmate.”

“Do you promise?” Lily pressed dubiously. I had never seen her with her hair down before and found the change refreshing.

“Yes, I promise. Have I ever lied to you, Lily?”

“All the time! If you want me to believe you, then, um, t-tell me what you think of my n-ni...” The usually vivacious maid faltered and twiddled her fingers as her words trailed off, but her gaze was insistent.

“Your nightgown is charming,” I responded honestly.

A smile bloomed on Lily’s face, and she pressed her hands to her cheeks. “Thank you!” she giggled. A lock of her hair stood up and swayed from side to side, just as Lydia’s and Lynne’s often did.

“Good night!” the delighted maid chirped, burrowing under the blankets with Lydia and Tina. “It’s nice and toasty here!”

“Good night. See you in the morning.”

I sat down on a chair I’d had left in the courtyard and deposited the basket on a round table. While pouring myself a glass of southern red wine, I considered

what I would write to Teto.

I had far too much to tell her—including many things that I couldn't commit to writing. Although a letter entrusted to one of Anko's messenger kittens would be safe from interception, someone might always read it at its destination—even inadvertently. Cheryl, at least, *would* read whatever I wrote, so I couldn't quite bring myself to relate the particulars of Lydia's rampage. Those, I ought to explain in person.

I took a sip of wine and found it astonishingly mellow. Lisa must have selected it herself.

I was still savoring the cool night air and planning my letter when I sensed someone else in the courtyard.

"Allen."

"Dad," I said. "You're still up?"

"Yes, I couldn't get to sleep," my father, Nathan, replied. He wore a samue in lieu of pajamas. "Mind if I take a seat?"

"No."

My dad sat down across from me. Even accounting for my own bias, he was a handsome fellow.

"Care for some wine?" I asked, taking a spare glass from the basket.

"I'd love some."

I poured for him. Then we clinked glasses in a toast—I'd lost count of how many I had drunk this evening. After taking a sip, my dad stared at me in silence.

"Is there something on my face?" I asked, puzzled. But I felt nothing when I ran a hand over my mouth and cheeks.

"I was just thinking that my dream's come true," he replied, with a wistful smile. "I've always wanted to share a drink with you, just the two of us."

I looked away, too embarrassed to answer. To divert myself, I picked up a pen and twirled it.

“Were you writing a letter to someone?” my dad asked.

“Oh, yes, to a friend from the university,” I replied. “But I can’t seem to decide quite what to write.”

“It happens. Sleep on it, and the right words will come to you.”

Slowly, I asked, “Are you speaking from experience?”

“I used to write to Ellyn all the time.”

My parents said that they used to travel all over the continent. Then they had found me and settled in the eastern capital. But I dimly remembered my dad leaving on a number of long trips even after he had become a magical artificer.

Oh, that reminds me.

“Dad, can you repair clockwork? Lydia’s pocket watch seems to be out of sorts.”

“The girl with the long scarlet hair—Lily, I think—asked me the same thing earlier,” he replied. “Why not let me take a look at yours while I’m at it? She asked me a lot of questions about magical devices as well. She’s a nice girl with a good head on her shoulders.”

“You don’t say?” I responded, reflecting that I had better not mention that he had been speaking to *Lady* Lily Leinster.

We sipped our wine and snacked on cheese and toasted beans without speaking, but the silence was comfortable, not awkward. A faint breeze rustled the trees. Summer would be ending soon.

When will the Royal Academy be able to reopen? I’ll have to ask the headmaster.

My dad set his glass down on the table and said, “Allen.” His smile was tender and calm, but tears glinted in his eyes. “You really...really have grown up. I never dreamed that that little baby would grow into such a fine young man.”

“Only because you and mom raised me,” I demurred, blushing at the direct compliment. “If I look like a fine young man, then the two of you deserve all the credit.”

“No, we don’t. You’re selling yourself short, Allen. You just risked your life and saved not only a lot of people, but the whole city to boot. Not just anyone could have accomplished that. Ellyn and I want you to know that we’re proud of you. That said...” My dad’s expression darkened. The moon hid itself in clouds, deepening the night. “I’m your father. I need to tell you how I—how *we* feel.” From his tone, I guessed that this was the real reason he had joined me.

“Although I was born into the wolf clan, I’m no use in a fight,” he continued. “You know that as well as I do. I’ve never been any good with a spear, or my fists, or even with spells. Ellyn might be stronger than I am.”

I did know. While my dad was among the finest artificers, he neither excelled at nor enjoyed violence.

“The only thing I *could* do as well as the next person was read. So I devoured books—history, travelogue, biography, technical treatises, you name it. They taught me some things I’d never know otherwise.”

As a child, I had discovered the joy of reading in my dad’s study. I had fond memories of regaling Caren before bedtime with the old stories and heroic tales that I’d learned there.

My dad looked me in the eye. His gaze held intense sorrow as he said, “Allen, many people love you dearly. You’re extraordinarily talented as well. The kingdom is going to keep changing in big ways...and I don’t believe that you’ll be left to your own devices while it does.”

“You’re making too much of me,” I protested weakly. “The kingdom is full of more impressive people.”

I knew at least two genuine geniuses: Lydia Leinster and Tina Howard. For the time being, I could still keep pace beside them and even lead them forward. But in the near future, they would leave me far behind. The same was true of Ellie, Lynne, Stella, Caren, and my former underclassmen. Never once had I felt myself more talented than any of them.

My dad looked away and lowered his gaze. “So many people asked me and Ellyn about you while you were in the hospital. They all seemed concerned for you, and to regret what they’d done in the past. Do you have any idea how many times Lord Richard, Rolo, and Dag bowed their heads to us? Even Duchess

Lisa Leinster took Ellyn by the hands and apologized in tears. The perceptive have already realized, Allen. The beastfolk aren't big enough to hold you—you're destined for greatness."

Silence was the only answer I could muster.

My dad looked up. "But I also know," he said, tears streaming down his cheeks, "that most great men fall and die before achieving what they set out to do."

Moonlight poured down on the courtyard. Evidently, the clouds had lifted.

"I know we've told you that you're named for Shooting Star, the great champion who fought for the wolf clan two hundred years ago, in the War of the Dark Lord. Ellyn and I both love old stories, and we hoped you'd be like him—like he was before he became a legend."

Shooting Star was said to have been universally beloved. Even his enemies had honored him. I had learned those stories long ago on my parents' knees.

"Allen," my dad continued, no longer even trying to conceal his distress in his desperation to make his point, "all Ellyn and I ever wanted for you was a life of health and happiness! Not even the Great Tree or our people's future would be worth sacrificing you. You don't need to become a legend. Truly you don't!"

I didn't believe in gods, yet I couldn't help giving thanks to them for making me a son to my parents, who loved me even though we shared no blood. I forced myself to choke out, "Dad, I—"

But just then, I sensed the mana I knew best in all the world—albeit considerably weaker than I was used to. A soft—yet intense—voice followed: "Please pardon me for interrupting."

Lydia strode out into the courtyard and stood beside me. She hadn't even bothered to put on shoes. Looking straight at my dad—and *only* at my dad—she said, "I cannot blame you for worrying, father. I admit that Allen and I have seen many battlefields in the past four years, and that he has suffered injuries on several of those occasions. My failures are entirely to blame. I beg your forgiveness."

"Lydia!" I protested. "That's not—"

“Be quiet!” snapped the scarlet-haired noblewoman, motioning me to silence with an emaciated hand. Then she continued, “Allen saved my life. I was in pitch darkness. I didn’t even know how to walk. But when I met him, for...for the first time in my life, I was able to forge ahead. Father.”

To my dad’s shock and mine, Lydia—Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter—went down on her knees before him and clasped her hands as if in prayer.

“This time, I will put my life on the line to keep Allen safe. So...So please! Give us your blessing to go on walking together. Please. I beseech you.” Her voice grew hoarse, and her falling tears stained the ground. “I can’t take another step alone. Not one.”

I rose and took Lydia’s hands. Then I helped her to her feet and put my arms around her shoulders. She sobbed into my chest.

“Dad,” I said, nodding to him, “thank you. Truly, I’m proud to be your son. But...But I’ll be fine. The lessons you taught me are always in my heart. I won’t go wrong.”

“Allen—”

“Lydia isn’t the only one,” a new voice interrupted.

“Tina? Lily?” I said, stunned.

Two more daughters of dukes, also dressed in their nightgowns, had appeared from behind a pillar of the house. Tina followed Lydia’s example and walked barefoot out into the courtyard. Once she reached its center, she turned around and said, “Lily, if you please.”

“You got it!” Lily gave her hands a big wave, and fiery flowers scattered. They surrounded the whole courtyard, forming a ward around it.

Tina brandished her right hand aloft. Potent mana pulsed, like a beating heart, as her myriad icy blossoms scattered the moonlight.

“My word,” my dad murmured, overawed by the spectacle.

Isn’t this the barrier I was prototyping earlier?

I shot a glance at Lily, and the maid smiled prettily.

Good grief.

Tina pressed her left hand over her heart. “A mere few months ago, I couldn’t cast a single spell,” she confessed to my dad. “I’d tried and tried and tried for as long as I can remember...but it didn’t make any difference. I acted cheerfully at home, but inside, I’d already given up hope. I’d resigned myself to never learning to use magic, despite being born into a ducal house.” The platinum-haired young noblewoman sneered at herself.

I couldn’t even imagine how much pressure she had been under as the magically impaired daughter of a duke. Lydia dug her nails into my chest. She must have had a clearer idea.

Then came a faint laugh, and Tina’s face brightened. “And when I was at rock bottom, I happened to meet Lydia at a ball in the royal capital, and she told me about Mr. Allen. ‘I’ve got the world’s most amazing partner!’ was how she put it.” Tina paused for effect. “And she was right.”

She stood up straighter, looking mature and dignified. “I was called ‘the Howards’ cursed child’!” she continued in a trembling voice. “And Mr. Allen... He gave me real magic. I can never thank him enough. I still wake up in the night sometimes, wondering if this is all a dream. But...But I still haven’t managed to do a single thing for him in return! And not only me—Ellie, Lynne, and my sister feel the same way. Father, I realize this is a selfish request, but please—*please!*—won’t you give us time to repay our debts?”

Snow crystals raged in sympathy with Tina’s emotions. I held them in check with a wave of my right hand so that they wouldn’t eat through the barrier that Lily was busy reinforcing.



My dad removed his spectacles and wiped his eyes. “Lady Lydia Leinster, Lady

Tina Howard.”

“Yes?” both noblewomen responded. Lydia raised her head, and Tina tensed as they awaited what he would say next.

My dad rose from his seat and bowed low. “I hope that Your Highnesses will continue to do your best for my son. He tends not to know his limits—I wonder who he got *that* from?—so please stop him when he acts rash. You have my permission to get a little rough.”

“D-Dad?!” I exclaimed, flustered.

Lydia and Tina, meanwhile, stood stock-still with their hands over their mouths. When the meaning of his words sunk in, smiles lit up their faces, and they chorused a delighted, “We’d love to!”

“Father,” Lydia added, glancing at Tina, “we’ll be fine without Tiny. I can take care of him all on my own.”

“What?! Y-You won’t be able to make that claim for long!” Tina retorted, marching up to her. “I’ll catch up to you soon enough! Before you know it!”

“Soon enough?” Lydia echoed in mock confusion. “Oh, you mean in a thousand years. Well, give it your best shot.”

Tina gnashed her teeth in frustration. “You’re just a big crybaby without Mr. Allen!”

“Say that again.”

“I most certainly will!”

The two daughters of dukes began grappling with each other. While I lamented this now predictable outcome, the barrier started to dissolve. Lily’s lips moved in a silent “You owe me one.”

“Just like the legend,” my dad remarked, chuckling.

I looked up in confusion and found him looking tenderly back at me.

“Shooting Star had two lieutenants: Comet and Crescent Moon. And legend has it that they also promised his parents that they would keep him safe from harm.” After a short pause, he added, “That promise wasn’t kept, but I have

faith that you'll all make it work."

*

Dear Self-Proclaimed "Normal Person,"

Hi, Teto. How have you been?

Let me guess what you'll say next: "You really overdid it, Allen. How many times does this make?"

Please don't be cross. I couldn't help it. And Lydia and I are fine, so don't worry on our account.

Thank you for guarding my sister Caren on the journey between the western and royal capitals. If all goes according to plan, she'll be your underclassman next year. Please look out for her.

I read your letter, but are you all really Cheryl's temporary bodyguards? Then, whatever it takes, resign! I'm writing this for your own good. Unless you want *stress-induced stomach ulcers?*

She's earnest, dedicated to righting wrongs, and driven—maybe a little too driven. But let me be plainer: during our time at the Royal Academy, Cheryl destroyed more buildings than Lydia. Imagine the headache that I had to deal with and choose wisely.

The railroad reconstruction seems to have hit a snag, but let's meet in the eastern capital. You should have no trouble finding where my family lives—just mention my name in the beastfolk districts.

Tell everyone else in the department to take care and avoid risks.

Yours truly,

Allen

(The only person in our department who can really call himself "normal.")

PS: Don't worry about Gil. I'll figure something out.

Chapter 3

“Hey, have you heard? They finished repairing the tracks from here to the royal capital.”

“You mean the Three Great Dukes can finally get here with their troops?”

“I hear the advance force skipped over the city and headed straight for the eastern border.”

“Hard to believe it’s been ten days since they put down the rebellion. The Algrens are done for. But I bet the council of chieftains will reconvene before anything else happens.”

I was making my way through the eastern capital’s beastfolk districts under the cover of a hooded cloak when I overheard a beastfolk, an elf, a dwarf, and a human chatting about current events under the mana lamps of a major New Town thoroughfare. Clenching my fists, I ducked into a nearby alleyway.

“Are you all right, Konoha? You look ghastly pale,” my companion asked worriedly from beside me. She was a tall southern beauty in a floral kimono, with long black hair and skin as dark as mine—my elder sister Momiji, with whom I had only recently been reunited.

“I’m fine,” I reassured her haltingly. “We should hurry.”

She didn’t reply.

Painfully aware of her concern, I forced myself to repeat more firmly, “I’m fine. Really.”

A royal proclamation issued shortly after the end of the rebellion had commanded all those implicated in it to refrain from setting foot out of doors until their punishments were determined. I wasn’t eager to violate the decree or to start a fight. My lord—His Highness, Lord Gil Algren, fourth son of the old duke—was already in an exceedingly precarious position. I was merely his maid and bodyguard, but even I was tempting fate by venturing out like this.

Naturally, my lord had not been directly complicit in this ridiculous

insurrection. He hadn't been informed of it in advance, and he had been confined to his house's mansion once it had begun. I had used force to keep him there. Nevertheless...

I gritted my teeth and squeezed the bracelet on my left wrist—a memento of my late mother—painfully tight.

Momiji cut in front of me and seized my shoulders. "Konoha, you should take a rest," she urged. "My fiancé won't mind if we're late."

"I don't want to make a bad impression," I muttered. "I hear your fiancé is a friend of Mr. Allen. I'm prepared to take a few punches."

"He wouldn't do that."

Who had emerged from the rebellion with the most glory? The knights of the royal guard, who had joined forces with the beastfolk militia and fought ferociously in defense of the Great Tree, despite their small numbers and the odds stacked overwhelmingly against them? Lord Richard Leinster, who had led their elite troops with indomitable spirit? The legendary Emerald Gale and the other officers of the Shooting Star Brigade, who had arrived from the far-off western capital with a force of hardy veterans at the eleventh hour, fulfilling their Old Pledge to the beastfolk? The people of the eastern capital foresaw a different answer.

I met my sister's gaze. Her eyes were still as jewellike as I remembered. "Mr. Allen did more than anyone to end the rebellion," I said, smiling weakly. "Everyone expects him to be elevated to a rank befitting his deeds. And Lord Gil once struck him down—all because I blundered and got myself taken hostage. I have no right to complain about a blow or two."

The sight of Lord Gil after that battle was seared into my memory. He'd looked like a lost child, utterly at his wit's end. And he still did. Despite the good he had done since—rescuing the comatose old Duke Guido Algren; defeating the rebellion's ostensible leader, Grant; and cornering Gregory, who had been in league with the Church of the Holy Spirit—my lord continued to wallow in self-recrimination. He had barely eaten.

I dropped my gaze and shrugged. "But no house in the city will help an Algren now," I admitted. "Even Earls Harclay, Hayden, and Zani are under house arrest,

along with their families. And the people who fled the Algren estate took its wealth with them. You're the only one I can turn to now. I'm so...so sorry."

"Silly." Momiji squeezed my hands. Her eyes brimmed with tears, and she seemed about to start crying at any moment. "You're my sister. Of *course* I'll help you. I'll talk to my fiancé for you."

It was all I could do to choke out, "Thank you." If I wasn't careful, I would burst into tears.

"Listen," my sister said, looking me in the eye again, "why not just talk to Mr. Allen in person? I'm sure he'll understand if you explain."

She was probably right. He was, after all, so preposterously good-natured that he had gone out of his way to tell Lord Gil to count me as an ally mere moments before being struck down by him. However...

"As I just said, Mr. Allen has become a living legend to the people of this city. The vast majority of visitors are barred from his hospital room, and his family home is under strict guard as well. I could never get through to see him. And I'm certain that Lord Gil won't even try."

Momiji gave me another worried look. "Konoha—"

"Let's go," I said. If we hurried, we could still arrive in time for our appointment.

As for what I ought to do, my mind remained undecided.

*

By the time I returned to the Algren villa on the outskirts of the city with my gift of food, it was after midnight. I exhaled, carefully undid my layers of perception-blocking wards, and pushed back my hood. Still holding the small mana lamp that Momiji had pressed into my hands ("What if you fall into a canal, Konoha?" she had argued), I ascended the stairs.

Inside, the air was so chilly that you would never know it was summer. Although the road appeared deserted from the windows, the house was undoubtedly being watched. I'd heard of the swift arrests that had befallen nobles attempting to flee to the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit.

My sister's future husband, Sui of the fox clan, had turned out to be a good person.

"What?!" he'd roared at our first meeting. "You work for the guy who took down Allen?! You've got some nerve, coming in here and— Hey, don't look like you're gonna cry. Don't try to grovel either! Konoha, right? Once Momiji and I are, uh, married, you'll be my sister-in-law. And beastfolk never turn their backs on family. Talk to Allen. I hear he got out of the hospital yesterday, and I know he'll figure something out."

The cloth sack stuffed with food that he'd pressed on me felt heavy in my arms.

Should I really consult him behind Lord Gil's back? I asked myself as I reached the top of the stairs and followed a long corridor to my lord's chamber. The old duke had once conducted his business here, I'd heard, although only during the summer.

I stopped outside a heavy door at the end of the corridor. After several deep breaths, I ventured a soft knock. Although there was no reply, I sensed mana in motion and grimaced. My lord was still awake, even though he hadn't taken a good night's sleep in days.

"Lord Gil, it's Konoha. Please excuse me," I said, opening the door and stepping inside.

The room was minimal in its furnishings: an old wooden writing desk, two chairs, a round table, a bookcase, and a bed for one. Amid these modest surroundings, my lord, Gil Algren, wrote feverishly by the light of a mana lamp on his desk. He wore only a shirt and black trousers. Bandages swathing his head covered untreated war wounds.

"Lord Gil, please eat something," I pleaded, heavy of heart. "I'll fetch a drink for—"

"Don't bother," he interrupted. "But don't worry; I won't die just yet. I wrote down a chronology of the rebellion and everything I know about what went on behind the scenes. Give it a look and correct any mistakes you find."

"Yes, my lord," I answered stiffly. This businesslike conversation was devoid of

Lord Gil's old cheer. Although my heart ached, I deposited the sack on a nearby chair and moved to his side.

Ever since the three dukes had sent a recommendation that he be confined to this villa for the time being, my lord had done nothing but work on this written appeal to the crown. It consisted of information that only an Algren would know: a range of figures and military secrets related to governance, the formula for the supreme spell Lightning Lord Tiger, the steps to activate the secret Violet Axe—and a full account of the rebellion and its antecedents. He had signed all these documents and sealed them with his mana.

Lord Gil intended to shoulder all the sins of his house. Once a verdict was reached, he would no doubt present himself in the royal capital to accept his sentence alone.

Unless I find some way to make him reconsider.

"The reconstruction of the city seems to be making good progress," I remarked, forcing myself to speak while I perused the documents.

"Yeah?"

"Train service to the royal capital will resume soon, I hear."

"Only for military use," my lord said. "Civilian train service won't return for months. People will need to rely on Skyhawk Company griffins, western wyverns, and shipping networks that use wagons or automobiles to make deliveries. And there's something fishy brewing with Lalannoy. Didn't the spell-guns and other magical contraptions that Zani's force used come from the republic? Our eastern border is under-garrisoned—a surprise attack there would wreak havoc."

