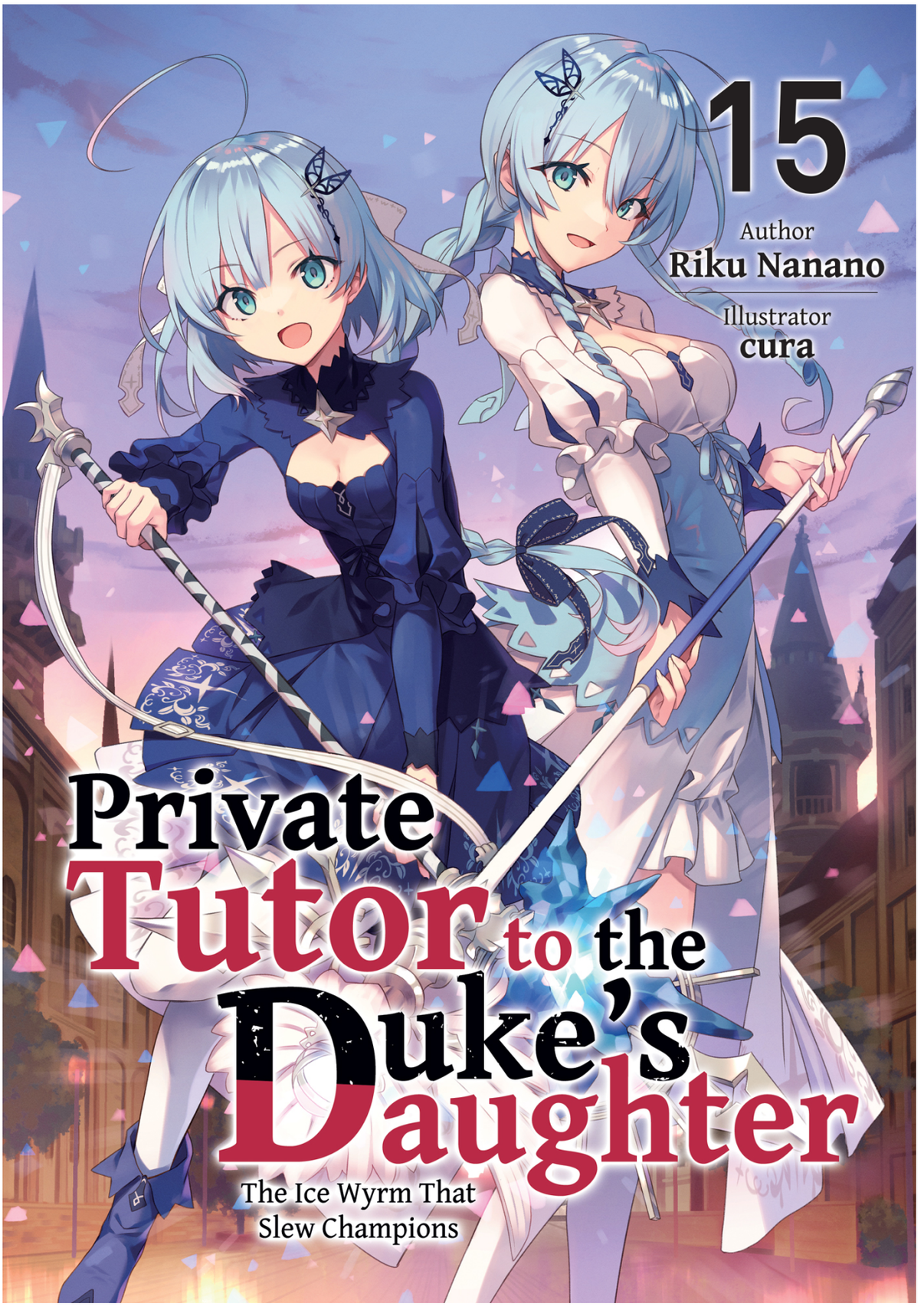

15
Author
Riku Nanano
Illustrator
cura
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The Ice Wyrm That Slew Champions


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“I have been appointed envoy to Lalannoy. I hope we’ll enjoy a fruitful partnership!”
Fashion-forward maid
Lily
The Leinster Maid Corps’s number three is extremely quick-witted despite her usual carefree attitude, but it’s in her guise as a noblewoman that she’s been named diplomatic envoy to Lalannoy!
Private Tutor to the Duke’s Daughter
15


Duke Leinster'seldest daughter
Lydia
"B-But you still didn't have to come to stay at Allen's place on—"
"Oh? I didn't think you'd make it back this early."
Allen's younger sister
Caren
"Caren no want together with Lydia and Lia?"
The great elemental Blazing Qilin
Lia
"♪"
The great elemental Thunder Fox
Atra


“Mr. Allen!”
“Sir!”
“Catch us!”
White Saint
Stella
Tina’s elder sister is the president of the Royal Academy student council and the future Duchess Howard. She resolves to accompany Allen to Lalannoy, determined to aid him with her newfound angelic power.
Duke Howard’s second daughter
Tina
Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen’s tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.


Tina was every bit as direct as she'd been the day we met. I held out my own rod beside hers and cast the new great spell of ice: Astral Frost.
Private tutor to the dukes' daughters
Allen
A young man who fails to appreciate his own unrivaled control of magic. Dispatched to Lalannoy, he finds himself caught up in yet another disaster.
"Tina, where's our secret weapon?"
"Right here!"



"Today, I'm at your side, and I won't give that up for anyone!"

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Epilogue
Afterword

CONTENTS

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Characters



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

Allen

The girls' erudite private tutor is slowly but surely making a name for himself at home and abroad.



Allen's adoptive younger sister
Royal Academy student council vice president

Caren

This wolf-clan girl is levelheaded but shows a needy side around her brother. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.



Thunder Fox

Atra

One of the Eight Great Elementals, Atra met Allen in a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea. She normally appears as a young girl or a fox cub.



Hero

Alice Alvern

This kind girl wields her absolute power in defense of the world.



First princess
Lady of Light

Cheryl Wainwright

She attended the Royal Academy with Allen and with Lydia, whom she equals in ability.



"The kingdom's most viciously devious sorcerer"

The Professor

Allen's, Lydia's, and Teto's mentor mystifies others with his easygoing attitude. His familiar, Anko, has the form of a black cat.



Allen & Co. head clerk

Felicia Fosse

Although Felicia is shy and physically frail, her brilliant mind is unmatched in fortitude. Her father went missing during the rebellion.



Twin Heavens

Linaria Etherheart

This legendary descendant of witches lived five hundred years ago, during an age of strife. She entrusted Atra to Allen's care.

Characters

The Northern Ducal House of Howard



Duke Howard
"God of war"

Walter Howard

A man of commanding appearance who loves his late wife with all his heart. He vanquished an imperial army at Rostlay.



Duke Howard's eldest daughter
Royal Academy student council president

Stella Howard

Tina's elder sister, the heir to the Dukedom of Howard, is serious and hardworking but craves Allen's attention.



Duke Howard's second daughter
Little Lady of Ice

Tina Howard

Her inability to cast spells led some to call her "cursed." But under Allen's tutelage, she took first place in the Royal Academy entrance exams.



Tina's personal maid
Little Lady of Wind

Ellie Walker

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne's frequent spats.

The Southern Ducal House of Leinster



Duchess Leinster
Bloodstained Lady

Lisa Leinster

Lydia and Lynne's doting mother is one of the kingdom's mightiest warriors.



Duke Leinster's eldest daughter
Lady of the Sword

Lydia Leinster

Allen's rambunctious partner is the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman, although she can be emotionally fragile when he's not around.



Duke Leinster's second daughter
Little Lady of Fire

Lynne Leinster

Lydia's younger sister is second in her class at the Royal Academy, and Tina's rival. In the wake of the rebellion, she resolves to keep improving.