The kingdom currently faced direct threats on three sides. The Yustinian Empire had struck in the north, while the League of Principalities had invaded the south. And to the east lurked that vile theocracy, the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit—the devils who had pulled the strings of the rebellion. If the Lalannoy Republic were to bring war on yet another front, then—

"Grant and Greck are too badly injured to interrogate, and they evacuated their families to the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit," Lord Gil continued in glacial

tones. “Gregory is missing. The Algren ‘Wings,’ Haag Harclay and Haig Hayden, are in the hospital. I think that the Violet Order ought to be deployed to the eastern border immediately, but...” A sense of powerlessness colored his expression.

I trembled at the enormity of the crimes I had to answer for. During our time in the royal capital, he had always been smiling.

Racked with regret, I forced myself to ask, “Do you believe the three dukes envision a war against the eastern powers?”

“They might mass troops on the eastern border”—Lord Gil considered—“but they couldn’t invade. Our supply lines wouldn’t hold out.”

Algren forces had temporarily captured the royal capital. But although the old grand knight Haag Harclay’s keen tactical mind and the elite Violet Order had accomplished that feat, they had been able to do no more. Even if the other ducal houses far outstripped the Algrens in terms of logistical thinking and personnel, anyone could see that a campaign into the foreign lands where the Church of the Holy Spirit had its roots would be fraught with difficulties.

“It’s not impossible,” Lord Gil concluded matter-of-factly, softly laying down his pen. “But now’s not the time. The kingdom can’t afford to escalate wars abroad until it finishes cleaning up after the one that just ended. Not that it’s any of my business.”

He rose and turned his gaze to the window, staring out at a single point—the beastfolk Old Town. I felt a pang in my chest. Lord Gil adored the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. Yet in my self-righteous arrogance, I...I had brought on this...this...

I pressed a hand to my heart, enduring the pain. Then, struggling to sound indifferent, I addressed his back—which was smaller than I remembered. “That reminds me. I hear that Mr. Allen has been discharged from the hospital.”

Without a word, Lord Gil slowly turned his head. I clapped my hands to my mouth in shock as, for the first time since he had sealed himself into this villa, I saw him smile.

“He has?” he murmured almost inaudibly. “Good.”

He soon resumed his former expression, but...my mind was made up. I would tell Mr. Allen everything and place the matter in his hands. He would save Lord Gil, my gentle master.

If I can never see my lord again, then...so be it. I need to atone for my crimes. But this time...this time I will *save Lord Gil. I'll give my all for him!*

I recalled Sui's words of encouragement: "Allen'll be called to a council of chieftains tomorrow, at the Great Tree. If you want to get a hold of him, do it at his parents' place. Anywhere else, people will mob him before you get a chance. My brother disciple would rather die than turn his back on someone he's been close to."

Sui was a busybody, and I felt certain that Momiji would be happy with him. Our late mother would have been delighted. I hoped that my sister would live well enough for both of us.

Lord Gil sank back into his chair and resumed writing furiously. This report seemed to concern the transfer of the enchanted halberd Deep Violet and the dagger imbued with the remnants of the great spell Radiant Shield. He was signing away his house's greatest treasures—meaning that he had written all he felt duty bound to write.

Once again, the moon hid itself in heavy clouds, plunging the room into darkness. Lord Gil spoke not another word until morning.

*

The first thing I felt, upon waking with a muted groan, was the warmth of another person. Still, I didn't think that anyone had snuck in after my conversation with my dad the night before—although Lily had deposited Atra at my feet.

I slowly opened my eyes...and immediately beheld a young fox-clan girl with long white hair and a white dress. She was sound asleep and seemed totally at peace. I almost blurted out her name in surprise but covered my own mouth in the nick of time—I wouldn't want to wake her. Instead, I placed a hand on her little head.

Pale mana shone as the sleeping child grinned contentedly and rubbed her head against my stomach. She was Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals, and until the day before, she had taken the form of a fox cub. I had lost her once already, when she had shielded me in battle with the inquisitor Lev. And although the great elementals within Tina and Lydia had helped to restore her, the intense drain on Atra's mana had confined her to animal form.

"Is she feeling a little better?" I wondered aloud as my mind came awake. "But this seems like Stella's mana."

I reached for my watch—and then remembered that I'd given it to my dad. But even without it, I could tell that I had woken up at my usual time.

If only I knew how to lie back and take it easy.

Birds twittered in the cool morning air. Inside, the house was quiet—even the maids still seemed to be sleeping. The way the mist in the courtyard caught the sunlight was simply sublime.

I raised my right hand and studied Linaria's ring on its third finger. According to the officious witch, I would be able to remove it if I surpassed her skill. And I would certainly need to do *something* about it, considering how seriously Lydia and Stella had discussed the possibility of cutting it off.

The child stirred and looked at me. She had gorgeous golden eyes and a bad case of bed head.

"Good morning, Atra," I said. "Did I wake you?"

“Allen!” she cried, breaking into a smile. Although her voice was musical, she sounded as though she didn’t quite have the hang of speaking yet.

I sat up in bed and began, “I’m getting up now, but—”

I never got a chance to say, “you can go back to sleep if you like.” My eyes had met those of the girl peering into my room. She was clearly fresh out of bed herself, and her gaze was fixed on Atra.

Oh dear.

“Tina, it’s not what you think,” I ventured.

“What isn’t?” the young noblewoman demanded sullenly.

“You see, this girl is—”

“I don’t want to hear it!” Tina rebuffed me, a lock of her platinum hair standing to attention. Then she brought her hands together, drew in a deep breath, and bellowed, “Wake up, everyone! We have an emergency!”

Every bird in the courtyard took flight.

So, it’s come to this.

Atra blinked, startled by Tina’s shout. I heard running feet out in the hallway. So, with resignation—and the little girl still cradled in my arms—I got out of bed and prepared to weather the storm.

“So, you didn’t realize it was Atra?” Lydia pressed. “But it’s so obvious. Just feel for her mana.”

“I thought something was seriously wrong,” Lynne added reprovingly, at almost the same moment that Caren chimed in to say, “You need to be more observant.”

“L-Listen, Tina...” Stella faltered from her seat beside me.

Tina’s hair drooped in the face of this criticism. “B-But I couldn’t help it,” she whined, taking another bite out of her breakfast toast.

We were eating outside, since it was a beautiful day and we had so many guests in the house. I found it particularly delightful sitting under the tent that

the maids had kindly put up for us. Everyone had finished dressing before coming to breakfast—perhaps because they didn't want my parents to see them eating in their pajamas.

Ellie was dressed in her maid uniform and energetically portioning out the salad. But she paused and blinked in surprise when she saw Atra perched on my lap and wolfing down freshly baked bread.

"St-Still," she mused, "I never knew that great elementals could look like people. Do you think that Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin can do that too?"

"I'm sure they can," I replied. "In fact, they looked very much like Atra when I saw them."

The child looked up, nonplussed. She must have thought that I had called her name. I heard a cough from one of the Leinster maids waiting on us, followed by a flurry of activity from her colleagues.

"M-Ma'am?! O-Oh no! She overdosed on cuteness!"

"Medic! *Medic*!"

"Are you recording this to a video orb?"

"Naturally!"

I reflected, not for the first time, that the Leinster maids seemed to enjoy every day to the fullest.

Still, I haven't seen Anna this morning. I wonder if something's the matter.

In the midst of it all, two women remained utterly unperturbed.

"Lisa, once things settle down a bit more, how would you like to go shopping together?" my mom asked in her usual singsong. "The healers don't need my help anymore, and the shops seem to be slowly coming back to life."

"Yes, I'd like that." Lisa paused before adding, "Assuming you don't mind, Ellyn."

My mom let out a musical laugh. "I'd never mind doing anything with you."

There followed a belated "Thank you." To my astonishment, Duchess Lisa Leinster looked bashful.

My mom was a force to be reckoned with. And my dad, who sat calmly watching the pair, was no slouch either.

I shot a look at Caren, and she shrugged. We were evidently in agreement.

Someone reached over me to set a bowl at my place. The beautiful amber soup within stirred my appetite.

“This is a local vegetable soup!” Lily cheerily informed me, wiping Atra’s mouth with a handkerchief. “I made it myself!”

“You don’t say,” I replied, scooping a spoonful into my mouth. I couldn’t suppress an exclamation: “Delicious!”

“I’m so glad you like it! And what about you, Atra? Is it tasty?”

“Tashty,” the child answered haltingly. “Atra like Lily.”

Tina, Stella, Ellie, Lynne, and Caren reeled in shock, while Lily pressed her hands together in delight.

Glare at me if you like, Lydia, but I don’t see how this is my fault. I’m sure she’ll say all of your names eventu—

A little green bird alighted on my shoulder, derailing my train of thought.

“No, Atra,” I chided, restraining the curious child as I transferred the new arrival to my finger. It was a magical creature conjured by Lord Rodde, the elven headmaster of the Royal Academy, whose arcane prowess had earned him the name of “Archmage.” The bird’s eyes glowed, projecting its message into the air.

Oh, that’s a clever trick. I must copy it sometime.

“Mr. Allen?” Stella inquired tensely.

“What does the headmaster say, Allen?” Caren echoed a moment later. She sounded a bit on edge as well.

“‘The council of chieftains will reconvene today,’” I recited. “‘Drop everything —I insist that you attend. We can’t move forward without you. I also wish to discuss Duke Algren’s youngest son...and the great elementals.’”

“What are we waiting for, sir?!” Tina exclaimed.

“L-Let me come too,” Ellie stammered.

“Allow me to accompany you, dear brother!” cried Lynne.

“Mr. Allen, I will join you as well,” Stella announced clearly, once the eager volunteers had finished talking over each other. A cloud of glowing white mana scattered as she spoke.

“I appreciate the offer,” I responded, “but this council won’t be any fun. And you still aren’t fully recovered, remember.” I hated to overburden Stella while her health suffered from the unexplained increase in her mana.

“I feel perfectly well this morning, and I’ll be fine as long as I don’t cast any spells. And besides”—her voice sank to a whisper—“I want to be with you.”

I scratched my cheek.

“I’ll go too, of course,” Caren cut in matter-of-factly, raising a teacup to her lips. “We can’t trust the chieftains, and I expect some of them will try to make you a scapegoat like Toneri used to.”

“You shouldn’t say such things,” I wryly admonished her. “But thank you.”

I sent Lydia a hand signal. Her answer went without saying. The rest of the group, meanwhile, eyed our exchange in sulky vexation.

Atra prodded my cheek.

“You want to come too?” I asked. “But how long can you stay in this fo—”

To our general consternation, light enveloped the child’s body, and she shrank back into a fox cub. I supposed that she could only remain a person for a limited time.

Lily reached down and scooped up the tiny creature, laughing musically. “Come on, Atra! Let’s all go together!” she proposed. “Can we, mistress? The head maid asked me to look after this little dear when she left for the royal capital last night.”

“You may,” Lisa agreed, nodding magnanimously.

So, Anna is in the royal capital. She certainly left in a hurry.

“Mom, dad, I’ll stop by the Great Tree later. I don’t think there’s any more

fighting to be done," I reassured my parents, who had worry written on their faces.

Slowly, my mom said, "Allen—"

"Ellyn," my dad interrupted before she could finish, laying his large hand on her petite shoulder.

I released the little green bird into the air and smiled at the whole company. "Let's leave after breakfast. We can take a gondola to the Great Tree."

Just then, from out on the street, a voice cried, "Intruder! Restrain her!"

It was a maid shouting, and she sounded urgent. We exchanged looks, then Caren, Tina, Ellie, and Lynne immediately began weaving an array of positively warlike spells. Lydia and Stella stationed themselves on either side of me.

"I'll take a look!" Lily called, sunny as ever. She perched Atra on top of her head before bounding up onto the roof.

I ventured outside with the rest of the group. We emerged from the entryway to find the whole neighborhood crowding round a young woman in a cloak, whom the maids had pinned down in front of the house. Her black hair was tied behind her head, her skin was dark, and her eyes burned with anxious desperation.

"I remember you," Stella murmured.

"You were at the Algren mansion in the royal capital," Caren finished for her.

I signaled to Lily, who said, "Please release her."

"Yes, ma'am!" The maids leapt to obey their superior's order, unhanding the black-haired young woman.

"I thought I'd be seeing you soon, Konoha," I said. "I take it that you've come about Gil?"

This young woman—Konoha—was both bodyguard and maid to my old school friend, Lord Gil Algren. And although the blood had drained from her cheeks, she managed to reply, "I realize that I have no right to ask this of you. Nevertheless..." She reached out and clung to my legs. The girls tried to intervene, but Lydia stopped them with a glance.

“Please,” Konoha pleaded feebly, anguished tears streaming down her cheeks. “Please save my lord. Please save Lord Gil. He plans to shoulder the responsibility for everything himself! You’re the only one I can turn to now. Please. I beg of you!” She bowed so low that I feared her head would touch the ground.

“Please stop that. Tell me exactly what’s— Lily.”

“Lily,” Lydia said at the same moment.

“You got it!” the maid replied, picking up on our meaning. With a wide sweep of her right hand, she flung fire flowers behind Konoha—where they burned through an invisible thread.

“Wh-What on earth?” murmured the black-haired young woman. The rest of our group was equally nonplussed.

“A remote tracking spell devised by my former schoolmate, Teto Tijerina,” I explained. “It seems that Gil was keeping an eye on you.”

Konoha trembled, struck speechless.

Damn it, Gil. If you’re willing to show your hand like this, you really must be set on taking all the blame. A considerate *school friend wouldn’t have skipped visiting me in the hospital to work on a scheme like that.*

The crowd was growing, as was the commotion.

“Who’s ‘Gil’?”

“The youngest Algren boy.”

“An Algren, is he?”

“I hear he hurt Allen.”

“And she works for this guy?”

“What are they up to *now*?”

This didn’t look good. To the people of the eastern capital, the Algren name had become an object of loathing. Nevertheless, I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I got down on one knee, placed a hand on Konoha’s shoulder as she sat there,

racked with sobs, and said, “Very well. Let’s set off at once.”

The black-haired young woman stared at me in disbelief. “Truly?”

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were behind me, but I could still sense their shock.

“But Allen, what about the council of chieftains?!” Caren demanded.

“I’ll miss it,” I replied. That didn’t seem to satisfy my sister, so I winked and added, “Wouldn’t you do the same thing in my shoes? I wouldn’t want you to think less of your big brother.”

“I’d never think less of you, but...” Caren sighed. “Fine. Have it your way.”

“Thank you. Stella, I really hate to ask this of you when you’re not well, but...”

“Leave the council to me,” Stella replied, calm yet joyful. She was coming into her own at an incredible pace.

Tina’s and Lynne’s hands shot into the air.

“Sir! I’ll go with you!”

“As will I, dear brother!”

There was nothing wrong with being assertive in my book.

“And what do you want to do, Ellie?” I asked the worried-looking maid.

“W-Well, I...” Ellie glanced past me at Stella. Then, resolutely, she replied, “I’m concerned for Lady Stella, so I’d like to go to the Great Tree.”

“Very well, then. Stella doesn’t always know her limits, so I hope you’ll take good care of her.”

“Y-Yessir!”

“Mr. Allen, Ellie,” Stella fumed, put out by this accord between the maid and me.

A sharp clap drew all eyes to Lydia, who had yet to speak. “The only people going to snap our old schoolmate out of his funk are me, Allen, and this black-haired girl,” she announced. “The rest of you head to the Great Tree and fight for Allen’s rights with everything you’ve got.”

“What?!” Tina protested. “Lydia, this is tyranny!”

Lynne chimed in with a reproachful, “Dear sister!”

“No can do, my lady,” came Lily’s lilting objection. “Don’t forget, I’m your bodyguard.”

I delivered my verdict:

“Lily will come with us to see Gil.” In response to a vehement yelp, I added, “And so will Atra.”

Tina and Lynne chorused a reluctant “Yes, sir.”

Ellie, Caren, and Stella were firmer in their agreement.

“Y-Yessir!”

“All right.”

“Take care, Mr. Allen.”

Lydia shrugged and said, “That’s that, then. Tina, Ellie, Lynne, go see what adult society is like. I expect you to tell me all about it later.”

*

“Allen, you great, thundering numbskull!” Dag bellowed. “You come barging in first thing in the morning, and what do you say?! ‘Launch your gondola!’ Have some pity on an old man, why don’t you?!”

Despite his harsh words, the one-time deputy chieftain of the otter clan—gray-haired, gray-tailed, and clad in a navy jinbei—plied his oar with consummate skill. So, although he was still fuming that I had stayed behind to guard the rear during our retreat from New Town, his timeworn gondola slid swiftly along the waterway leading to the city outskirts. I found the voyage most refreshing.

“Are you listening, boy?!” he demanded.

I was seated by the gunwale, with Atra, who was leaning over the side and looking into the water, and Konoha, who was trying to make herself as small as possible. While casting a wind spell to prevent the fox cub from falling overboard, I turned and replied, “Dag, please leave it at that. I don’t want Atra learning any dirty words.”

“Ha! As if I’d let you off the hook that easily!” In a calmer tone, the old otter continued, “So, you’re off to meet Duke Algren’s boy? He’d better be worth skipping out on the council for, ’cause your future could well be on the line at this one.” He looked worried, but it gladdened my heart to know how much he cared for me.

“I know,” I replied. “When I was little, a gondolier who used to tell me old stories taught me to never betray a friend, even if my friends betray me. This is a choice between glory and friendship, and I like to think I’ve learned which matters more.”

Dag snorted. “Smart-aleck young pup. Listen, Allen.” He pulled his pipe from his jacket and thrust it at me. His voice shook and his eyes grew moist as he said, “Never...*Never* pull a stunt like that again, you hear me?! If you understand, speak up!”

Atra tumbled backward, startled by his roar. But she soon picked herself up, looking confused, and returned to Lydia, who was sitting under a parasol and dressed for swordplay. I watched the fox cub settle down on her lap while I prepared to answer Dag, but she beat me to the punch.

“Don’t worry. He’ll always have me with him.”

Don’t I get a say in this?

Dag blinked, then broke into a hearty guffaw. “If you say so, Scarlet Lass, then I can rest easy. Take good care of him, now.”

“I will.”

“You trust Lydia over me? Doesn’t our long acquaintance count for anything, Dag?” I demanded, glaring at the old otter. He had looked out for me for at least ten years and was practically family.

“Ha! Put your hand on your heart and think about why that is! But anyway...” Dag turned to stare at the water behind us with mingled admiration and disbelief. “That’s, well... I’ll be damned. How does she do it?”

“Oh, how should I put it?” I responded evasively, looking back as well.

Lily was hopping across the water’s surface, her black ribbon and scarlet

tresses fluttering behind her. She held a long, thin cloth bag. And a spell activated each time her feet touched the water—an improved Heavenly Wind Bound, which I had modified at her insistence. Of course, *I* could never have mastered the finicky bi-elemental magic so easily.

"Yoo-hoo! Alleeen!" she called, vigorously waving her left hand. "This spell is so much fun!"

"Well?" Her Highness demanded, her cold glare boring into my back—although I didn't see how this was my fault.

"Please don't overtax yourself!" I hollered back. "It's still experimental, after all!"

"Okay! Hup!" Heedless of my warning, the maid took a graceful leap off the water's surface and did a full twirl before landing beside the gondola. She was pulling ahead of us.

Dag put his pipe in his mouth, so dumbfounded that he was acting on instinct. "It's a big world," he muttered. "Still, why's she dressed like a schoolgirl from out east? I thought you said she was a maid."

Wearily, I replied, "It's complicated."

We were nearing the outskirts, and I had an old schoolmate in need of a good talking-to.

"Well, here we are," Dag announced, putting in at a little tree-shaded dock. Konoha got out first and secured the mooring rope.

"We truly appreciate it," I told Dag. Then I disembarked myself and held out my hand. "Lydia."

"Very good," Her Highness remarked as she took it and stepped onto the dock.

Dag roared with laughter. "Well, don't you two make a pretty couple!"

"Please don't tease us," I groaned—just as Lydia replied, "Naturally."

Lily, who had arrived ahead of us, shouted, "Me too, Allen! Do that with me!"

“No,” I replied.

“No, of course not,” Lydia added with greater emphasis.

“You’re both so hard on me,” Lily whined. “I suppose Atra is my only friend.”

The fox cub twitched her ears, apparently in protest.

“Thank you again, Dag,” I said in parting to the old otter.

“Don’t mention it!” he replied. “Count on me to row you home too. I’ll fish while I wait. This is one of the best spots in the ‘forest capital,’ although not many people know it.”

“Yes, a rascally old otter taught me that when I was younger.”

“Good!” Dag boomed with satisfaction, adjusting his straw hat and giving me a mighty thump on the back. “Now, go drag the little lordling out of his hidey-hole!”

“With pleasure!”

*

“So, this is it, then,” I muttered, signing my name—Gil Algren—and depositing the documents in an old carrying case of my dad’s, which I sealed securely with a spell. Only the professor, his other research students, and Anko would be capable of opening it. They and two alumni of the department, for whom I had the utmost respect. Once they read this, they would understand my position.

I had already finished setting the room in order. And the thread I’d stuck to Konoha had burned through, so it was high time I got going, I thought as I took my coat off the chair. I’d made it out of admiration for Allen, with advice from the department’s three other students in my year. It was my treasure, and although I no longer had any right to wear it...

“I should at least get to choose the clothes I die in,” I told myself, slipping into the coat.

Leaving the room, I walked down the long hallway and descended the stairs. The house was deserted, and so was the road outside. No one wanted to come anywhere near this place. A few old Algren servants had offered to remain, but I’d turned them down.

My house had no future, and I couldn't bring myself to drag loyal retainers down with it. Besides, someone would need to look after my comatose dad after I faced the music. Only one person had refused to leave no matter what: the black-haired ex-slave girl.

"And even that ends today," I said to myself as I entered the cavernous vestibule.

Then I realized something was wrong—the whole grounds were enclosed in a massive barrier of fire!

"It can't be," I muttered. "Who could cast this so silently?"

"It's a tactical fire-flower barrier. I drew the underlying formula."

My eyes widened as a young sorcerer strolled out of the rear first-floor hallway. He carried a rod in his left hand, and the look on his face was as serene and unfathomable as ever.

I couldn't stop myself trembling as I murmured, "Allen."

There, cool as a cucumber, stood the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, Lydia Leinster's one and only partner and the kingdom's finest sorcerer. "Hi, Gil," he said, as casually as if we'd just seen each other yesterday. "I got hospitalized twice while I was in town, and you never came to see me. Since when have you been so heartless?"

I was shaken to my core. As much as I admired and respected Allen, I had struck him down on the battlefield. So, gritting my teeth, I did my best to keep calm and said, "Weren't you called to the council?"

I'd known that Konoha would try to save me, but this was a crucial day for Allen. The beastfolk needed to reach a consensus before the dukes and royals arrived, and how to treat him was the biggest issue on the table. He was needed in the Great Tree.

"Yes," he answered offhandedly, "but I stood them up."

For a moment, I was speechless. Then, "What?! Are you out of your mind?! They're meeting to work out what to report to the crown! Your whole future is riding on this!" I ranted, although I wasn't telling him anything that he didn't

already know. “Get back to the Great Tree *now*!”

“No thanks,” he said flatly. His gaze seemed to pierce right through me. “After all, I care far more about getting my old school friend back on his feet than about some boring old council.”

I was stunned, but I could tell that he meant every word. Arguing would get me nowhere. And while the wall of fire flowers was an unknown, I could probably break through it if I really tried. I steeled myself and was just about to make a break for the front entrance—when the door opened.

“Leaving without so much as a word to your old upperclassmen? Perhaps you need reeducation,” the department’s undisputed overlord pronounced in glacial tones as she entered, flanked by Konoha and a scarlet-haired woman holding a fox cub. Although she’d cut her own scarlet hair short, she wore her familiar swordswoman’s garb with a dagger at her hip.

Her mana had plummeted—she had even less than Allen. But I still retreated a few steps in terror as I stammered, “L-Lydia.” It didn’t matter how much mana she’d lost—as long as Allen was with her, she was unbeatable.

I gave up on fighting and pleaded, “Try to talk some sense into our savior here! He’s too selfless for his own good, and he’s making the wrong call! Don’t you want to see him come up in the world too?!”

As far as I was concerned, Allen was the best sorcerer the kingdom had to offer. So what if he didn’t have much mana? That didn’t matter! The only thing he lacked was status. If he could only get a title...

Lydia rubbed her forehead and sighed. “You really are an idiot,” she said. When she lowered her hand, her gaze was furious and intensely sulky. “You ought to know I can’t change his mind once he’s set it on something. He *always* gets in over his head! Just look at when we fought the black dragon or went up against that four-winged devil and pure-blooded vampire or slew the Stinging Sea! When he sees someone in trouble, he reaches out to help them! Glory? Status? Rewards? You have no idea how much easier my life would be if any of those were enough to tempt him. Do you *want* me to slice you up?”

Allen cracked a rueful grin.

“What do you want from me?” I asked quietly.

His eyes remained irritatingly placid as ever.

“My stupid dad, Haag, Haig, and Zaur ran around scheming behind my back, then turned around and told me, ‘Live and do your duty as an Algren’!” I exploded. “So I will! I’ll make a clean breast of everything in the royal capital and take the blame for all of it! Just forget about me. I’ll only tarnish your glorious—”

Allen sank down, closed the distance between us in an instant, and lashed out with a devastating kick. I just barely managed to get my guard up, but it still knocked me back.

“Oh, you blocked that?” he said. “I’m impressed.”

I glared at him. “What’s the big idea?”

“What do you think? I’m challenging you to a rematch. I mean, you know I wasn’t exactly in tip-top shape last time.”

My head swam. A rematch? What was he talking about?

“Now’s really not the time for—”

“Gil Algren.” Allen’s soft tone brought me up short and made me stand up straighter in spite of myself. Dispassionately, he continued, “I’m sorry to say that there are no charges against you, and appealing to the royal capital won’t change that.”

I was even more flummoxed. What did he mean, no charges?

“Ha!” I barked, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “That’s rich, coming from my victim himself. I...I fought you, and...”

“Gil, that was a sparring match.”

I goggled at him, unable to believe my own ears. At last, I managed a hoarse “What?” I could feel anger kindling in my chest.

“What else would it have been?” Allen asked, spreading his arms in a theatrical gesture. “We went to university together, and you didn’t hurt anyone but me. When questioned, I intend to say, ‘We were only sparring, and I won’t

let anyone claim otherwise. Why else would I still be alive?' Far from facing prosecution, I'd say you deserve to be commended for your achievements."

As I digested his words, it dawned on me. Sure enough, I had only fought Allen, Grant, Gregory, and the Black Knight.

"Do you really mean that?" I asked slowly, more irritated than I'd felt since I'd faced him in my departmental entrance exam.

"Would I joke about something like this?"

All at once, the rage in my heart exploded. I stamped and screamed, "I've had it with your bullshit!"

Electricity arced through the foyer, cracking walls and windowpanes. Yet Allen looked content. "I see you're finally getting into the spirit of things," he remarked. "Lily!"

"You got it!" the long-haired woman chirped and tossed her sack at me.

As soon as I caught it, the thing inside responded to my mana, disintegrating the cloth in a burst of lightning. My eyes widened as I murmured, "Th-This is..."

The enchanted halberd Deep Violet, my house's greatest treasure.

"You can have that back," the Brain of the Lady of the Sword said, with a cocksure grin. "So, show me what Gil Algren is really made of. If you win, I'll let you have your way. But if *I* win..."

Oh, right. He's always, always *been like this. Once you get mixed up with him, there's no backing out.*

"I insist that you remain my old school friend, no matter how hard you find the going! And I'm sorry, but I didn't come here to lose!"

*

"Each of the Four Great Ducal Houses is heir to its own supreme spell and secret art," Gil recited. My taunts had silenced him for a moment, but then he had tightened his grip on Deep Violet.

There. That's the look I was hoping to see.

"Firebird, Blizzard Wolf, Gale Dragon, and Lightning Lord Tiger. The Scarlet

Sword, the Azure Fists, the Emerald Spear, and the Violet Axe."

Crackling sparks flew as he twirled his halberd. I couldn't help but admire his mana.

"But the world's a big place, and that's not enough to beat everything in it. The ducal houses are the sword and shield of the kingdom. We're not allowed to lose."

Gil swung his halberd in a wide arc, and the supreme spell Lightning Lord Tiger materialized with a roar of thunder. I fondly recalled that some called him "the second coming of the first Duke Algren," and with good reason—my former schoolmate was a prodigy. Then my eyes met Lydia's and saw the jealousy in them.

I really must pin down the cause of her mana depletion.

"So," Gil continued, "we keep an ace up our sleeves."

He raised his halberd high, and it drew in Lightning Lord Tiger, blazing with light as it absorbed the spell. A flurry of lightning bolts smashed furnishings and took chunks out of the mansion itself. But Gil took no notice.

"This is the Algrens' *other* secret art!" he roared. "The Annihilating Axe! Now, come on, Brain of the Lady of the Sword! See if you can stop this strike!"

Gil gripped Deep Violet—now living up to its name—in both hands and swung it in a merciless horizontal sweep! Eight pillars of lightning surged toward me, dominating the battlefield as they came.

Very much like the pillars Atra fired at me, I mused, thrusting out my enchanted rod Silver Bloom to intercept. It struck the lightning, setting off a fierce shock wave and a blinding flash. However...

Gil let out a strangled cry of astonishment as my rod rapidly dispersed his bolts. As I'd thought, they really were akin to Atra's.

Still, I can't believe what that witchy busybody sent me off with. This rod barely has any mana left, but it still resists and amplifies spells as well as ever!

With it in hand, I was able to disrupt spell formulae far faster than normal. Even Gil's encrypted family arcanum had posed shockingly little difficulty.

“That certainly packed a punch,” I opined, concealing my elation and readying my rod for another strike. “I can see why you’d call it the ace up your sleeve. That said...”

I darted into range, forcing Gil to retreat before my blow.

“It lacks polish,” I concluded, giving my rod a twirl. “I’d guess your house gleaned knowledge from ruins in the Four Heroes Sea and tried to parlay it into a new technique, but they didn’t quite finish. The completed spell”—I conjured eight pillars of lightning and instantly slammed them together beside Gil, leaving great rents in the floor that exposed the building’s foundation—“might look something like this.”

“You’ve already recreated it?” Gil asked hoarsely, although he had resumed his usual tone. “It was too much for me.”

“Yes, although you can guess how much damage mine deals,” I replied. “Gil, I told you to show me what you’re made of. Come at me with that spell—the one you beat me with.”

The nobleman blinked. “I’m no match for you,” he groaned tiredly. “You’ve been a terror as long as I’ve known you.”

“How rude! Is that any way to talk to the only person in our department with a right to call himself ‘normal’?” I retorted, setting my former underclassman straight while I deployed a spell I’d been working on.

Lily, who was standing in front of Lydia and Konoha with a protective wall of fire flowers, raised her hand and called, “Excuse me, Allen, but I don’t think normal people can block secret arts!”

“Lily, I don’t think that normal maids dress like you do,” I countered, and my blow struck home.

“H-How could you say that?! Oh, you monster!”

Good grief, I thought as Lily pretended to sob. *Now, will this spell work out?*

Wordlessly, Gil raised Deep Violet high above his head. Eight halberd-shaped advanced lightning spells deployed around it simultaneously. This was Fulgurous Lightning Axe, a new spell that I had delivered to Gil before the start

of summer break. And although a supreme spell was technically more powerful...

“This is clearly a cut above that secret art of yours,” I said.

“Get ready,” Gil warned me. “This is my—Gil Algren’s—best shot!”

“I’m ready for it!”



The enchanted halberd swept down, and eight advanced lightning spells

launched toward me. In the face of this furious onslaught, I struck the floor with my rod and...

“That spell!” Gil exclaimed in alarm.

Blazing flower petals came together, overlapping to form a shield, and the crackling halberds shattered against it. I had weathered the storm.

Gil grunted and bellowed, “There’s more where that came from! You haven’t beaten me!”

He gripped Deep Violet in both hands and dashed forward, slamming the weapon into my shield with all his might. A searing flash shook the mansion, smashing windowpanes, walls, and floors beyond hope of repair.

When the last sparks of electricity finally vanished, Gil stuck his halberd in the floor and fell to one knee, his mana exhausted. “So, I couldn’t measure up,” he panted. “That figures.”

“Not quite,” I replied, holding up my slightly singed left sleeve. Gil *had* breached my barrier. “I suppose you’ll surpass me any day now. I might not be able to beat you without this rod anymore.”

“Was that supposed to be funny? You win, so I’m yours. Do your worst.”

“Yes, I mean to,” I informed him, with an emphatic nod. Then I looked to Lydia for confirmation. The noblewoman’s lips moved silently: “Have it your way.”

“Allen,” Gil sobbed, “I’m really...really— Ow!”

I cut his moping short with a mana-imbued finger flick to his forehead. He doubled over, on the verge of tears.

“If you apologize,” I informed my former schoolmate, “you’re in for the dressing-down of your life. You did your best. What else is there to say except ‘Well done’? Even if everyone else in the kingdom blamed you, Gil Algren, I’d still be on your side.”

Gil said nothing, but his back shook. Then his sobs echoed through the mansion. After a while of that, he finally looked up, eyes red with weeping. “Allen,” he said, bowing low, “Gil Algren hereby swears undying loyalty to—”

“Stop making a fool of yourself and stand up,” I interrupted.

Once I'd helped Gil to his feet and he was silent again, I touched my fist to his chest and said, "I helped you because I wanted to. And I think you really do have a rocky road ahead of you. It takes a long time to build back trust once you've lost it. If it gets to be too much for you again, don't be a stranger. This may come as a surprise, but my parents raised me well. I'd never turn my back on a friend."

The dam holding back Gil's emotions burst. "Alleeen!" he wailed, breaking down in tears like a child.

Now, that only leaves...

I heard the front door open as a black-haired young woman fled.

"Lily," Lydia commanded.

"You got it!" The maid vanished, and in the blink of an eye, she was back with Konoha tucked under one arm.

"Let go!" the young woman cried, struggling fiercely. "Please! Let go of me!"

"Nope!" Lily replied, chuckling. She walked up to me and deposited Konoha beside Gil.

"Excellent work, Lily," I said, immediately casting a botanical spell and binding the young woman's legs with vines to prevent another escape attempt.

"What do you expect?" she crowed, with a smug laugh. "I *am* a maid. And I'll take that fire-flower shield as a reward."

"I'll teach it to you later."

I'd devised that spell for Lily's use in any case. And if I could get my hands on that dagger imbued with Radiant Shield that Gil had wielded, I might be able to make further refinements.

As we watched, nobleman and servant faced each other, both equally flustered.

"K-Konoha..."

"L-Lord Gil..."

There were no hard feelings between them—they simply took life far too

seriously.

Lydia took custody of my left arm. “You just thought that *they* take life too seriously, didn’t you?” she demanded sulkily. “Now there’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

“I don’t think I agree with that,” I ventured.

“No back talk!”

She must have felt lonely at being left out.

“Gil,” I cautioned, stowing my rod in empty space, “the first thing you need to do is eat properly, get plenty of rest, and have some nice long talks with Konoha. All the hard parts can wait. Konoha, please take good care of my friend.”

Hesitantly, Gil murmured, “You’re the boss,” while Konoha responded, “I will. Thank you...Thank you so much.”

That settled that. I released Konoha and accepted Atra from Lily. All that remained was to go home and listen to Stella and the girls’ account of—

“But even if Allen forgives you,” Lydia mused, “*they’re* going to demand an explanation. That’s one pinch I can’t see you getting out of.”

Silence fell. “They” were the rest of the department, who were still in the royal capital. And they had completely slipped my mind.

“A-A-Allen!” Gil wailed, clinging to my legs. “Please! You’ve got to save me! Yen is one thing, but a beatdown from T-Teto and her posse is no joke! I’ll die! I’ll honest-to-god die!”

I knew only one response for such occasions. I looked sorrowfully at my friend and said gravely, “Gil, I’ll always remember you.”

My former schoolmate’s anguished cry resounded through the mansion:

“What happened to that support you *just* got done promising me?!”

*

“Hm? Hmm? Hmmmm?”

“I beg your pardon, but, um, wh-who might you be?” I asked the strange elven woman. She had met me at the door of my parents’ house after I’d left Gil and Konoha, and she had immediately begun pawing at my cheeks. Her shoulder-length jade hair gleamed in the light, and her figure was so flawless that it hardly seemed real. Her light pale-green garments were unlike anything I could recall seeing in the royal capital, let alone the eastern one.

Lydia wasn’t with me. She had met up with the girls on our way home, and they had all set out on a shopping trip, taking Atra with them.

I was still wondering what to do when a scarlet-haired beauty emerged from the house wearing an apron just like my mom’s. “Letty, Allen doesn’t know what to make of you,” Lisa chided the elf, exasperated. “You could at least introduce yourself.”

“Hm? Oh! Right you are!” The woman unhanded me, straightened herself up, and said, “I am Leticia Lebufera. Some know me as the Emerald Gale, but you may call me Letty.”

I froze, stunned. I had heard that the Shooting Star Brigade had joined the battle, and Caren had told me about her encounters with them, but they had hurried on to the eastern border before I’d had a chance to meet any of them.

“What troubles you?” asked Duchess Emerita Letty, breaking into a grin. “Do I come as so great a shock?”

“Oh, y-yes,” I stammered. “Forgive me. I...I’m Allen. I’ve read so much about your exploits, starting with picture books when I was little, that this hardly feels real. M-May I...”

“Yes?”

“M-May I shake your hand?” I asked timidly.

“C-Certainly, if you like.”

“Thank you so much!” I cried, gripping her proffered hand for only a moment. My heart was racing, and I couldn’t suppress my excitement. How was I supposed to remain calm when I had just *touched* one of my heroes? Her hair

was shorter than it had been in the picture books, but she was still the legendary Emerald Gale—or the Comet, as she had been known during the War of the Dark Lord!

Caren poked her head out from inside, wearing an apron and accompanied by the sweet aroma of baking cake. “Allen?” she said. “What’s come over y—”

“O Caren, your brother is a man to be proud of!” Duchess Letty interrupted, beaming at her.

“Keep your voice down,” Caren admonished. “And that goes without saying. I mean, he is *my* brother.”

“Well spoken!” Duchess Letty let out a peal of laughter, then turned back to me and said, “I haven’t called on you sooner because I’ve been on the eastern border with the rest of the brigade. Yet now, since both northern marquesses have arrayed their forces, I was able to return a day ahead of my comrades. Might I have a word, O Allen of the wolf clan?”

In the kitchen, an aproned Stella and several Leinster maids were gazing into the oven. Lisa and Duchess Letty proceeded past them to the courtyard. My parents, it seemed, had gone out to hunt for watch parts as soon as Caren and Stella had returned.

“Do you think it will come out well?” Stella asked, torn between anxiety and anticipation. She didn’t seem to have noticed me.

The maids were quick to reassure her.

“Have no fear, your ladyship!”

“Mr. Allen is sure to love it!”

“Oh, that somber expression in profile is simply divine.”

“I pledged my loyalty to Ladies Lydia and Lynne. And yet...”

Evidently, our saint was winning converts even in the Leinster household. And the ranking maids had yet to return from the border.

“How was the council?” I asked Caren.

“They adjourned in no time,” she replied. “What else could they do without today’s guest of honor? They said they’ll reconvene once Dukes Howard and Lebufera arrive in the city.”

“Duke Liam can’t make it, then?” I asked slowly.

“No, he can’t. And his forces will be returning to the southern capital.”

Given that hostilities with the League of Principalities were still ongoing, I was hardly surprised to learn that the main Leinster forces would not be marching east. Still, was it wise to leave the royal capital without a duke to watch over it? Although old Duke Guido Algren’s plan had dealt a blow to the conservative nobility, many had simply sat out the rebellion. What would they do in the absence of a firm hand on the royal capital?

Her Highness looked up from the oven and spotted Caren. “Come look!” she exclaimed excitedly. “It rose! Now I’m certain that Mr. Allen will—”

“It’s good to see you again, Stella,” I said.

Stella blushed bright red. “M-M-Mr. Allen?! H-How long have you been... Oh...” She let her words trail off and her gaze fall as she approached me and plucked at my right sleeve.

The maids seemed beside themselves.

“Oh, god...”

“Lady Lydia, Lady Lynne, please forgive my treachery.”

“My heart...My heart can’t take it.”

“Should we form a faction for our saint?”

“We must!”

Caren hugged my left arm. “His right is still free, you know, Stella?” she advised her best friend.

“C-Caren?! B-But I... W-Well... B-By your leave!” Our resident saint bashfully seized my right arm, giggling as her pale mana pulsed with joy. She remained in that position while she reported to me, “I informed the headmaster and the chieftains why you felt the need to visit an Algren house. No one objected.”

“Thank you,” I responded. “Shall we move to the courtyard?”

“Yes, let’s!” Stella and Caren chorused. So, I made my way along the hall with my sister clinging to one arm and the noblewoman, to the other.

Under the tent, Lisa and Duchess Letty were sipping tea from porcelain cups. Waiting on them were several tense maids and one unfazed Lily.

“A beauty on each arm, O Allen!” cried the living legend.

“I wish you would save that for *my* daughters,” the duchess added with an exaggerated show of dejection.

Lily drew out chairs for us as we descended into the courtyard. Caren, Stella, and I thanked her before sitting down.

“Don’t mention it!” she chirped in answer.