The Leinster Maid Corps's number three

Lily Leinster

This fashion-forward maid is actually the daughter of Under-duke Leinster. She gets along well with Allen.

Characters

Anna ····· Head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster.
Veteran of the War of the Dark Lord.

Romy ····· The Leinster Maid Corps's second-in-command.
An immigrant from the southern isles.

Sida Stinton ····· A Leinster maid in training. Worships the Great Moon.

Graham Walker ····· Head butler to the Ducal House of Howard.

Teto Tijerina ····· "Allen's star pupil."
One of the professor's university students.

Leticia Lebufera ····· A living legend known as the Emerald Gale.
One of the kingdom's mightiest warriors.

Richard Leinster ····· Duke Leinster's eldest son.
Vice commander of the royal guard.

Gil Algren ····· Duke Algren's fourth son.
Allen and Lydia's former underclassman.

False Saint ····· The shadowy mastermind behind the Church of the Holy Spirit.
Who is she really?

Sage? ····· An enigmatic sorcerer who wields the great spell Falling Star.

Alicia Coalfield ····· A vampiress who calls herself "Crescent Moon."

Io Lockfield ····· Second-ranked of the Church of the Holy Spirit's apostles,
after Alicia.

Viola Kokonoe ····· Loyal servant of the False Saint.

Rosa Howard ····· Stella and Tina's late mother. Much about her remains mysterious.

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Characters
4. Prologue
5. Chapter 1
6. Chapter 2
7. Chapter 3
8. Chapter 4
9. Epilogue
10. Afterword
11. Bonus High Resolution Illustrations
12. About J-Novel Club
13. Copyright

Prologue

“Lord Ridley, I’ve finished probing their mana, and the wavelengths match. We’ve found them: apostles of the Holy Spirit and their band of inquisitors!”

The shout rang through the moss-covered entryway of a disused chapel on the western edge of Tabatha, the city of craft, capital of the Lalannoy Republic. A boy with dull-blond hair flushed beneath the hood of his white-and-silver robe, still clutching his metal staff as he ended his detection spell. Lord Artie Addison looked frail and childlike in the light of the mana lamp. Everyone said he was fifteen, but he still reminded me of a puppy. Nearby, several dozen of our crack troops shot good-natured grins at the eldest son of Marquess Addison, founding champion of the republic.

At his age, my kid sister Lily had already started steering her own course.

“Drop the ‘lord,’ Artie. The troops are watching,” I said, looking out at a few of the city’s distinctive square towers silhouetted against the sky. Circumstances had kept me in the country for a year now.

“F-Forgive me,” Artie said, with a start. “But I can’t be too cavalier with a duke’s son. My father warned me to mind my manners.”

He had a point. The Leinsters held one of the Four Great Dukedoms of the Wainwright Kingdom, the greatest power in the west of the continent. The duke and his family were customarily styled “Highness,” and foreign powers treated the duchy like a nation in its own right. My own parents, the under-duke and -duchess, got some of the same perks. Me, though?

“Lord Addison never changes,” I said, touching the red hair poking out the side of my hood. “I keep explaining that I ran away to become a humble seeker of swords and sweets, but I can’t seem to get through to him. Now, how many are we up against, and how skilled are they? What elements do they use?”

Artie shrank and hung his head. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, tears welling in his dark-brown eyes. “I couldn’t tell that much.”

Well, magic’s not what it used to be. I can’t hold him to the same

standards as a master sorcerer from back home.

"Never mind," I said, sword and armor clinking as I dusted off my cloak. "We know our target's here, and that's good enough. I can tell you've improved."

"Th-Thank you." Artie's frown turned upside down. He had talent. With more years behind him, he'd grow into a fine sorcerer, a fine marquess, and a fine leader of his country.

"Captain, how's morale?" I asked an approaching naval officer—Minié Jonsson, a man high in Marquess Addison's trust. A tricorn hat crowned his blue uniform, and a saber and spell-pistol hung from his belt.