Once we were all in our seats, Duchess Letty bowed deeply and said, “First, I owe you gratitude. Many thanks for granting us the opportunity to fulfill our pledge to our late commander, Shooting Star.” The living legend raised her head and gave us a fleeting smile, heedless of our astonishment. “To be frank, I had given up hope. Two centuries have passed since the War of the Dark Lord. Many of my comrades in arms are gone, and we who remain are not immortal. I no longer believed that I would be able to keep my word in this life. O Allen, you have quite a sister. Know you that she fought her way from the eastern to the western capital alone? The western houses will tell of her for many years to come.”

“I know,” I replied, nodding in complete agreement. “She’s the best sister in the whole wide world.”

“A-Allen, you’re embarrassing me. J-Jeez,” Caren grumbled. Her ears and tail were wiggling happily.

“Is that all you came to say, Letty?” Lisa asked.

“Naturally not! That was but preamble. O Allen.”

“Yes?”

The elven champion fixed me with an earnest stare. “We have not yet fulfilled our pledge,” she said, in a graver tone. “Have you heard the wish of the

beastfolk?”

“Didn’t they ask you to liberate the eastern—”

“Nay!” Duchess Letty slammed her fist down on the table.

I turned to Caren and Stella and found them looking deliberately unconcerned. That didn’t bode well.

The living legend known as the Emerald Gale, a lieutenant of the wolf-clan champion Shooting Star, looked me straight in the eye and spoke the truth: “The beastfolk wished, O Allen, for *your* rescue. Yet not only did you escape captivity unaided, you saved the city into the bargain. The western chieftains are in a tizzy. Expect them to demand a substitute wish upon their return. Not that I won’t do likewise.”

I let out a gasp of astonishment, then turned a questioning gaze on my sister.

Wh-What is the meaning of this?! Don’t tell me that I was kept from seeing anyone or from learning too much because...

“How do *you* like being surprised?” Caren asked, with a mischievous grin.

“You’re the only one who didn’t know,” Stella added, looking equally sinister. “Lydia and Tina proposed the secrecy.”

I stared heavenward in silence. This was the problem with geniuses!

Just then, I heard girls’ voices from the entryway, raised in a friendly argument.

“Show some propriety, Lydia! You’re far too clingy with Mr. Allen!”

“Oh? So, you think clinging to him is improper, then, Tiny? Really, now. Well, all right—I’ll be sure to let him know.”

“I...I said no such thing!”

“Dear sister, *I* don’t consider it improper in the least.”

“L-Lynne!”

I heard running footsteps in the hallway, followed by a frantic cry from Ellie: “Oh, Atra! W-Wait for meee!” Evidently, Atra had resumed her beastfolk form.

I straightened in my seat and returned my attention to Duchess Letty. “I understand your dilemma,” I said. “As for the wish... Please permit me to think on it.”

Chapter 4

"So, what exactly is your scheme, Marchese Carlyle Carnien?" I demanded.

"You wound me," Carlyle replied. "I wish only for the growth of the league, Donna Roa Rondoiro."

"Have you no shame? Or do you imagine I don't know you've been obstructing peace talks behind the scenes?" I glared at the handsome man, who sat elegantly sipping his coffee. His dirty-blond hair was tinged with aqua at the tips, and he wore a formal blue suit.

We were in The Cat Parting the Seas, one of the city of water's most time-honored cafés. Near to the great assembly hall and overlooking the harbor, it stood in the heart of the League of Principalities. We were the only customers, although the elderly owner was behind the bar, polishing glasses.

Many-masted sailing ships and cutting-edge paddle wheel vessels powered by magic streamed in and out of the vast harbor—just what natives and foreigners alike pictured when they thought of daily life in the city of water. But as the future marchesa of Rondoiro, one of the six southern principalities, I knew better. In the past month and a half since the outbreak of war, our fortunes on the northern front had only gone from bad to worse.

Even the newspaper Carlyle was perusing offered no hopeful headlines.

"Fierce fighting continues on the northern front. Atlas, Bazel categorically reject truce with the kingdom."

"Committee of Thirteen locked in debate. Northern and southern marchesi divided. Doge expresses concern."

"Wheat prices in the city of water hit new record high. Northern principalities address assembly, request increased assistance."

I cast a sound-dampening spell while toying with my palest-orange bangs. Then I addressed my former upperclassman. "I took a risk coming here, so please be honest with me. My grandmother doesn't think much of what you and Marchese Folonto are up to. If you continue down this path, it really may

cost you your life."

The Committee of Thirteen consisted of the five northern marchesi, the six southern marchesi, and a doge and deputy chosen from the city of water. It was the league's supreme decision-making body, and at the moment, it couldn't make up its mind. Marchesi Atlas and Bazel had launched this war against the Leinsters in the name of reclaiming the lost principalities of Etna and Zana, and they remained the hardest of the hard-liners, even as the military situation worsened. Yet disputes over grain prices in their lands were also creating a rift between them. The other northern marchesi seemed demoralized—devastating griffin strikes had taken the fight out of them.

The six southern marchesi were no more united. The leaders of the four southernmost principalities—including my grandmother, Marchesa Regina Rondoiro, "the Impaler"—favored a swift peace. However, the Principalities of Carnien and Folonto, which bordered the city of water, supported the war.

Public opinion in the city remained undecided as well, doubtless because its residents had yet to feel the full effects of the conflict in their own lives. Doge Pisani and Deputy Nitti held their peace and maintained neutrality.

Carlyle folded his newspaper and looked at me with his deep-brown eyes, which had once been fixed on me alone. "Quite a frightening prospect. But she will do no such thing," the young marchese replied. Then he set down his cup and continued in quite a different tone, "Marchesa Rondoiro is a shrewd woman. She knows that four southern principalities will follow her lead. But what then? She might seize my lands and Folonto, but that wouldn't resolve this crisis. Exhausting our fresh troops would eliminate any hope we have of defying the Bloodred Witch, and she would never commit such a blunder."

Duchess Emerita Lindsey Leinster was the most abominably dreadful sorceress living. She had spread a pall of fear across battlefields in the Second and Third Southern Wars, and she had returned to terrorize the northern front a third time in this current campaign.

"Besides which, the marchesa retains enough good sense to avoid dragging women and children into the fires of war. She would therefore never declare open war on me—certainly not before commanding you to take my head, at

least. So, when can I expect your lethal visit? Not tonight, I hope. I have important guests to entertain."

"I already know that uncanny adherents of the Church of the Holy Spirit frequent your house," I replied stiffly. "And that a growing number of people are devoting themselves to someone calling herself the Saint, both here and abroad. I take it the two are related. Have you taken leave of your senses?! The Leinsters alone are too much for us."

"Really," said Carlyle, "I expected more from the woman hailed as a once-in-a-century prodigy at the Academy of Magic."

"There's always someone better," I said, recalling the princess who had first made me feel defeated—and with whose nation we were currently at war. "Although I suppose a dropout like you wouldn't know that."

"I merely hate to waste an opportunity."

"Will you still be saying that if prolonging this war costs us our country?" I growled, my anger releasing a surge of mana that lifted my bangs and shook the table.

A number of Rondoiro agents marched with the northern armies under assumed names, and their reports revealed that our military situation was hopeless, to put it mildly. Retaking Etna and Zana was a pipe dream, while Atlas and Bazel were as good as lost. Even if we managed to avoid ceding them entirely, they would be brought into the kingdom's economic sphere of influence and eventually absorbed.

Carlyle gazed out the window at the harbor. His profile looked...lonely. "Don't mistake me," he said. "I don't want to see the league destroyed any more than you do."

"Then—"

"That said," he continued over my objection, "if we maintain the status quo, then our nation still won't be long for this world. The kingdom is simply too powerful." The man with whom I had once walked side by side resumed the face of the sagacious Marchese Carnien.

I was at a loss for a retort. When had our paths diverged so?

The marchese donned his hat, which had been resting on an empty chair, and stood up. “The league must change,” he said, “and an existential external threat is necessary to make that happen. Once it does, I can finally speak of— But let us leave it at that, Donna Rondoiro.”

This pose doesn’t suit him in the least.

“And how is your lovely wife?” I asked indifferently. “I hear that she has been bedridden for some time.”

“Excuse me, but I take no interest in her. It was merely a political marriage, and I’ve secured my position in the family. I no longer need her to make me ‘Marchese Carnien.’ No doubt I will receive word if she dies.”

Carlyle had gained his title by wedding an innocent and unworldly young woman. After a moment of disappointment, I said, “Cad.”

“You only just noticed? Now, if you’ll excuse me.” The marchese paid for both of us and left the café.

I dispelled my sound-dampening ward and stood with a sigh. I would need to report to my grandmother at once.

A tall woman entered. She was breathtakingly beautiful—and not human, or so it seemed to me. Her tarnished-silver hair cascaded to her waist like freshly drawn blood, and her silver eyes seemed to suck me in. Her clothes—white with black trim—were cut for swordplay, although she was unarmed. She sat at the counter and began reading an old book. When I passed behind her, the crescent-moon earring she wore flashed with dazzling light.

*

“Let’s see... Grain prices in Bazel are shifting as planned. Emma, are there any issues with the aid we’re providing to refugees from Atlas?” asked Miss Felicia Fosse, leafing through documents. The bespectacled young lady looked charming in a maid uniform. Her pale-chestnut bangs were tied up out of her eyes, and her headband was crowned not with white lace, but with beast ears. The mere sight of her eased my fatigue.

This was another typical day at high command, occupying the Ducal House of Leinster’s council hall in the southern capital, and that meant a constant stream

of supply and intelligence officers from every house under the sun. Miss Fosse and I—Emma, the Leinster Maid Corps's number four—had been overseeing logistics here since the outbreak of war, although several of my fellow Allen & Co. maids had since been recalled to the royal capital.

"None, Miss Fosse!" I replied, darting behind her chair to massage her shoulders. "My, how stiff you are! I suppose your bosom must be to blame."

Miss Fosse squealed and twisted away from me. "St-Stop that, Emma!" she protested, cowering. "It t-tickles!"

Ah, that gets my blood pumping, I reflected, chuckling to myself.

The young lady sitting beside Miss Fosse paused in the middle of the note she was writing and said, "Felicia, I can't help but feel that you're rather overdoing it with the beast-eared maid getup." Earl Sykes's daughter, Lady Sasha, also wore a maid uniform with her pale-scarlet bangs up, and I couldn't help envying her dainty figure.

"Th-The uniform makes it easy to change clothes," Miss Fosse countered, avoiding her companion's gaze. "A-And I'm only wearing the beast ears because...e-everyone said I should! Th-That's all there is to it."

"Oh, is that so?" Lady Sasha, the other maids, and I asked in unison. "You mean Mr. Allen's tastes have nothing to do with it?"

"W-Well, you see, um..." Miss Fosse flung her face down on her desk and groaned in embarrassment.

"That's quite enough, everyone," interjected a petite, though buxom, maid with ear-length blonde hair, spectacles, and a deadpan expression—the Howard Maid Corps's number four, Sally Walker. Placing a glass of ice water on the desk, she added, "Miss Fosse, may I suggest you take a breather?"

"All right, Sally," Miss Fosse reluctantly replied. "Thank you."

"Such is a maid's duty...although Emma seems inclined to prioritize her personal interests."

"What?! P-Perish the thought!" I exclaimed. "And you're one to talk, Sally! You—"

“Cool and delicious,” Miss Fosse declared, bringing the glass to her lips. That one, simple remark blew away the tension that had been building between Sally and me.

In this war with the League of Principalities to the south, our allies maintained the indisputable upper hand. The Principalities of Atlas and Bazel, which bordered the Under-duchy of Leinster, had lost the bulk of their forces over the course of several battles. Their remaining troops had barricaded themselves in their capital cities, while both marchesi had fled to the city of water. Miss Fosse’s plans to economically isolate and divide our foes were steadily bearing fruit. And yet...

“Sasha, Sally, has public opinion shifted in the city of water?” Miss Fosse asked, setting down her glass.

The pair responsible for intercepting magical transmissions and decrypting messages looked grim.

“Not particularly,” Lady Sasha replied softly, shaking her head. “They seem to be locked in endless deliberations.”

“Their leadership is disunited, split into hawks, doves, and fence-sitters. That said...” Sally hesitated and let her words trail off.

“A growing number of transmissions are encrypted with that eastern cipher,” Lady Sasha explained. “And it’s updated frequently. So, as much as I hate to admit this, I doubt that I’ll be able to break it anytime soon. These are the only words I’ve managed to decipher.” She quickly jotted something on a sheet of notepaper and held it out to us.

Apostle.

Cornerstone.

We all looked perplexed. The Church of the Holy Spirit was clearly involved, but that was all we could tell.

Miss Fosse removed her spectacles, lowered her gaze, and murmured, “Allen would know what that meant.”

We fell silent, unable to comfort her. The eastern capital was back in friendly

hands, and Lady Sasha's fiancé, Lord Richard Leinster, was safe and sound. Concerning Mr. Allen's safety, however, we had yet to receive any word.

"Miss Fosse," I said, bending down and taking her hand.

"Please rest," Sally added, following suit.

Lady Sasha joined in as well, murmuring, "I don't know what we'd do if your health gave out."

But Miss Fosse replaced her spectacles. "Don't worry about me," she said courageously. "Now, let's get back to—"

The doors of the council hall crashed open. Sida—a maid in training with her lustrous brown hair in pigtails and the emblem of the Great Moon's cult on her necklace—rushed in and stared around, panting. Once she had caught her breath, she held up a bundle of letters and shouted:

"Fr-From the eastern capital, for M-Miss Fosse!"

While a stir ran through the hall, Miss Fosse rushed to the entrance, and we hurried after her.

"H-Here you are, miss!" Sida proclaimed, holding out three envelopes.

"Thank you," Miss Fosse replied breathlessly. "One from Stella, one from Caren, and one from"—she clutched the envelopes to her chest for a long moment—"Allen."

Her tears of joy infected Sally, Lady Sasha, and me as we cheered for her.

"Congratulations, miss!"

"Felicia!"

"Oh, Miss Fosse!"

The other maids of the Society for Covertly Smoothing the Way for Miss Fosse's Romance were equally moved.

A moment later, Miss Fosse collapsed to the floor and began sobbing like a child. "Thank goodness!" she wailed. "Oh, thank goodness! I'm so, so glad! Allen, Allen, Allen!" Once unleashed, the tears that she had been bottling up were unstoppable. She went on weeping for some time, and there was not a

dry eye among us.

“Do you feel calmer now?” I asked at length. “No one will blame you if you want to keep crying a little longer.”

“I’m impressed that you held it in so long. You’re a most admirable young lady,” Sally added. The two of us had maneuvered Miss Fosse onto a sofa to comfort her.

Sida was clutching her pendant and wondering, “O Great Moon, sh-should I do that too?”

“I...I’m fine now,” Miss Fosse replied, turning recalcitrant now that she was back in control of herself. “Wh-Whatever you do, don’t let Allen find out that I cried.”

“But miss!” we all whined in unison.

“Don’t ‘but miss’ me! You have to promise me you won’t tell him!”

Pouting, Miss Fosse unsealed Mr. Allen’s letter and ran her eyes over it. She was tearing up again right in front of me. Then she removed her spectacles, dried her tears on her sleeves, and summarized the message as calmly as she could manage.

“He writes that he’s hospitalized in the eastern capital, and that he’ll come here once things calm down. The rest was just him being a worrywart about me and...” Tears spilled from her eyes, smudging the letter. “He says thank you. I...I couldn’t save anyone. I was no help at all, but he thanks me. *Me!*”



I immediately dropped to one knee and exclaimed, “Don’t sell yourself short,

miss!”

“Mr. Allen appreciates all you’ve done as much as we do!” Sally added, kneeling beside me.

“Emma, Sally,” Miss Fosse sobbed, “thank you.”

“Miss Fosse!” we both cried as the three of us joined in a group hug.

Lady Sasha wailed, “I...I’m too late!” while Sida grumbled, “I w-wanted to join in.” Everyone seemed so much brighter.

To think that a single letter could change our moods so much. Mr. Allen, you truly are a gentleman worthy of Miss Fosse!

Footsteps heralded more new arrivals.

“My word,” a man’s voice said. “What seems to be the matter, Felicia?”

“Oh me, oh my!” a woman’s voice exclaimed, followed by musical laughter. “How simply charming. Shall we copy her look, Celebrim?”

“If you wish it, mistress,” came the cheerful reply.

“Venerable master! Venerable mistress!” we maids exclaimed, hurriedly composing ourselves and bowing to greet the couple.

Duke Emeritus Leen Leinster and Duchess Emerita Lindsey Leinster wore military uniforms, as befitted the supreme commanders of the southern front. And as for the stunning, dark-skinned maid beside them, with pointed ears poking through her palered hair...

“That’s Celebrim Ceynoth, the former second-in-command of our maid corps,” I whispered to the nervous Sally.

“Ceynoth ‘the Headhunter,’” she replied under her breath. “She really exists, then.”

Miss Fosse held out the letter. “Duke Leen, Duchess Lindsey,” she said, “this is from Mr. Allen.”

The venerable master looked taken aback. Then, to our collective astonishment, he bowed. “Forgive me,” he said. “I knew that he had been hospitalized, but I kept it from you for fear that the news would cause you

distress. I've just learned that he's been discharged."

"Isn't that wonderful, Felicia?" the venerable mistress added. "Allen is such a nice boy."

"Y-Yes!" Miss Fosse agreed.

Sally observed the exchange and muttered to herself, "If only my useless brother had a thousandth of Mr. Allen's qualities." A famous name wasn't always a boon, I supposed.

Lady Sasha sank heavily onto the sofa. "My darling Richard hasn't written a word to me," she groused, punching a cushion. "Is this all because the league won't come to terms? Fine, then. My father and I will crack every code they have!"

Having cured herself of her dejection, the young noblewoman rose to her feet. What a heroic figure she cut.

Miss Fosse blinked in surprise, while the venerable mistress beamed.

"We're winning this war, thanks in part to your help," said the venerable master. "But the league refuses to let it end. With Liam returning soon, I doubt that we'll have any trouble maintaining our advantage. Still..."

"Wars are so much easier to start than to finish," the venerable mistress continued, serious once more. "If only someone from the league were willing to talk."

Gloom settled over the hall.

"W-Well..." Miss Fosse hesitantly broke the silence.

All eyes were on her. She quailed under the attention, but held firm.

"Allen wrote that he would be visiting the southern capital soon."

The venerable master and mistress sank into thought. At length, the former said, "Lindsey, what do you say we take the professor up on his proposal?"

"Yes, I'd love to have him here. And I'm certain Felicia would love some quality time with him."

"D-D-Duchess Lindsey?!" Miss Fosse spluttered, her bosom swaying as she

reeled from this surprise attack. “I r-really couldn’t care less whether I see Allen.”

“But I hear you wear those beast ears for good luck because he’s so fond of them?” the venerable mistress pressed, striking again before Miss Fosse could recover.

“Oh, well, these are, um, you see...”

Miss Fosse’s excuses ended in a squeak as she fainted clean away. Sally, Lady Sasha, and I all cried her name as we dove to catch her. The other maids responded swiftly as well.

“Damp cloths, prepped and ready!”

“Fetch something to fan her with.”

“Is she due for a mandatory rest, do you think?”

We were all old hands when it came to—

“Wh-What should I do?” Sida dithered. She had some growing to do.

Miss Fosse slept peacefully in my arms. She must have felt so relieved.

Thank goodness.

While our hearts warmed, the venerable mistress commanded, “Now, carry little Felicia to bed. She deserves to rest to her heart’s content, and she has a lot of sleepless nights to make up for.”

*

“Come on! You can move faster than that!” Gil shouted, swinging his wooden halberd.

Ellie and Lynne cried out in surprise, forced to retreat in the face of this ferocious assault. That left no one to defend Tina, who had been weaving spells at the rear of the group.

“Not on my watch!” Caren yelled, darting forward with Lightning Apotheosis to fill the gap. Her wooden spear came crashing down on Gil, who blocked with his halberd. Their clash filled the courtyard with flashes of lightning.

“Not bad! But not good enough!” Gil parlayed the momentum into a vertical flip, placing him behind Caren. My sister blocked his ensuing kick, but it still knocked her back, and she landed beside Ellie and Lynne. Her floral beret soared through the air.

The trio in Royal Academy uniforms were being pushed to their limits, while Gil seemed nowhere close to his.

“That was too straightforward,” he said breezily. “You’d be surprised how many people scarier than me will just—”

Potent mana pulsed ahead of Gil as wild winds blew snow across the twilit summer sky. Then the supreme spell Blizzard Wolf took shape, mightier than ever before. With her rod held aloft and the mark on her right hand shining, Tina roared, “I’ve got you!”

“No, you don’t,” I interjected from my chair near the veranda as, to the astonishment of all five combatants, I dispelled the supreme magic with a twirl of my pen. Holding up a warning finger, I continued, “Tina, I told you that Blizzard Wolf is off-limits. I expect to see polished elementary spells.”

“B-But sir...” Tina whined.

“No buts. And that goes for you too, Lynne. Dismiss that Firebird and focus on your swordplay.”

“Yes, dear brother,” the red-haired noblewoman responded as, shamefaced, she adjusted her school beret and resumed her sword-fighting stance.

While I was at it, I threw in a few gentle words of advice for the angelic maid.

“Ellie, try to keep calm—your last spells had too much wind in them. Good luck!”

“Y-Yessir! Thank you so much!” Ellie chirped, beaming. No matter what the future held, I would defend her smile against all comers!

The maid’s classmates fixed her with stares of silent reproach.

“L-Lady Tina? L-Lady Lynne?” she stammered. “You’re sc-scaring meee!”

The trio launched into their usual antics.

From inside the house, I heard Lydia, Stella, and my mom laughing. Evidently, they were baking dessert. Lisa and Duchess Emerita Letty had left that morning to attend a council at the Great Tree in preparation for the dukes’ arrival, although they hadn’t seemed to relish the prospect. The Leinster maids had gone with Lisa, leaving only Lily—who was nevertheless nowhere to be seen. She had taken Atra (who had been in beastfolk form since morning) and gone off to who-knew-where.

“You rely a bit too heavily on Lightning Apotheosis,” I warned Caren, catching her airborne beret with a wind spell and depositing it on the round table. “I can cover for you when we’re together, but it’s still a bad habit.”

“Nothing will ever separate us,” she replied sullenly, folding her arms and looking away. What was I to do with her?

“Shall we resume?” I addressed my old school friend, present by special permission. “Now, get to it, Gil Algren, voted ‘second most vaguely awkward’ in our department! Oh, and where’s Konoha?”

“Didn’t you come in first?” Gil shot back, smirking. “And Konoha is at her sister’s place.”

Well now. I have no complaints about Konoha. However...

“You know, we *could* try allowing supreme magic this—”

“Your loyal servant Gil Algren is ready and willing to work himself to the bone! Now, come at me, if you dare!”

The sparring resumed, and I began laying out experimental spell formulae while I jotted down the combatants’ mistakes to review with them later. I was

currently attempting to re-create two things: silver-snow and that great, thorny fire serpent with bladed wings. The former was a mysterious form of ice that Linaria had mentioned, and the latter was the most powerful spell that she had attempted in my presence. The serpent was just barely coming together, since I had seen its spell formula. As for silver-snow, I couldn't be certain, but I believed that it had been imbued in the dagger that had come to my aid.

Using water and wind, I created ice crystals in midair. Next, I added light. So far, so good. Then to the gleaming slivers, I added...a drop of darkness. To my dismay, the formula unraveled, disintegrating completely.

This is quite a challenge.

I couldn't cast Linaria's spells—my mana fell hopelessly short. Her staggeringly intricate formulae guzzled mana and demanded superhuman control of their wielders. To make matters worse, they were encrypted, and it would take me some time to decipher them.

"You won't catch me that easily!" Gil hollered. "Running away is one thing I *know* I'm good at!"

Caren grunted and Ellie wailed, "I c-can't keep up with him!" as the young Algren lord bamboozled them with his nimble acrobatics. Lynne's "Stay still or —" ended in a sharp cry as he gave her a light electrical shock. And he never allowed Tina a clear shot at him, as her frustrated "H-He's too fast!" made plain.

"I wonder if I could get him a place in the guard," I mused.

The knights of the royal guard were a strict meritocracy. They set no store by past deeds, requiring only that their recruits display resourcefulness and knightly resolve. And while objections from other quarters would be formidable, my own achievements should suffice to cancel them out. Stripping Gil of the style "Highness" and leaving the ducal succession undecided, to be judged on the basis of his future deeds, struck me as a plausible compromise.

The Ducal House of Algren was the linchpin of the kingdom's eastern lands; as with the earldoms of Harclay, Hayden, and Zani, it would be foolish to simply dismantle it. The kingdom would do better to preserve the title by passing it on to the next generation, treating the succession as a model case for meritocracy. Especially since, while the two northern marquesses were apparently holding

the eastern border for the time being, they could hardly garrison it permanently. I would need to speak with Richard and Duke Walter about—

"We've got you!" shouted two girlish voices.

Ellie, who was already acquiring the rudiments of flight magic, startled Gil with a flurry of rapid strikes. He let out a cry and withdrew—only for Tina's ice blasts to pelt him from behind. Then Caren and Lynne joined the fray.

If there are to be monetary rewards, I must see that the families of the war dead get their share. And I can't forget the railroads and lines of communication that Lydia destroyed—although I suppose I'll need to throw myself at the mercy of the professor and the headmaster for that.

"Our department motto!" Gil recited, launching a storm of lightning blasts. "Obey Lydia without question! Revere Anko with all your heart! When Allen asks you for a favor, say only, 'It would be my pleasure!'"

"I agree with the second and third parts, but I suggest you cut the first one!" Caren called back, deflecting the lightning with her wooden spear while Ellie and Lynne supported her with a spirited barrage of wind blasts and fireballs.

"Return to your senses!" Tina shouted, unleashing a colossal Divine Ice Wave with a wide swing of her rod. It crashed into the storm of electricity, and the spells canceled each other out.

In the aftermath, Gil's plaintive cry rang out:

"You're too young to know better! You wouldn't talk like that if you had any clue how scary she can really be! You think I didn't challenge her when Allen wasn't around?! We all did! And... And..."

The girls looked questioningly at me as Gil trailed off into sobs.

"Well," I said sheepishly, "I suspect she drew True Scarlet and hit them with a military wide-area annihilation spell."

"Yikes," came the response in four appalled voices. The flaming sword True Scarlet, the greatest treasure of the Ducal House of Leinster, was far too potent to use against individual opponents.

Gil dried his eyes, spun his halberd, and then froze. "That defeat opened our

eyes. We learned better than to go against Lydia.” He paused, as if a thought had struck him, then added, “Caren, will you and Stella be joining us next year?”

“We plan to,” Caren admitted hesitantly.

A light of hope kindled in my old school friend’s eyes. Laughing ominously, he held his wooden halberd aloft and said, “Finally! Every time she argues with Allen, that witch hangs around griping—or bragging about their romance. I can’t tell which! But now our counterattack can—” The blood drained from his face. “It’s not what it sounds like.”

On the veranda stood Lydia, dressed in a pale-scarlet kimono she’d sent for from the southern capital and with a dagger in her obi. In her words, she’d needed to “dress the part” for my “special day.” The girls gaped at her outfit in wonder and delight—although not without envy.

“Any last words?” she demanded icily.

Mental anguish suffused Gil’s face as he racked his brain for an answer that would save his life. Then, as the girls, Caren, and I looked on, he steeled himself, raised his head, and bellowed, “Once, when you and Allen were fighting, I—Yen and I—spent two days and a night with him at a hot spring near the royal capital!”

“Gil?!” I cried.

“It’s up to you now, Allen! Good luck!” Having chosen to involve me in his downfall, Gil bounded onto the roof and bolted away with a sunny smile on his face.

I felt a murderous glare on my back and turned, trembling, to find a beautiful smile on Lydia’s lips. She approached, saying, “You’ll still be paying for this in your next li—”

Her threat ended in a cry as she tripped stepping down from the veranda. I caught her before she fell, but I could tell without looking that Caren and the girls were shocked.

“You’re still not well,” I chided the mana-deficient young woman. “You shouldn’t lash out so quickly.”

“A servant who doesn’t put his mistress first has no right to—”

Lydia was interrupted yet again as a little girl with a violet ribbon in her hair dove between us, flickering with white light.

This is Stella’s mana. I know that Atra slept with her last night, but could that be why she can assume her beastfolk form?

“Mind your manners, Atra,” Lily scolded cheerily, setting a pair of sandals at Lydia’s feet.

My dad waved from the hallway, on his way back to his workshop. Apparently, the pair had been watching him ply his trade.

“*You* arranged that interruption, didn’t you, Lily?” Lydia demanded accusingly.

“Whatever do you mean?” her cousin replied, giggling cheerfully as she dodged the question.

Lydia glared at me, but what did she expect me to do?

“Tina, Lynne, Ellie,” I called, “I’ve written down some homework for you. Be sure to practice it later.”

“We will!” they answered in unison, raising their hands as they took their papers from me. Atra mimicked them with enthusiasm.

“You don’t need written notes, do you, Caren?” I asked.

“No,” my sister replied, “but go over it with me later.”

“You sure crave attention.”

“As any little sister should.”

Once we’re back in the royal capital, I must remember to give Caren my old school ber—

A little bird alighted on my shoulder. It was one of the headmaster’s magical messengers.

“Sir,” Tina asked hesitantly, “does that mean...?”

“Yes, it does,” I replied, surveying the girls. “Dukes Walter Howard and Leo Lebufera have arrived in the city. A public council will be held in the plaza

before the Great Bridge, and Their Highnesses wish us to attend. Tina, Ellie, please call Stella. Dessert will have to wait."

*

A crowd was forming around the vast plaza, in the center of which a large pavilion offered shelter from the sun's rays. Beneath it, chairs encircled a round table, while magically constructed stone walls and military barriers guarded its perimeter.

Lisa, Duchess Emerita Letty, and Duke Walter sat with their backs to the Great Tree. As a matter of protocol, Lydia and the girls had reluctantly seated themselves on that side as well. Stella, Tina, and Lynne wore military garb, and Ellie, her maid uniform. Atra sat on Stella's lap, while Lily waited respectfully behind the group.

I supposed that the handsome young elven man to Duke Walter's left was Duke Lebufera. Powerful northern and western nobles also occupied seats at the table, as did the beastfolk chieftains and influential eastern humans. Even the chieftains of the dwarves, giants, dragonfolk, and demisprites were in attendance. The choice of this open-air venue was, I supposed, a show of courtesy to the giant delegation.

The headmaster was just about the only notable absentee, although my parents had also stayed home—they weren't fond of crowds.

"You'll regret this, traitor," Lydia's disgruntled voice announced from the communication orb in my left ear.

"Mr. Allen, please sit with us," Stella added, sounding no happier.

"We really ought to cut communications now," I replied, removing my orb. I had expected this sort of whining from Lydia, but never Stella.

"Allen," Caren urged, tugging at my sleeve.

"Right," I said. "Let's go."

As we wove our way through the crowd, I spotted a cloaked Gil with Konoha and Momiji, young Lotta of the fox clan, and Caren's old friends, Kaya of the squirrel clan and Koko of the leopard clan. Strangely, neither Sui nor Richard

ambushed me. I puzzled over their absence as we went—until we neared the entrance to the pavilion and the familiar figures clustered around it.

Lord Richard Leinster, the red-haired vice commander of the royal guard, wore pristine white armor. The lightly armored leopard-clan man with him was Rolo, captain of the beastfolk militia. Behind them, I saw the seasoned Sir Bertrand of the royal guard and Sui of the fox clan. Toma of the bearlet clan and the sisterly Shima of the hare clan were present as well.

My gaze met Rolo's.

"They're here!" he shouted, raising his left hand. "Everybody make way!"

The ranks parted neatly.

Isn't this a bit much?!

I turned to the red-haired knight and my fellow disciple, but they looked calm and unmoved. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach.

As we reached the plaza, I noticed a change. The knights of the royal guard and the militia stood in orderly ranks, forming a path all the way to our assigned seats. Before I could even think of running, Richard and Rolo placed their hands on my shoulders. I could hear my bones creak.

"Hi there, Allen," growled the vice commander. "So glad to see you out of the hospital."

"You're not going anywhere today," the militia captain added menacingly.

I knew it! They're furious*!*

"R-Richard, R-Rolo," I said. "Th-That hurts! V-Violence is never the answer!"

The pair grinned boldly, unhanded my shoulders, and bellowed to their troops.

"Knights of the royal guard!"

"Beastfolk militia!"

Then, in unison, "Salute the saviors of the eastern capital!"

All obeyed, beating their breastplates in honor of Caren and me. Then they drew their weapons and formed a roofed corridor for us to walk. Even Rolo

raised his spear. And to top it off, a formal tune began to blare.

A military band?!

Caren sidled nervously closer to me.

“Richard,” I hissed, giving the vice commander a reproachful stare.

“Ceremony matters,” he retorted, “especially at times like this. Oh, and don’t even *think* about running for it.”

His Highness led the way, and we processed awkwardly behind him.

Beside the pavilion, battle standards flapped boldly in the breeze. One stood out from the rest. Massive, stained, and timeworn, it bore a design of a shooting star.

We arrived at our seats and found that they were set exactly across the table from Duke Walter.

“Allen, Caren.” Richard motioned us to sit, so we nodded and complied. The music ceased, and I heard the clatter of many weapons being lowered at once.

The red-haired knight withdrew, and a burly, platinum-haired man in uniform—Duke Walter Howard—began to speak. With the aid of a communication orb, his voice carried well.

“**Thank you all for gathering here today!**” he boomed. “**I am Walter Howard, charged with governing the north of this realm.**”

“**And I am Leo Lebufera, guardian of its west**,” announced the princely elf with pale-jade hair.

“**We wish to begin with an apology.**”

“**Forgive us for this catastrophe.**”

Both dukes bowed deeply. A stir echoed through the plaza.

“**The Four Great Ducal Houses are the shields of the kingdom**,” Duke Walter declared. “**Yet the Algrens mustered highborn malcontents to assault not only the eastern but the royal capital. I need not remind you of the result.**”

Shouts of agreement. Most of those killed in this city had been beastfolk.

“**But what did the rebels’ ‘Great Cause’ amount to?**” Duke Lebufera continued. “**Our kingdom is now locked in wars with multiple foreign powers: the northern Yustinian Empire, the southern League of Principalities, and...the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit. We cannot afford to leave our eastern border undefended, and the demonfolk to our west are as mighty as ever they were. Thus, we shall now pronounce a provisional sentence.**”

Enemies on four sides—five, if one counted Lalannoy. It was an absurd predicament, and both dukes were right to view it with alarm.

“**All Algrens are to be arrested, as are the heads and high-ranking members of every noble house that took part in their rebellion. They will face judgment individually as circumstances permit. Penalties will be severe and may very well extend to the dissolution of their houses.**”

“**Those who participated in the slaying of the monstrous Stinging Sea will immediately reform their units and march to the eastern border. Their future punishments will depend on the service they render there. Most lesser officers and common soldiers will be pardoned.**”

Grumbles of dissent. As far as the victims’ families were concerned, this was a slap on the wrist.

“**Let me remind you again: this war is not over**,” Duke Walter boomed, scowling. “**We must use every resource at our disposal if we hope to keep this kingdom safe.**”

“**As for the public standing of the beastfolk, we swear to petition the throne to improve it in concert with Duke Leinster**,” Duke Lebufera added. “**I cannot forget the depredations of Rupert, my former vassal.**”

The disgraced Earl Rupert had been responsible for the death of a girl named Atra, whom Caren and I had known as children.

“**Next, we must question Chieftain Ogi and the other members of the beastfolk council.**” Duke Walter’s tone was glacial. All the chieftains stiffened, with the exception of the missing ape-and rat-clan traitors. Caren reached out and squeezed my hand under the table. “**As regards Allen, I will be brief. Is it true that you steadfastly refused to recognize him as beastfolk prior to the rebellion? That you refused his advice as it raged around you? And that you**

had traitors in your midst?”

Many beastfolk were stunned speechless—my situation wasn’t widely known.

Ogi, the chieftain of the wolf clan and head of the council, hung his head and answered feebly, “It is true.”

A roar that bordered on a shriek rose within and without the pavilion. Everyone had been at least vaguely aware of the council’s dysfunction. Yet who wouldn’t be shocked to hear its leader admit as much?

“We spent the rebellion in helpless panic,” Ogi continued dejectedly, although the admission clearly cost him an effort. “The Great Tree held out thanks to the selfless courage of the royal guard, and to the militia, volunteers, and common citizens who banded together to defend it. We could not even make up our minds to invoke the Old Pledge until children gave us the push we needed.”

The screams faded into a gloomy silence.

Ogi shook his head. “Fortunately, the city was delivered. Yet our crimes remain. Your Highnesses, Duke Walter Howard and Duke Leo Lebufera...” All the chieftains stood as one. They were prepared for this. “We wish to resign our posts as soon as the end of the reconstruction is in sight. This is a time for young chieftains who can join hands with the humans who share our city.”

Ogi paused. Then, with a look of profound regret, he bowed low to me and said, “Allen, I’m sorry. We...We have made unconscionable mistakes, yet you still risked your life to save so many of us. Thank you for defending our city and all of us in it.”

I couldn’t find the words to reply. If only I had managed things better.

Caren dug her nails in and shook her head, on the verge of tears.

Via my communication orb, I caught Lydia’s whispered “Unbelievable” and Stella’s equally concerned “Mr. Allen.” Tina’s and Lynne’s mana seemed stormy, while Ellie and Lily strove to calm them.

Both dukes raised their hands.

“**Be seated. Judgment will be rendered in due course.**” Duke Walter allowed the chieftains time to comply, then bellowed, “**This matter concerns the other**

races as well! The Knights of the Holy Spirit now pose the gravest threat to our kingdom! If the eastern capital is disunited, they *will* strike again!"

"**There are great changes in this kingdom's future**," added Duke Lebufera. "**Let none of you forget that.**"

For better and for worse, he spoke the truth. The Church of the Holy Spirit was so uncanny—and so powerful—that it could not be otherwise.

Duke Walter's expression softened as he turned to me. "**Allen, His Majesty sends word to you from the western capital.**"

I froze in shock.

"Allen," Caren hissed, tugging on my clothes.

Clumsily, I rose to my feet.

His Highness, Duke Walter Howard, straightened and began, "**In honor of the magnificent service that he has so lately performed...**"

I didn't like where this was going.

"**Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, may henceforth claim the title 'Shooting Star'!**"

A stir ran through the western nobles, although the four western chieftains showed no reaction.

I heard mutters from outside the pavilion.

"What does he mean?"

"Just an honorary title?"

"I thought for sure they'd ennoble him."

"**Silence**," Duke Walter commanded, and a hush fell. "**Shooting Star was the name given to the champion who saved our kingdom in the War of the Dark Lord.**"

"**And my grandmother and predecessor, the Emerald Gale, served as his lieutenant**," added Duke Lebufera.

My communication orb caught the girls and Stella murmuring, confused and

delighted as they parsed the meaning of that statement.

“What?”

“D-Does that mean...”

“M-My dear brother...”

“Mr. Allen could...”

If historical precedent held true, then the title of Shooting Star was nearly a grant of extralegal authority.

Suddenly, a dwarf with curly reddish-brown hair, whom I took for his chieftain’s aide-de-camp, pounded the table and shouted, “Objection!”

“Stop, Admiran,” ordered the muscular dwarven chieftain seated beside Duchess Letty.

But his incensed subordinate continued, “The title of Shooting Star is sacred to all the peoples of the west! It can’t be handed out so lightly!”

“I agree!” boomed a heavily armored giant, thumping his chest.

His gray-haired and bearded old chieftain turned from his boulder seat to glare and snap, “Agrelo.”

“I too find it difficult to accept a new Shooting Star,” said a dragonfolk woman, slowly shaking her beautiful head.

“Aathena,” sighed her battle-hardened chieftain, folding his arms.

“I do not doubt his character,” added a demisprite girl. “And yet...”

“Ando—”

“I refuse to budge on this, grandmother,” she continued, interrupting the Flower Sage. “Not even for you.”

The four chieftains and the other members of the Shooting Star Brigade seemed receptive to the announcement—although I couldn’t imagine why—but most other westerners of the long-lived races expressed their protest through silence. And who could blame them? This whole idea was ridiculous.

“Oh, very well,” Duchess Letty grumbled, rising smoothly to her feet. “You

want to see if Allen has what it takes, I suppose. Nothing could be simpler."

The living legend met my gaze. The most ominous chill of my life set in as I recognized the gleam in her eyes from my sword lessons with Lydia.

Oh dear. This is a disaster waiting to happen!

Duchess Letty struck the ground with her timeworn spear wrapped in black cloth and bellowed, "**I shall test his mettle myself! Look on and draw your own conclusions!**"

The crowd was flabbergasted, while the panicked Duke Lebufera shouted, "Grandmother!"

The four chieftains' aides looked sour.

"Well now!" Duchess Letty exclaimed, her eyes widening. "Is that displeasure I see?" The living legend roared with laughter, and it suddenly became difficult to breathe. Baring her pointed canines, she asked, "Shall I face you first, then, O little lads and lasses?"

The quartet turned pale. Tina and Lynne seemed to be suffering as well.

I suppose I've got no choice.

"Duchess Letty," I said, "would you kindly leave it at that?"

"Hm? Oh, pardon me," she replied, and her aura of menace lessened.

Caren exhaled deeply.

"I accept this challenge," I said, nodding to the two dukes. "Please reserve judgment concerning titles until it is finished."

"Very well," Duke Walter reluctantly agreed.

"We must set the stage at once," added Duke Lebufera.

While a growing commotion filled the plaza, Duchess Letty inquired, "O Allen, why do you smile?"

"What?" I responded, taken aback.

Have I been smiling? I had no idea.

Honestly, I answered, "You are the Emerald Gale, second-in-command to

Shooting Star—or should I call you the peerless Comet? The thought of trading blows with a hero out of my childhood storybooks makes me positively giddy.”

“I see. How like a man. And I’ve not heard that name in a long while. Now...” The legend turned her attention to the girls. “You there. Those who flinched earlier will only slow Allen down. Yet if you still wish to challenge me, I’ll play with you before our bout. Think on it while they ready the arena.”

*

“I just can’t accept it!” Tina exploded. “We ought to fight on Mr. Allen’s side!”

“I agree with Miss First Place,” Lynne joined in. “We won’t be a burden to him anymore!”

“B-Big Sis Stella,” Ellie pleaded from between her irate friends.

My father and Duchess Lisa stood a short distance away with Mrs. Ellyn, who had come running as soon as she had heard the news. Mr. Nathan was apparently unable to join us, being in the middle of crafting a magical artifact, so Atra had withdrawn her calming presence to Mrs. Ellyn’s side. She was currently frolicking atop a chair that the Flower Sage had hastily conjured using botanical magic.

I wonder what’s come over her.

Caren raced over to our seats. “Tina, Lynne, you felt Letty’s mana, didn’t you?” she cautioned the pair. “And besides...”

My best friend squinted at the elven beauty, who stood alone with her spear in the center of a great, circular stone arena constructed with giant magic. Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, was a warrior among warriors. She had even traded blows with the Dark Lord. And now she awaited Mr. Allen, whom Lord Rodde, the headmaster of the Royal Academy, had summoned to the Great Tree.

“She’s a genuine legend, straight out of a storybook,” Caren concluded. “We couldn’t hold a candle to her.”

Tina and Lynne groaned in frustration.

“Say something, Lydia,” Caren appealed to the scarlet-haired, kimono-clad

noblewoman currently sipping tea beside me.

The Lady of the Sword handed her cup to Lily and said, “Sixty-five out of one hundred. Suffering can be a good teacher, Caren.”

Tina froze, while Lynne ventured a nervous “Dear sister.”

“You’re such a harsh critic!” Lily pouted.

“The Howards’ and Leinsters’ youngest are still fuming, I see,” Duchess Leticia called to us. “Come, then. I’ll amuse myself with you until Allen returns.”

“Lynne,” Tina growled.

“Yes!”

The girls nodded to each other and leapt up onto the stage.

“M-My ladies!” Ellie cried frantically, while I shouted their names in equal alarm.

Caren sighed.

“They’ll live,” Lydia remarked indifferently.

I saw my father and Duke Leo press their hands to their foreheads, while Duchess Lisa seemed delighted.

“We won’t take that lying down!” Tina shouted, tying her ribbon onto her rod.

“We’re more than a match for you!” Lynne added, drawing her sword.

The crowd stirred, but Duchess Leticia was unfazed. Her unmoving composure drew more shouts from the girls.

“What are you waiting for?!”

“Assume a fighting stance already!”

“No need,” the former duchess replied. “I can’t fight seriously against chicks with bits of eggshell still clinging to their tail feathers.”

Trembling with anger, Tina and Lynne swung their rod and sword wide. Gusts of freezing cold and scorching heat pierced the barrier as the supreme spells Blizzard Wolf and Firebird descended on the battlefield.

Shock was spreading through the crowd, yet Duchess Leticia held still.

“We’ll make you regret that!” Tina shouted.

“This fight will be over before my dear brother arrives!” yelled Lynne.

Unleashed, the two supreme spells launched themselves furiously at Duchess Leticia.

“Watch out!” Ellie and I cried.

Lydia and Caren held their peace, while Lily gave one of her usual merry giggles.

The legend’s ancient spear flashed. First the Firebird disintegrated, run through. Then Duchess Leticia effortlessly seized the Blizzard Wolf’s fangs as it bore down on her and slammed it into the stones of the arena. An ice storm sprang up—but a sharp gust soon dispersed it.

Tina and Lynne stood frozen in wide-eyed surprise.

“Not bad,” Duchess Leticia opined dispassionately, “especially in this age of weakened magic, bereft of the elementals’ blessing. You have talent, and you’ve worked hard to refine it, as has Caren. But above all, I suppose that *you* must be an excellent teacher.”

An intricate spell formula materialized before the girls.

Short-range teleportation!

“Their own talent and hard work deserve all the credit,” demurred the brown-haired sorcerer who emerged from it, enchanted rod in hand. “Thank you for waiting; I had an urgent matter to discuss.”

At the sight of Mr. Allen, relief flooded Ellie’s and Caren’s faces—and mine as well, I supposed.

“Thank you both,” he said calmly to Tina and Ellie. “Please allow me to take it from here.”

After a dejected “Yes, sir” and “Yes, dear brother,” the pair vanished, only to land with a squeal back in their original seats. I traced the mana and found the headmaster seated beside Duke Lebufera.

“If neither combatant objects, I propose that we begin,” my father

announced. “What say you?”

“I have no objections,” Mr. Allen replied.

“Likewise!” declared Duchess Leticia.

“Very well,” said my father.

The duel would start at any moment. I cursed myself for the inexplicable condition that left me unfit to fight. If only I could have stood at Mr. Allen’s side. But as I ground my teeth in frustration, my father swung his hand down and cried:

“**Begin!**”

Immediately, Duchess Leticia raised her spear. “Prepare yourself, O would-be legend of a new age,” she said. “Let us begin with a simple test!”

Magical emerald winds whirled as a series of tornadoes materialized from thin air.

“Are those *all* advanced spells?” Caren murmured in amazement.

Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and I couldn’t even speak. Screams rose from the crowd.

Sh-She calls this *“a simple test”?*

“I question your use of language,” Mr. Allen said wryly.

“Oh, this is but child’s play,” Duchess Leticia retorted. “Pray, try to give me a challenge!”

Dozens of tornadoes launched themselves at Mr. Allen, their mighty winds kicking up fragments of wood and stone to block my view.

No! A direct hit?!

Abruptly, Duchess Leticia spun and grunted. With an effortless sweep of her spear, she tore through the storm of Divine Light Shots bearing down on her. But even as the elementary spells kept coming, razor-sharp icicles sprouted from the ground. An icy mist formed as well.

“Too easy!” Duchess Leticia barked, balancing one-legged and on tiptoe atop an icy point as she continued to intercept the barrage.

What about Mr. Allen's mana? It was no use—I couldn't sense it. The tranquility of his spellcasting beggared belief.

Tina and Lynne were speechless, while Ellie gripped my hand, murmuring, "A-Amazing."

A dark shape emerged from the thick mist behind Duchess Leticia. "So, *there* you are!" she cried. "Hm?"

Her spear had bisected...a pitch-black lion.

Magical creatures!

Several more lions sprang at her, while the storm of light spells targeted her blind spots.

"Impudent tricks!" Duchess Leticia snapped. The lions, icicles, and bolts of light disintegrated in an emerald flash.

I heard someone kick off the ground. Then Mr. Allen broke through the icy mist, charging straight at the former duchess as she landed!

"At last!" she cried. "But this isn't nearly enough to—"

"I don't doubt it!" Mr. Allen replied as a black lion sprang out of Duchess Leticia's shadow. She shattered it with one swift blow of her left hand, but then his rod struck her spear in a shower of glowing mana.

"You immediately judged that you could not dispel all of my tornadoes, choosing instead to meddle with a limited number," Duchess Leticia said cheerfully as they strove to overpower each other. "You then shifted to bombarding a wide area with rapid spells, forcing me to take the defensive. And to crown it all, you secreted one of your creatures in *my own shadow*! What fun!"

Mr. Allen leapt back, keeping his rod raised to defend himself as he landed. "I'd appreciate a little restraint," he said, frowning. "But then, I suppose that really was 'a simple test' as far as you're concerned."

"Verily! Good for limbering up, no?"

We weren't the only ones left speechless by their exchange—the whole crowd was dumbfounded as well. That brief clash in the arena had been

superhuman.

The elven champion raised her left hand, eliciting startled murmurs from Tina, Ellie, and Lynne.

“Is she covered in...”

“G-Green wind?”

“It reminds me of Lightning Apotheosis.”

Jade-green breezes were winding themselves around the living legend. Were we witnessing the basis of her nickname, the Emerald Gale?

“I’ve finished going quite so easy on you,” she announced, closing her upraised hand into a fist. “Call on the mana in Twin Heavens’ rod—or this may be where you die.”

“I’d rather avoid that if I can help it,” Mr. Allen replied. “It’s too good for the likes of me.”

Duchess Leticia chuckled. “Mayhap you’ll change your tune...once you’ve seen *this*!” As she shouted, the wind began coalescing into a concrete form.

The girls and I were stunned speechless, while Lydia murmured, “Well now. I’ve never seen that before.”

“Me neither!” Lily chimed in, equally fascinated.

In the arena, Mr. Allen grimaced at the living legend who stood revealed before him, a daredevil grin playing on her lips. “If you could see your way to taking me less seriously,” he grumbled, “I would greatly appreciate it.”

“Need I remind you that the truly strong are always in earnest?” Duchess Leticia retorted as an immense and beautiful creature of pure magic soared above her head. This was the symbol of Lebufera might: the supreme spell Gale Dragon.

“Now,” the legend continued, gripping her spear in both hands for the first time, “have at you!”

The ferocity of her shout made my skin tingle as her Gale Dragon broke into a steep dive, pouring into her. Then Duchess Leticia was gone. I could only barely

glimpse the emerald afterglow that she left in her wake.

A loud, metallic crash rang out. The ensuing shock wave made even the Great Bridge sway.

“Allen!” Caren screamed.

I frantically turned to look...and saw that Mr. Allen had blocked a thrust from the dazzlingly radiant spear with his lightning-girded rod. The look on his face was anything but calm.

“You did well to stop my Emerald Spear!” Duchess Leticia pronounced. “Twin Heavens must have put you through your paces!”

“She did!” Mr. Allen grunted. “I thought it would be the death of me!” Knocking the spear aside, he unleashed a burst of the elementary spell Divine Fire Shot.

“Such paltry magic will have no—”

To the former duchess’s surprise, the fireballs she brushed aside transformed into icy vines, clinging to her spear and hindering her movements. Then tree roots sprang from the ground beneath her, binding her arms and legs.

“Prepare yourself!” Mr. Allen cried. Having regained distance, he swung his rod in a wide arc, instantly multi-casting the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances to surround Duchess Leticia.

She can’t dodge that*!*

The living legend countered the frosty javelins by pushing the wind that shrouded her to new heights of intensity. A sharp cry of exertion escaped her as it tore through the projectiles, disintegrating them along with the vines and roots.

The black cloth on her timeworn spear fluttered as she gave it a twirl and exclaimed, “What finesse! And I’ve not seen elements so disguised in a hundred years! O Allen, the west would welcome you!”

“I appreciate the invitation,” Mr. Allen replied. The light was fading from his rod, meaning that its mana was exhausted. He would need to fight on using only his own reserves. He glanced at us before continuing, “However, I am

engaged as those young ladies' private tutor. And although they'll soar higher than me someday, I still feel duty bound to guide and protect them now. So, I must regretfully decline."

The elven champion beamed. "You have a good heart," she declared. "You neither grow conceited nor tire of your pupils' talent nor lose sight of your responsibilities. Ellyn and Nathan must be proud of you. Thus..."

A chill ran down my spine.

Wh-What could that be?

"I shall show you a weapon and technique worthy of your valor!"

A shudder ran through the crowd as the fabric of space bent and winds dark as night began to take physical form.

The girls clasped each other's hands.

"Wh-What in the world...?" Tina murmured.

"It's so p-pretty," gasped Ellie.

"A jet-black spear?" Lynne whispered, awestruck.

Caren said nothing, but she looked troubled.

When the inky gusts subsided, Duchess Leticia's left hand clutched a black spear—sinister yet beautiful. Her armor of wind turned a dusky jade color, and vague, shadowy wings took shape behind her. She gave each of her two spears a twirl, then spread them wide apart.

"I wrested this black spear, Flicker of the Dying Moon, from the very hand of the Dark Lord," the living legend declared, then chuckled. "I haven't materialized it in a century—not since I faced that eight-winged devil, I suppose."

Neither we nor anyone else in the crowd could utter a sound. The Dark Lord reigned over the demonfolk in the vast lands west of Blood River, and had done so for nearly a thousand years according to one theory. What must that monster's spear be capable of?

Duchess Leticia leaned so far forward that she almost touched the ground.

“Now,” she said, “how will you fend off my Dark Emerald Spear without your rod’s mana to draw upon? Show me!”

Her feet shattered the stone of the arena as she surged forward—darting straight at Mr. Allen. Leaving a tail of dusky jade in her wake, she truly looked like a comet streaking across the night sky. And although Mr. Allen fired spell after spell, screening himself with another barrage of Divine Light Shots...

“One!” the legend roared, crashing boldly through and lashing out with her Dark Emerald Spear in a low, left-handed sweep. Mr. Allen activated wind spells on both his feet, just barely deflecting the strike with his rod as he retreated.

“Two!” Duchess Leticia kicked off the ground, continuing her assault with a right-handed spear thrust.

We could do nothing but scream Mr. Allen’s name. Then a little feather of flame flitted past the corner of my eye, and a burning flower with it.

“Not so fast.” A dagger turned the dark spear aside.

“Kindly take this!” A greatsword came crashing down on Duchess Leticia. Not even the living legend had expected this—she hurtled backward across the arena and crashed into its stone wall near where the two dukes sat. The entire barrier shuddered.

A broken dagger slipped from a young woman’s hand.

“Lydia, Lily,” Mr. Allen gasped, taken aback by this timely rescue. “Why—?”

“Excuse me? Have you forgotten *already*?” Lydia demanded, clasping her hands over the one in which Mr. Allen held his rod. “I’m your sword and no one else’s. And I’ll never, *ever* break that promise again. What does it matter if my mana’s running a little low?”



Caren, the girls, and I bit our lips, mortified by this display of superior

determination. Apart from Lydia, only one of us had acted without hesitation: Lily, who stood with her greatsword planted in the ground, smiling at Allen like a child who had just gotten away with some mischief.

"Remember," she said, with a smug little laugh, "I'm a maid *and* a bodyguard!"

Mr. Allen looked perplexed. "What do you—? Oh, I see," he said, grinning ruefully. "*I'm* the one you've been guarding all this time."

I felt a pang in my chest as I sensed the unconditional trust behind his words.

Duchess Leticia burst out of the stone wall and leapt, spinning in midair on her way back to the arena. "Splendid! Magnificent!" she cried, with an ecstatic smile. "I'd not have it any other way! Now, I demand greater satisfaction!"

"Lydia," said Mr. Allen.

"Hm?"

He waved his left hand, and the enchanted sword Cresset Fox appeared from thin air. Lydia drew it without the least hesitation. Then the Lady of the Sword and her Brain stood shoulder to shoulder.

"And don't forget about me!" Lily called, pulling her greatsword free with a lilting laugh. One flash of her blade conjured more fire flowers than I could count.

The girls' eyes were locked on her, and I felt a flicker of light magic as a torrent of emotion surged through me.

I've never felt more frustrated! Not ever! Why couldn't I have raced out there too?! I swore to protect Mr. Allen! What does it matter that I can't cast spells?! Neither can Lydia!

In that moment, I realized vividly—far, *far* more vividly than ever before—that merely standing by his side was not enough for me. Pressing my feather to my chest, I knew that I wanted the strength to defend him. I couldn't do that yet. I had neither the right nor the resolve. But...But...

"Are you all right, Stella?" Caren asked, eyeing me with concern. "You're leaking mana."

What had Mr. Allen told me in the royal capital, at the café with the sky-blue roof? “You don’t have to think about doing everything yourself.” For just a moment, I closed my eyes, calming myself and reining in my mana.

Then I turned to my best friend and said, “Caren, I want us to grow much, *much* stronger. Together!”

“So do I,” she replied.

So, with renewed determination, we gazed at the trio in the arena. The true contest was about to begin.

*

“So, what’s the plan?” Lydia asked, glancing at Duchess Letty. The living legend was more eager for a fight than ever, and a fresh torrent of mana revealed that she still had strength to spare.

“Unfortunately,” I replied, “our best option may be to use a certain overenergetic self-proclaimed maid as a shield and rush her.”

“Out of the question!” Lily cried, sulkily forcing her way between Lydia and me. “And I’m a real maid! I *am*!” I had seen this look on her face often enough during our adventure in the southern capital five years earlier.

“I mean that we’re counting on you,” I said, tapping her lightly on the cheek.

Lily giggled.

“All right, that’s enough of that!” Lydia declared, pushing her aside and fixing me with a childish glare. “You have some nerve, flirting in front of your mistress.”

We’re on the ropes...but I can’t see us losing!

I gave my rod a twirl and began weaving spells.

“Ready, are you?” Duchess Letty asked, crossing her spears. “Then see what you make of this!”

Enchanted dark-emerald gusts coalesced into four Gale Dragons. Their formulae were in constant flux.

So that first salvo of advanced spells was a ploy to get a look at my interference.

Lily was gathering her tiny flower petals into a blazing shield.

“An uncommon spell,” the former duchess remarked, scrutinizing it closely. “I see both witch and Wainwright blood is strong in you.”

Lily touched her floral hair clip, setting her lovely locks fluttering. “I learned it from a mean-spirited boy a little younger than me,” she answered in a mature tone. “When I debated giving up on my dream, he gave me the push I needed.”

Annoyed, Lydia interjected, “Listen—”

Then she gaped at my right hand, a moment before the ring on it surprised us

by releasing a burst of crimson light.

One of Linaria's spell formulae?!

The flash split into three rays: one to Lydia beside me, one to Tina...and one to a little girl in the spectator seats near her.

Lily, Lydia, and I all murmured at once.

"What gentle voices."

"Is that mother and..."

"Atra?"

My mom was singing along with the child perched on her lap. Atra's long violet hair and ribbon radiated a faint glow.

Dad always said that mom was the best singer in the clan.

"And this mana," I murmured as we looked up to see hundreds of sea-green griffins circling in the sky above.

"They're singing, aren't they?" Lydia asked slowly, rubbing her shoulder against mine.

"Yes," I replied, "I believe they are."

While we all stood in awe of this mythic spectacle, Lily cried, "Look!" and pointed to the Great Tree.

The World Tree, as Linaria had called it, blazed with sublime radiance.

"Can it be?" Duchess Letty whispered, wide-eyed. "Has the World Tree answered the great elementals' prayers?"

Atra's, my mom's, and the griffins' voices joined in harmony. Light showered down, only to be absorbed into Lydia and Tina.

Twin Heavens' will flowed from the ring into my mind: "You're a key, aren't you? Then act like one."

That witch doesn't know how to mind her own business. But I'm grateful for her.

"Allen," Lydia said, holding out her left hand.

“Yes.” I squeezed it tight—and linked our mana. As the singing stopped and silence descended, I felt her presence more distinctly than ever before. And then...

Plumes of pristine white flame danced over the plaza. For the umpteenth time that day, a thrill ran through the crowd.

Lydia let go of my hand and gave a fearless little laugh. “I’ll just pop over and give her my regards,” she announced cheerfully—and charged at Duchess Letty! The eight wings on her back burned an angelic white. Between them and her kimono, she was the most gorgeous person I had ever seen.

“I’ve seen such plumage before!” Duchess Letty cried, startled, as she maneuvered her Gale Dragons to intercept. But Lydia bellowed and destroyed all four dusky-emerald creatures with a swift downward stroke of her enchanted blade. Then she came on even faster, slashing at the living legend with superhuman speed.

Duchess Letty blocked the strike with both of her spears, but its force was still too much for her. She flew backward into the wall again, and a shower of shattered stone buried her.

“Sh-She drove my grandmother back in a frontal charge, without trickery?” Duke Lebufera exclaimed in disbelief.

The veterans of the Shooting Star Brigade seemed equally stunned.

“How long has it been since the vice commander lost a test of strength?”

“Since she marched to the royal capital a hundred years ago, I’ll bet.”

They say some intriguing things, but those will have to wait.

“Well now, I’d say she’s awake,” said the scarlet-haired noblewoman—entirely self-possessed, although her mana had not merely made a full recovery but risen to new heights. “And she promised to help me, if you can believe it.”

The mark of Blazing Qilin stood out vividly on the back of Lydia’s right hand, and it sounded as though she was learning to communicate with the great elemental. But why hadn’t she been able to sooner? I checked our enchanted weapons and found that they had recovered some of their mana.

“Lydia,” I called, eager to share my latest discovery.

“Hm?”

“Your mana was depleted because Blazing Qilin needed it to recover and take root in you. Some of it also went to feed that sword...as well as this rod I’m holding. Which means...”

This was a consequence of excessive linking. The circuit between us was becoming permanent, and I would be able to take even more liberties with Lydia’s mana than ever before. That simply wasn’t right. A grimace spread over my face, and my vision dimmed.

“Unbelievable. You really can be such a fool,” Lydia muttered, tenderly embracing me with her wings as well as her arms. “I’m glad. After all, I can feel so, so, *so* much closer to you now. And I can grow even stronger.”

Her wings of pale fire let out a dazzling flash. “On our own, we’re merely strong. But...” A smile lit up her face as she ran her finger along my cheek. “Together, we’re unbeatable. We always have been, and we always will be! Am I wrong?”

I wiped my tears on my sleeve and forced myself to smile before I replied, “No, you’re right. We *are* unbeatable! So...”

“Of course.” Lydia’s wings unfurled from around me just as shards of stone wall filled the air.

“Leave this to me!” Lily chirped, shielding us with her greatsword.

The dark-emerald gusts intensified as Duchess Letty made her second return. “I never looked to see the great elementals lend a mortal such aid!” she declared, fixing me with a menacing grin. “O Allen, you may be the answer to my commander’s and my late comrades’ prayers. Now, let us settle this.”

“Yes!” I agreed. “But first, a question.”

“Oh?”

“In the depths of a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea, I was saved by a spell that Shooting Star left behind,” I said, staring straight at the former duchess as I began weaving my spells. “Please tell me: Where may I find his grave?”

For a moment, Duchess Letty said nothing. Then, “Why do you wish to know?”

“So that I may offer fruit of the Great Tree there. My father taught me to keep my word to the dead.”

“I see. They always were his favorite.” Duchess Letty slowly raised her spears, and her shadowy wings unfurled. “Shooting Star and Crescent Moon never returned from Blood River. Their graves in the western capital are untenanted.”

“Is that so? Then I’ll cross Blood River one day and negotiate with the demonfolk.”

Lydia gave me an exasperated look, Lily smirked, and a wave of consternation swept through the crowd.

“Truly?” the former duchess demanded, disbelieving. “You would go to such lengths to repay a single favor from a vestige of the past?”

“Isn’t that what it means to be a man of one’s word?” I countered.

Chuckling, Duchess Letty lowered her gaze and murmured, “You truly are a marvel.” Then, to our astonishment, she crushed the black spear in her left hand.

The dusky-emerald wind raged as a change came over it. The sky turned dark as night, dotted with innumerable gleaming spears of strange design.

And are those twinkling lights...stars? The mana imbued in all this far surpasses any supreme spell!

The living legend gathered her dark gusts around the tip of her own timeworn spear as well. “My house’s hidden secret art: the Stellar Spears,” she announced, flashing her sharp canines. “With it, I struck down an eight-winged devil and sealed it beneath the royal capital a century ago. Fight as though your lives depend upon it! I will not scorn you if you run.”

“Did you hear that, Lily?” Lydia said pointedly.

“Well, you *are* still convalescing, my lady,” the maid replied.

Cold sparks flew and dark-tinged plumes collided with flowers of flame as the young ladies tittered at each other.

“Ah, for the good old days,” came a slightly pained murmur from across the arena, “so unforgettably bright, and yet so brief. I—we—shared such days as well—times when we had someone to protect with every fiber of our beings. Yet...Yet, daughters of the Lady of the Sword! What will you do when you cannot defend the one you must?! When you are confronted with an impossible choice?!”

“You have to ask?” Lydia replied.

“It’s plain as can be!” Lily chimed in.

Then, in unison, they answered, “We’ll slice, burn, and slice some more! Allen can sort out the details!”

Duchess Letty looked taken aback—then roared with laughter. “I see! So that’s your answer! If only it had been mine that day, I could have stayed with them until the bitter— But no, what’s done is done. However!”

Tension filled the air, and the tips of the floating Stellar Spears began to swirl. Duchess Letty’s gorgeous jade-green eyes gleamed with unshakable resolve as she bellowed:

“Being the lone survivor has its privileges! Allow me to introduce myself once more.” The Stellar Spears halted, and the head of the spear in her right hand shone dusky emerald. “I am the right hand of the great Shooting Star, who ended the War of the Dark Lord with his death, and the friend of the mystic swordswoman Crescent Moon, who dealt a blow to the Dark Lord: the ‘Comet,’ Leticia Lebufera.”

“Lydia Leinster.”

“And Lily Leinster.”

“Allen, son of Nathan and Ellyn, of the wolf clan.”

Then, as one, we all four shouted, “Have at you!”

The floating Stellar Spears immediately launched themselves down at us, leaving dark-jade tails in their wakes. They shredded the stone, and the mere reverberations of their impact burst the barrier.

Lydia gripped her sword in both hands, pointed the blade behind her back,

and focused her mana. “You’re in charge of spellcasting!” she barked. “Lily, buy us time!”

“You got it!” the maid responded, darting to the front of our group. She conjured a rapid stream of fiery petals, overlapping and combining them as she cast my first experiment in simplifying Linaria’s formulae: the bi-elemental spell Scarlet Blossom Shield!

Lily intercepted the spears with her flaming floral barriers, then brought her greatsword to bear when those failed, swatting javelins aside with brute force. The dark-emerald gusts assailed her as well, becoming blades that tore rents in her sleeves and the hem of her skirt. Blood sprayed from her skin.

I wished that I could heal her, but the spell that I was weaving was beyond intricate. If I gave it any less than my full attention, it would misfire. Yet the Stellar Spears kept raining down until I could bear it no longer.

“Lily, you’ve done enough!” I shouted. “Please fall—”

“No!” she shot back instantly in a tone that brooked no argument. She thrust her left hand out straight to one side as the scarlet of her hair deepened. “I’m a maid! And a maid protects her master!”

A flame-wreathed greatsword materialized in her left hand.

Another one?!

“A maid! Has! Pluck!” Her fire flowers gained power, and she went on weaving more as she shouted, “Lydia!”

“Well done, Lily!” the Lady of the Sword praised her cousin, flapping her wings and zooming toward Duchess Letty.

Her Scarlet Sword, shrouded in pale fire, clashed with the Stellar Spear in the living legend’s left hand. Both noblewomen roared as fiery feathers met emerald gusts. Enormous fissures split both the barrier and the stone arena. Then Duchess Letty grimaced as her Stellar Spear cracked...and shattered.

“Now!” Lydia shouted, while Lily cried, “Allen!” Both young women darted out of my line of fire.

Quietly, I held out the enchanted rod Silver Bloom.

“I...I know that spell!” the legend exclaimed, her eyes widening.

“This is it!” I yelled, unleashing my completed spell: a great, thorny serpent of fire with bladed wings!

Unbelievably, its spines trapped and incinerated all the Stellar Spears that moved to intercept it. I had cast the thing, and it still gave me chills.

All this before I’ve even come close to perfecting the formula!

“Not yet! You’ve not bested me yet!” Duchess Letty roared as she gathered all of her mana into the spear in her right hand and struck out at my serpent.

The stone arena crumbled, unable to withstand the strain. Around its edges, the two dukes, the headmaster, and the western chieftains let their mana do the talking, deploying barrier after barrier even as each one went up in flames. And they were still only barely containing the destruction.

Then Linaria’s ring flashed, and without warning, the scene before me changed.

On a hilltop beneath a shining crescent moon, a long-tailed comet, and a rain of shooting stars stood a young wolf-clan man and a girl. The latter was human, with short hair of pale silver, and she wore a curved sword at her hip. She looked more or less the same age as my younger students. A large, fluttering banner marked this as a field position of some kind. It bore the emblem of a shooting star.

The girl stalked away from the young man in a huff.

“Allen,” a voice interjected.

“Don’t worry, Letty,” said the man, who wore daggers in his belt. “I’m sure she’ll come round.”

I’ve heard this voice before—in that ruin on the Four Heroes Sea. Am I in Duchess Letty’s memory, then?

“Which reminds me, have you heard?” he continued, grinning. “People have taken to calling me ‘Shooting Star’ lately.”

“What difference does that make?” Duchess Letty asked, toying with her long

hair.

“Well, I was thinking that if I’m a shooting star, then you must be a comet.”

“What? Are you calling me headstrong?! You always—”

“That’s not what I mean. You know how shooting stars vanish in a flash, but comets return again and again?”

“Enough riddles! Get to the point!” Duchess Letty demanded, pouting.

“I mean that Allen of the wolf clan can trust Leticia Lebufera to carry on for him,” Shooting Star answered, smiling. “If I don’t survive this war...”

The stone arena returned. Spear and serpent, wind and flame vied for dominance. I struggled frantically to maintain control of my spell—and to keep it from being driven back. But as Duchess Letty and I cried out with exertion, the fire was slowly but steadily eating away at her weapon.

She dropped her gaze to the black cloth on her spear, then looked at me. I saw affection and delight in her eyes as she murmured, “I sincerely commend you.”

Then the balance broke, and my spell exploded! A flash of inferno and fiery blades dyed my vision red and white as Lydia, Lily, and I dug in, pouring all of our strength into wards and fire-resistant barriers.

When at last the flames died and I opened my eyes, the plaza had become a scorched field. Even a portion of the Great Bridge was burning.

Did we maybe overdo it?

Lydia sheathed her enchanted sword and latched on to my left arm. “I take it you have nothing to say in your defense?” she asked.

“Have you ever heard of a mock battle?” Lily added, planting her greatswords in the ground and seizing my right.

I groaned, and they both laughed, merrily prodding my cheeks.

Then a sharp breeze cleared my view and revealed Duchess Letty—unscathed, although her clothes were somewhat worse for wear.

“Good grief!” she exclaimed. “Was that any way to treat your elder?! I thought I was a goner!”

“I...I beg your pardon,” I stammered.

“As you should!” Lydia scolded me.

“Definitely!” Lily chimed in.

Oh, honestly.

Duchess Letty acknowledged my plight with a rueful grin, then held her old spear aloft. “I have lost,” she announced. “**Let all gathered here bear witness!**”

All eyes turned to her.

“**In my name, I confirm Allen of the wolf clan’s right to inherit the name of Shooting Star!**”



The ensuing cheer seemed like the very earth rumbling. Throughout the

crowd, I saw beastfolk embracing. Then Duchess Letty raised her left hand, and the shouts instantly ceased.

"**Next**," she continued, "**listen well, O my comrades of old!**"

The members of the Shooting Star Brigade rose in unison and stood at attention.

"**You all saw, did you not? The name of Shooting Star has been passed on here, before your very eyes. Ever since that day—that unforgettable parting at Blood River—we have lived on, biting back regret that we failed to save those who should have lived and cherishing the memories of our comrades who have passed on before us. And not in vain. No! Not in vain! Thus...**" The legend detached the black cloth from her spear and smiled at her trembling comrades in arms, who seemed on the brink of tears. "**Let us hold our heads high! We...**We... I..."

Duchess Letty's voice was dwindling. Clutching the black cloth to her chest, she forced herself to speak through a flood of emotions. "After two hundred years, we've finally, *finally* completed the last mission that our comrades and commander entrusted to us: to find one worthy of carrying on their will."

The old soldiers sobbed and wept, unable to restrain their tears. Beastfolk who knew the tale of Shooting Star's death joined in. Even the girls and my mom cried, while Atra sang.

At length, the living legend dried her eyes and forced herself to smile. "**Fools**," she boomed. "**Weep not—tears have no place in a time for celebration. Eat well, drink well, be merry, and sing loud enough to reach the heavens! Is that not what our commander would do?**"

Her troops wiped at their eyes, smiling through tears.

Was this...for the best?

Lydia rested her head on my left shoulder and whispered, "Of course it was, silly."

"**This night, let us celebrate the birth of a new legend in lavish style**," Duchess Letty exulted. "**As we once rejoiced with him and her, never tiring of conversation till the break of dawn!**"

“**Yes! Yes! Yes!**”

The swelling cheers shook the whole city. It seemed we were in for a rough night. But as I watched my students and my sister run toward me, I reflected on what would follow.

*

“I lost! You vanquished me, O Allen!” Duchess Letty shouted from her seat in front of me, roaring with laughter. “O Lisa, O Ellyn! Won’t you cede him to the Lebuferas? I’d choose him the finest bride in all the west!” She then drained her brimming mug of northern liquor, despite the several bottles that she’d emptied already.

So these *legends are true too.*

“A-Allen, sir, o-once more for good luck!” Ellie cut in before I could respond, bombarding me with healing spells. I’d already had all of my wounds seen to, but I still couldn’t refuse the angel’s heartfelt efforts.

In the night, mana lamps illuminated the vast plaza and the many cheerful celebrants who filled it. Some drunken beastfolk broke into loud singing, while humans from the eastern capital and their western rescuers of all races cheered them on and a northern marching band joined in. I enjoyed watching them.

“Keep talking like that, Letty, and you’ll be fighting my mother and me next,” cautioned Lisa, who had forced Lydia into a seat beside her while she chatted with my mom.

“A duel with Scarlet Heaven and the Bloodstained Lady?” Duchess Letty replied, grimacing. “Th-That sounds like a fatal proposition.”

While the living legend was distracted, the kimono-clad noblewoman shot me a look that said: “Save me from this already!”

I shook my head, refusing aid. Surely Lisa wanted a chance to talk with her daughter.

Atra sat on a sofa that Lily and the Leinster maids had brought out, looking small as they pampered her for all they were worth. While I watched her, my mom replied airily, “I let my son choose his own future.”

“I see,” Duchess Letty said slowly. “O Ellyn, O Lisa, let us drink!”

“Yes, let’s!”

“Agreed.”

Drinking with duchesses past and present? What will my mom do next?

Across the table, the remaining girls were deep in discussion.

“Lynne, we have a long way to go, and we’ve barely even started,” Tina pronounced.

“Yes,” Lynne agreed. “Ellie, won’t you join us?”

“Y-Yes’m! Y-You’re right as rain, Allen, sir!” Ellie declared, bobbing her head to me before she sprinted off.

Beside the trio, their upperclassmen were immersed in a talk of their own.

“We need to work harder,” Caren said grimly.

“We’ll catch up to them together,” Stella solemnly reassured her.

They would grow by leaps and bounds. But I would need to do something about Stella’s malady first. Perhaps Atra could point me in—

“Excuse us,” a woman’s voice sharply interrupted my reflections. The four division leaders of the Shooting Star Brigade had arrived, and they were frowning.

“Lily,” Lisa commanded.

“Okay, let’s give them some privacy!” the maid lilted as her barriers rose.

“Yes, ma’am!” her subordinates responded, casting sound-dampening wards of their own.

A hovering demisprite with translucent wings on her back and a floral hat on her head—Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe, the Flower Sage—fixed me with a piercing stare. “I don’t object to one loved by the great elementals inheriting the name of Shooting Star, although I will fault you for being so young. However...”

“That wolf lass there delivered a plea to us,” continued the dwarven chieftain

Leyg Vaubel, the Fiend Slayer, sitting cross-legged on the ground.

“She asked us to save her brother,” added Chieftain Dormur Gang, the Mountain Hurler of the giants, stroking his gray beard.

“But you freed yourself.” The Battlemaster, Chieftain Egon Io of the dragonfolk, lashed his tail on the ground as he gravely declared, “Our Old Pledge remains unfulfilled.”

“Name your wish!” Chieftain Chise demanded. “I swear on our late commander that we’ll do everything in our power to grant it!”

“And as I told you the other day, so will the Lebuferas,” added Duchess Letty. “Leo has already consented.”

I had already consulted Duke Walter about Gil’s treatment, although he had glowered at me and barked, “You deserve to take things at a slower pace. But you still can’t have my daughters!” And I had dumped all of my various requests for investigations on the headmaster—the Royal Academy, it seemed, would not reopen its doors for a little while yet. So I didn’t have much left to wish for, personally. Perhaps Richard would like—

Ow!

Lydia had slipped free of Lisa in time to give my left arm a pinch. There went my hope of escape.

“Well then,” I said, “allow me to take you up on your generous offer. Caren, Lynne.”

The pair approached me, looking mystified.

“Allen?”

“Dear brother?”

I stood and calmly explained, “I hear that the dwarves and the giants, along with the elves, once forged the Leinsters’ greatest treasure, the flaming sword True Scarlet. So, I have two requests for you. Caren, hand your dagger to Chieftain Leyg.”

“Here you are.”

The aged dwarf made a noise in his throat and the old giant murmured, “The commander’s trusty blade...” as they squinted at the weapon.

“My first request is for you to reforge this dagger and restore its edge,” I concluded.

“A-Allen?!” Caren exclaimed.

“This is my wish. Next, Lynne.”

“Dear brother,” demurred the red-haired young noblewoman, “I don’t really want—”

A pat on her military cap silenced her as I continued, “My second wish is for a flaming dagger at least the equal of True Scarlet.”

The two old war heroes broke into grins and bowed.

“Consider it done!”

“I swear we will succeed!”

“I look forward to it,” I responded. “Ellie.”

“Y-Yessir!”

I guided a blushing Lynne to a seat beside Lydia, then turned to Chieftain Chise. “The botanical magic you cast to help set the stage earlier impressed me deeply, and I would like you to instruct this girl in its essence.”

Ellie let out a startled squeak. “B-But Allen, sir, I...I c-can’t use botanical magic.”

Not *yet*, certainly. However...

“Botanical magic requires a mastery of all eight elements,” Chieftain Chise responded, narrowing her eyes. “And few can cast it without the Great Tree’s blessing. Not even the beastfolk can do much with it outside of the royal and eastern capitals.”

“It isn’t wise to underestimate my students,” I replied. “Isn’t that right, Ellie?”

The maid blinked in surprise, then bowed deeply to Chieftain Chise and shouted, “P-Please teach me, ma’am! I’ll w-work as h-hard as can be!”

The great sorceress sniffed, and lowered the brim of her hat. “Just remember: I don’t coddle anyone!”

If the legends were true, this meant that she was in excellent spirits.

I next turned to Chieftain Egon. “I’ve read that a dragonfolk priestess known as the oracle receives knowledge of many kinds from the flower dragon. Is this true?”

A flicker of surprise crossed the legend’s stern features. “It is true,” he replied. “Your learning does you credit.”

“In that case, I wish for one thing from you: a cure for uncontrollable surges of light mana.”

“M-Mr. Allen?!” Stella cried, releasing a pale glow in her agitation.

“Forgive me,” I added, suppressing the light. “I know that I’m a busybody.”

Her objection quashed, our resident saint clutched her sleeves and groaned, blushing furiously.

The aged warrior cracked a faint smile at the sight of her and answered, “I swear to swiftly relay all that I learn.”

That makes four. The only one left is...

“My turn, then!” Duchess Letty proclaimed, standing tall and laughing smugly. “Name your desire! Mayhap my Stellar Spears?”

“No thank you,” I replied. “I doubt that I could ever master them. And besides...”

Didn’t Shooting Star Allen devise that technique just for you?

The Emerald Gale read my meaning in my face and looked bashful as a little girl. “Come, out with it,” she pressed. “None will blame you for putting yourself first, you know.”

“Thank you. I will.”

If it comes to that.

I screwed up my courage and said nervously, “When a cursed child recovers after nearly falling, is there any danger of a relapse?”

Everyone gasped. Lydia pressed her hands to her chest and looked ready to start crying at any moment.

“Do you mean to say,” the living legend who had once been known as a cursed child herself replied quietly, “that the answer to that simple question is all you wish for?”

“I realize that my question is impertinent, but please, would you tell me?”

We all held our breath while Duchess Letty gazed up at the starry sky. At last, she replied, “These two hundred years and more have seen the birth of twenty-odd cursed children of whom I know. Of those, only two returned from the brink of devilhood—Crescent Moon and I. Three, counting the Lady of the Sword.”

Both *of Shooting Star’s lieutenants nearly fell?!*

“Thus, I am your answer,” Duchess Letty continued, giving her chest a few thumps. “A cursed child who returns has gazed into darkness and can do so no more—we would never survive the attempt. And most importantly, she has you.”

Relief flooded my heart. I didn’t know if the sigh I heard was my own or Lydia’s—or perhaps Lisa’s.

“Thank you,” I said. “Did you hear that, Lydia?”

I felt a warmth on my back, followed by an admission that only I could hear. “Allen, you big, unbelievable oaf. I’ll never leave you again, do you hear?”

If possible, I’d like some information about the great elementals as well. But first...

“Lily, please take charge of Lydia,” I said. “And strengthen the barrier.”

“You got it!”

With Lydia in the maid’s capable hands, I approached another noblewoman, who waited dejectedly on her own, her platinum hair drooping. She looked about to cry.

“Tina, give me your hand,” I instructed. “Do you remember the mana you received from the Great Tree earlier? Let me show you what it means.”

“Sir?” she asked hesitantly.

We clasped hands, and then...I cast my spell. Water, wind, light, and darkness intermingled, and the ground began to audibly freeze over. As all assembled gave a start, I went down on one knee.



“Tina, Stella—your mother, Duchess Rosa, had an incredible ancestor,” I

informed the stunned, highborn sisters. “I believe that this is the true ice: silver-snow. My rod’s mana is now exhausted, but please accept this ‘key.’”

When I slowly withdrew my hands, a glittering silver ice crystal rested in Tina’s palm. She cupped it in both hands and held it just over her heart. A blizzard raged around her, cool and fresh.

“I feel your mana within me so vividly, sir,” she murmured, gazing at me with teary eyes. The mark of Frigid Crane pulsed on the back of her right hand.

“The Great Tree must have bolstered Frigid Crane’s power by sharing some of its mana with you,” I explained. “And she provided the push that made this silver-snow possible. Tina, she dwells within you for a reason, and I’d like us to learn what that is, one step at a time. I have every faith that you can do it.”

Tina’s eyes widened. “Yes,” she said, blushing and looking older than her years. “Yes! Thank you, Allen. I always knew that you were my—”

“Sorry, time’s up,” a red-eyed Lydia interrupted, muscling between us.

“Y-You’re being a bad sport, Lydia!” Tina protested. “It’s *my* turn now!”

“You don’t get a turn. After all, mine never ends.”

“Wh-What?!” Tina’s shout gave way to a sporadic, sinister laugh. “And here I was trying to be nice and make way for you out of sympathy. Well, fine then! No more mercy!”

“Oh? You mean I don’t need to go easy on you?”

“Th-That’s an entirely separate— J-Jeez! Lydia!”

While the two of them butted heads, the rest of us exchanged looks...and burst out laughing. Atra sang, my mom dried her eyes with a handkerchief, and Lisa smiled.

Yes, this was a good use of my wishes.

“Well then, thank you all,” I said, bowing to the four chieftains. “Would you be willing to share some of your old war stories later?”

*

Dawn the next morning found me in the front hall, dressed once more in my usual attire and tying my shoelaces. The party had continued late into the night, with the result that it was still quiet inside the house at this gray hour. I had left a letter for everyone, so the only remaining difficulty was— Footfalls in the hallway derailed my train of thought.

“Allen,” said a voice, “where are you going so early?”

“Mom? I’m sorry, did I wake you?” I responded, finishing the last knot. “Still, I’m amazed you could tell.”

“I’m your mother. I know these things,” my mom said in her usual singsong. She wore a cardigan over her nightgown and a smile on her face. “Nathan is busy in his workshop.”

“Oh.”

My dad hadn’t joined in the previous night’s celebration either.

By way of explanation, I added, “Some important people have asked to see me, so I’m popping over to the royal capital. I don’t think I’ll be gone long.”

“Allen, I know how capable you are, but...but...” Anxiety clouded my mom’s normally cheerful face.

What am I to do?

Before I arrived at an answer, a young woman with short scarlet hair appeared. As usual, she was dressed for a sword fight.

“Have no fear, mother,” she said. “I’ll be with him, so you have nothing to worry about.” Then she turned to me and whispered, “How dare you try to leave on your own. Don’t think I won’t bite you.”

“My apologies, Lydia,” I whispered back, “but I know you’re going to bite me later anyway.”

“Thank you so much,” my mom said, evidently convinced. “And Allen, make sure you listen to Lydia.”

“Wha— M-Mom...” I stifled my own protest before it got far. It wouldn’t do to wake everyone.

Lydia, meanwhile, chirped, “Don’t mention it!”

“And don’t *I* deserve a word in parting, Lydia?” another voice cut in. “Remember who tipped you off.”

“M-Mother?! I...I thought you were asleep!” Lydia exclaimed as Lisa appeared, also wearing a cardigan.

Duchess Letty put in an appearance as well. “O Allen, leave matters here in my hands,” she said. “And when you return, I’ll whip you into shape!”

“I’ll pretend I d-didn’t hear that last bit,” I replied, with a strained laugh.

Then I shot a look at my partner, who was having her collar straightened by Lisa. We both bowed and said, “Goodbye.”

“Mom,” I added, “give my best to dad and the girls.”

“Have a nice trip!” my mom replied.

“Anna is in the royal capital,” Lisa said. “Turn to her and the other maids for whatever you need.”

Duchess Letty concluded with a simple “Take care.”

The headmaster and Chieftain Chise awaited us outside the Great Tree.

“There you are,” the old elf said. “Forgive me for disturbing you so early in the morning.”

“No apology necessary,” I responded. “But what’s this about an urgent summons from Crown Prince John?”

The missive that I’d received before my duel with Duchess Letty had been short and to the point: *Wish to discuss matters in utmost secrecy. Tomorrow morning, come alone to...*

“I can teleport you easily enough,” Chieftain Chise said, frowning. “Still, don’t you find it odd?”

“Yes,” the headmaster agreed. “I’ve had no word, and I can’t explain it. But neither can I ignore it.”

“I’ll just have to go and find out, then,” I replied. “I doubt that anyone will try

to assassinate me out of the b—”

“Allen! Lady Lydia! Wait for me!” came a musical cry, followed by a “Whoop!” as a maid appeared from the gloom and landed before us. On her back rode a child whom I’d last seen asleep with Stella, now dressed in a coat.

“Lily,” I sighed.

“We won’t take you with us,” Lydia added quickly.

“I know! But I think you’d better take Atra!”

Once Lily set her down, the little girl gave her ears and tail a wiggle, shaking loose pale lights—Stella’s mana. As I’d thought, Atra had been absorbing her excess. So, ideally, I would have liked to leave her in the eastern capital.

Lydia, however, stooped down and said, “All right. *You* can come. But you’d better listen.”

Atra gesticulated.

“What do you mean, you ‘like hugs from Allen’?! H-How many times do I have to tell you that he’s *mine*?! Honestly...” Lydia was lecturing in earnest, and she’d only just begun.

I suppose there’s nothing else for it, I decided and signaled to the pair readying the teleportation spell.

After a moment, the headmaster replied, “Very well.”

“I’ve got you covered,” added Chieftain Chise as an arcane design shaped like a flower spread out from under our feet.

“Allen!” Lily called.

“Yes?” I said. “Do you—?”

Lydia looked up from playing with Atra. Her cry, followed by a sharp curse, rang in my ears...as Lily threw her arms around me. Her warmth and softness made it hard to think, but I noticed her slip a silver bracelet onto my right wrist while fire flowers kept Lydia at bay.

Lily’s satisfied, elder-sisterly grin filled my view. She ran her slender fingers over the bracelet, then produced a pair of pocket watches.

“That’s a charm imbued with my mana—my way of saying thank you for the hair clip,” she announced. “The watches are from Mr. Nathan.”

I just barely managed a “Th-Thank you.”

“Did that give you a thrill?” Lily asked, smugly noting my expression. “Is your heart racing?”

A loud crash marked the end of the fire flowers as Lydia roared, “Lily!”

“Aaaw, that was quick. Whoop!”

To Lydia’s and my surprise, the maid evaded her cousin’s bare-handed chop and hopped onto a nearby railing.

Then the headmaster and Chieftain Chise cried, “Brace yourselves!”

Atra jumped up and down as the glow intensified.

Lily winked mischievously at Lydia, who had already retrieved her watch from me, and said, “Just one last thing.” Her lovely long scarlet hair flashed in a ray of sunlight—and so did the bracelet on her left wrist. “Now we match, Allen!”



“L-Lily?!” Lydia spluttered, her face a mask of surprise. “You never learn! But

this is n-no big deal. I'll slice it off and incinerate it in—"

"Aw, really? You're going to break it? Mr. Nathan made that bracelet himself, you know. Well then, I guess you won't mind if I mention the engraving on your watch."

"L-Lilyyy!"

The maid laughed. "I'm your big sister, so you ought to know I'm no pushover."

No doubt this was exactly how she had cheered her lonesome cousin when they were children.

Lady Lily Leinster spread her skirts in an elegant curtsy. "Take care, Allen," she said. "I'll keep an eye on the young ladies, so please mind Lydia and Atra for me."

Just then, a radiant flower enveloped us.

Epilogue

The light of the strategic teleportation spell faded, and I opened my eyes on a courtyard. Myriad flowers bloomed through the morning mist, and Atra raced around them, yipping musically. Her ears and tail were twitching in delight.

“This looks like my house’s place in the royal capital,” Lydia remarked from beside me.

Slowly, I said, “Yes, I think you’re right.”

There was a commotion indoors, presumably from Leinster servants who had remained behind.

Lydia glared at Lily’s bracelet as though it had done her a grievous injury. Then she took my hands in hers and touched her forehead to mine. Closing her eyes, she let out a low “Mmm.”

Fair enough. Better safe than sorry.

I lightly linked our mana, and Lydia opened her eyes.

“That’s all?” she asked, pouting.

“It’s already more than I’d like.”

“Stingy,” Lydia grumbled, slowly releasing my hands.

“Miss Atra, it’s time for your hug!” Anna announced, catching the child as she passed near the house. Atra gave a start but then squealed happily.

“May I have her next, ma’am?” asked her second-in-command, Romy, adjusting her spectacles.

More maids came out to join them—all officers of the corps. Was this much force really necessary?

A woman with chestnut-brown hair and a gentle expression gave me a slight bow, which I acknowledged with a nod. She reminded me of my mom.

“I have business to attend to,” said my beautiful companion in the dawn light. “And I’d say that Atra is better off here, wouldn’t you?”

“Take my watch and Silver Bloom too,” I replied. “Just in case.”

“If you say so.”

Anna approached, securely holding the child, who nevertheless made her wishes known.

“Atra, would you keep an eye on Lydia for me?” I said. “Anna, they’re in your hands.”

“You may depend on me, Mr. Allen,” Anna crowed, while Atra expressed her assent without words.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Lydia asked sullenly.

“Exactly what it sounded like,” I replied. “We’re dealing with the royal family, and that means absolutely no rampages.”

“I know that. Don’t you have *any* faith in me?!” Lydia fumed, sulking like a child. This side of her hadn’t changed since the day we’d met.

“I believe in you,” I said honestly, “probably more than you believe in yourself.”

Atra’s ears twitched.

“Oh me, oh my!” Anna exclaimed.

“Well spoken,” Romy said contentedly.

Lydia blushed furiously, opened and closed her mouth a few times, and then started pummeling me to mask her embarrassment. “D-Don’t say things like that where other people can hear!”

“Ow! That hurts!” I grabbed her hands, but she switched to nipping at me without missing a beat.

Honestly! Has the Lady of the Sword never heard of restraint?

Once I’d managed to peel her off me, I said in parting, “The meeting will be held at Marquess Gardner’s villa. Lydia, Atra, I won’t be gone long.”

✻

Life really is full of surprises.

I smiled bitterly to myself in the vast council chamber on the Gardner villa's third floor. The hostility in the looks I got was palpable.

"Sp-Speak, Brain of the Lady of the Sword!" a rotund nobleman barked impatiently. "What is your answer?!"

I waited a moment before replying, "Very well. Permit me to speak."

I raised my head and looked up at the throne, on which sat His Royal Highness Crown Prince John Wainwright. Behind him, court sorcerers and his own personal guard stood warily, arrayed in their finest combat gear. The summons had been genuine, but its aim had been my arrest, not a discussion.

So, no sooner had I entered the mansion than I had been ushered into this hall full of conservative aristocrats who had sat out the rebellion. For instance, the gray-haired old man standing deferentially behind Prince John was Gerhard Gardner, the leader of the court sorcerers. His face showed no emotion.

"I fail to grasp your meaning," I continued. "You say that if I 'wish this incident to be overlooked,' I must 'hand over everything,' and that if I do so, I will 'receive fair treatment.' Would you be more specific?"

"D-Do not feign ignorance! The Lalannoy Republic has lodged private complaints about your unlawful trespass on their soil! And about the island in the Four Heroes Sea that you so abruptly *wiped off the map*! This is a serious matter! We cannot afford to make war with *all* of our neighbors!" My overweight interrogator—Viscount Ucoveri, a powerful player in the central government—pounded the table. The crown prince winced slightly at each blow; he lacked his half sister's courage.

I expected someone to make a fuss, but this is too soon.

As soon as I'd entered the chamber, Gardner had coldly informed me that "In this time of crisis, His Royal Highness Crown Prince John governs in His Royal Majesty's stead. Her Royal Highness Princess Cheryl has departed for the eastern capital." In other words, they had sprung into action as soon as His Majesty, the three dukes, and Cheryl were out of the city. If only, I thought disgustedly, these nobles were as responsive when it came to anything other than their own power struggles.

“And what, precisely, do you mean by ‘everything’?” I pressed the viscount.

“I told you not to feign ignorance!” he roared. “We are already well aware that you escaped from an ancient ruin on the Four Heroes Sea, kept secret by the Algrens! Give us all the knowledge of the Fire Fiend that you acquired there, and we will speak no more of this matter. We may even consider showing you greater favor. Accept His Royal Highness’s benevolent—”

“I respectfully decline.”

“I beg your pardon?” Viscount Ucoveri stammered, disbelieving. The possibility of a refusal must never have crossed his mind—nor those of his fellow blue bloods, to judge by their muttering.

Did they honestly think I would agree to that?

“I respectfully decline,” I repeated. “Excessive power and ambition invite destruction. Reconstruction and clearing the kingdom of dissidents should take priority at present. Would you let old Duke Algren’s devotion to the kingdom and the royal family go to waste?”

Old Duke Guido Algren was a man to be feared. Having discovered three of his sons plotting rebellion with powers both domestic and foreign, he had hatched a scheme to exploit the conspiracy and purge the east of hard-line nobles with ties to the Church of the Holy Spirit. By leading Lord Grant to believe that his support for Gerard had come to light, the old duke had tricked him into launching his insurrection prematurely. And with the aid of loyal retainers, this counterplot had succeeded. The old duke had been a harsh taskmaster, but not for nothing was he Gil’s father.

“The words of a rebel are not to be trusted!” screamed Viscount Ucoveri. “Simply give us everything and have done with it!”

“And if I refuse?” I asked.

“I-Impudence!”

The court sorcerers wove spells, while the crown prince’s bodyguards gripped their sword hilts. Mentally, I heaved a sigh.

Why did it have to come to this?

Softly, I said, “You heard him, Lydia.”

Immediately, a section of the ceiling collapsed in a flurry of sword strokes. The knights and sorcerers attempted to deflect the falling debris, but with a beat of her bright white wings, Lydia darted down through the hole from her perch on the roof and made short work of them. She carried an enchanted sword in one hand, a rod in the other, and an excited little girl on her back.

“So, where should we defect to?” she asked, handing me the rod. “Lalannoy? The city of water?”

The whole assembly was struck speechless, and I could sympathize. Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, had just announced her intention to forsake the kingdom.

“You shouldn’t joke like that,” I replied hesitantly.

“Who’s joking? So, what now? Slice them up? Incinerate them? Or maybe slice them up after all?” Her Highness sounded as though she were having the time of her life, and the mark of Blazing Qilin shone on the back of her right hand. Pale flames sprang up throughout the hall, igniting furniture and curtains.

I shrugged, turned back to face the crown prince, and placed my hand on Atra’s head. “Your Royal Highness, I could never share even the least scrap of what I gained in the place with the sort of people who would spring a thing like this on anyone. I gave her my word that I would keep this child safe, and I mean never to break it again.”

The crown prince stared at me in silence, his face pale. In his steady gaze, I saw...profound intelligence. It reminded me of something that Cheryl had once said: “I can’t help feeling that my brother John is acting a part.”

Could it be?

“I believe that you are far from the only person concerned in this matter,” Gardner said, breaking his long silence. “Have you considered that the blame may extend to your associates?” His gaze was as icy as it had ever been. And for some reason, I found that comforting.

I forced a grin and squeezed Lydia’s left hand. As our link deepened, I felt the most intense joy.

“If you ever attempted any such thing...”

Fiery plumes, ice crystals, arcs of electricity, and emerald gusts whirled through the hall. All eyes widened as four supreme spells—Firebird, Blizzard Wolf, Lightning Lord Tiger, and Gale Dragon—all materialized at once.

My erstwhile interrogator, Viscount Ucoveri, toppled from his chair with a shriek. His fellow nobles were equally ready to flee. The knights and sorcerers raised their weapons even as the blood drained from their faces.

“What a nuisance,” Lydia muttered, taking one careless upward swing with her sword. All that remained of the roof burst free, falling as a shower of fiery rubble.

In the resulting confusion, capturing us was the last thing on anyone’s mind.

“Th-This can’t be happening!”

“Retreat! Retreat!”

“D-Defend His Royal Highness!”

“Extinguish those fires!”

“I...I can’t! They won’t go out!”

“How can they resist advanced water spells?!”

“Your Royal Highness!” called a female knight whose helmet partially concealed her stunning face.

“Evacuate at once!” added a court sorcerer, not even trying to hide his panic.

The crown prince, however, never took his eyes off me.

I was right. He’s—

“What are you waiting for?” Lydia demanded, backed up by a gesture from Atra.

“Oh, right.” I struck the floor with the butt of my rod and prepared the experimental tactical teleportation spell Black Cat Promenade. Then I cast a levitation spell on Atra and wrapped my arm around Lydia’s shoulders.

My partner let out an odd little cry, and her body temperature spiked.

“If you do anything to harm these girls or my family,” I told Gardner, “I’ll see that the kingdom and the royal family regret it. Please bear that in mind. Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

I released all four supreme spells at once and listened to everyone except the crown prince and Gardner shriek as the teleportation spell engulfed us. Crown Prince John gave the slightest of nods.

“There,” I said, still feeling Lydia’s warmth as we landed on the roof of a nearby building. Then I grimaced and groaned, “Oh dear.”

The Gardner mansion was a towering inferno. How was I ever going to explain this?

“I feel so refreshed!” Lydia declared, sheathing her blade in one masterful motion. “We should have just done that from the start!”

A bright-eyed Atra seemed equally enthusiastic.

Looking at them, I couldn’t bring myself to voice my own concerns. I stored my rod, still groaning inwardly. Then I sensed two people behind us—one familiar and the other new to me.

“Mr. Allen, Lady Lydia, Miss Atra!”

“Everything is ready for you.”

“Anna?” I asked.

“Anna, Maya!” Lydia exclaimed. “Perfect timing.”

There stood the Leinsters’ head maid with a suitcase in her hands and Anko, for some reason, on her left shoulder. The maid who had struck me as gentle was with her, bearing white hats and traveling coats.

Atra, ever curious, eagerly seated herself on the luggage.

“Oh! Isn’t she precious?” Anna cooed.

“Here you are, my ladies,” said the maid called Maya, helping Lydia and Atra into the hats and coats.

“E-Excuse me, Anna,” I said hesitantly, still unable to process the situation.

“What on earth is all this for?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Lydia replied, suddenly seizing my right hand. “Now, get ready to fly!”

“L-Lydia, I— Whoa!”

“Have a lovely trip!” the head maid called. “Leave matters here to your humble Anna.”

“And Maya,” added her companion.

Then, while both women curtsied and Anko let out a meow, Lydia grabbed the suitcase with her left hand, flapped her pale wings, and shot skyward. I hurriedly teleported Atra onto my back and worked wind magic to ease Lydia’s flight. The child’s happy song rang out in the dawn air as Lydia beat her lovely, angelic wings, picking up speed. And she was heading south.

“Lydia,” I said weakly, “we should at least let the girls know what—”

“Well, we won’t! We’ll let our elders worry about all those annoying little details!” The scarlet-haired young woman—whose birthday was fast approaching—hugged me tight in midair and laughed with all her heart. “It’ll be just the two of us for a while! And I’ll see to it we make up for lost time!”

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been another four months...and this time, I barely made it. Keeping that deadline almost killed me. Time management is important—*really* important! And my battle with my drafts continues as [...].

As usual, I revised this volume—about ninety-five percent of it, I believe. Yes, that still counts as revision. I think I'll be doing a little less of it in volume ten. Probably. Maybe. Hopefully.

As for the story, a dark horse is closing in at breakneck speed. She's the freest spirit in the series. The author has no say in what she does. In past volumes, she was on her best behavior. Now you see the real her.

I hope you know who I mean, especially since she snagged the cover of volume nine for herself. Being something of a big sister to Lydia makes her a force to be reckoned with, and she gets on well with Allen too. It's no wonder she placed third in the popularity poll on— C-Could the readers who voted for her have seen all this coming?! (The author certainly didn't.) I hope you'll continue to root for this noblewoman who aspires to maid-hood.

Announcement time! Three volumes of *Henkyō Toshi no Ikuseisha* (*The Mentor in a Frontier City*) are now on sale. It's a prequel to the world of *Private Tutor*. Reading them together should give you plenty of chances for knowing grins, so I heartily recommend it.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. Thank you for helping me through yet another volume. And congratulations!

The illustrator, cura. You deliver truly gorgeous work every volume. The desire for more of your illustrations keeps me motivated.

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. In the next volume: a long-awaited honeymoon.

Riku Nanano