"High," he answered. "My second-in-command, Snider, has a force staking out the other exit. We can't be too free with orb communications, though. Apart from the church, anti-Addisonites could be listening in."

"I hear you took a hand in the Algren rebellion yourself."

"Orders are orders." A bit sheepishly, he added, "The marquess saved me from a court martial, and don't think I'm not grateful. I want to sail a ship again."

Lalannoyan artificing had never been better. Some of it even beat anything the kingdom could put together. Spell-guns, which let anyone rapid-fire elementary spells until they ran out of bullets, stood out as the prime example. At the moment, though, the country was split clean in two.

Nearly a hundred years had gone by since the republic won its independence from the Yustinian Empire to its north. The House of Addison and the Bright Wings Party it led had guided the country all that time…until an eastern army faction had rebelled against its anti-Yustinian focus on the western front and formed a secret alliance with the Church of the Holy Spirit. They had not only smuggled spell-guns and other magical weapons to the Algrens but also sent troops to massacre rebel Wainwright nobles on the islets of the Four Heroes Sea.

The marquess had purged the eastern forces as soon as the dust settled and tried to sweep the incident under the rug. But by then, it was already too late. His opposition, the Heaven and Earth Party, had let the cat out of the bag. Public opinion had split east and west, along with the military, leaving the republic on the brink of civil war.

More likely than not, the Heaven and Earth Party had their own backroom deal with the church. Marquess Addison still

feared splitting his country for good too much to make any grand military moves, but he couldn't ignore the apostles getting up to who-knew-what in the shadows either. In the end, he'd recalled the republic's greatest champion to the capital, begged for my help, and sent the both of us after them. Just the other day, we'd put an end to the fourth apostle, an ancient vampire, with the help of an old martial artist.

All well and good, except I came here to train my pastry skills.

"To be honest," Minié said, adjusting his tricorn, "I can't say I'm thrilled about taking on a bunch of monsters, but what can you do? Anyway, better them than another round with the Brain of the Lady of the Sword."

That nickname takes me back. No one but my cousin called him that back when I fled the royal capital.

"Most things seem that way when you compare them to the continent's future greatest sorcerer." I cracked a rueful grin, tapping my armor and scabbard—both white and scarlet.

"We found that out the hard way on the Four Heroes Sea. Now, if you'll excuse me." The seasoned naval officer strode off toward a group of soldiers preparing for the assault. His back radiated fighting spirit.

Artie had listened to us talk in silence. "Ridley," he spoke up hesitantly, "is the Brain of the Lady of the Sword really as great as all that?"

"You bet," I said. "He made it into the Royal Academy without anything to fall back on but his own skill, and I've lost count of the great deeds he's done since. The Lady of the Sword owes her meteoric rise to meeting him. Rumor has it he's played a hand in just about every crisis in recent memory."

Despite her ducal lineage, my cousin Lydia had never managed to cast a decent spell. People had gone as far as calling her "the Leinsters' cursed child." Then a new legend in the making had saved her and won the current Hero's respect. Lord Rodde, the Archmage and veteran of the War of the Dark Lord, had known greatness when he saw it—and so had I, or I wouldn't have lost my head and challenged my cousin to single combat in front of her "Brain."

"If he were here," the republic's future leader said, clutching my sleeve with both hands, "could he fix our communication orb problems?"

"Well…" I faltered, then fished out a little pocket watch I'd

bought in this city of craft.

I guess we have time.

"Artie, let me tell you a funny story—one I've never shared with anyone before."

"I'm not sure I follow," the boy said.

I felt his gaze on me as I rested a hand on the hilt of my trusty sword. "You see, as far as I could tell, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword—Allen of the wolf clan—doesn't have any special talent for magic."

That took a moment to sink in. Then Artie murmured, "What?"

The winter wind rustled our cloaks.

"He was an orphan," I said, looking the baffled lordling in the eye. "No relation to his wolf-clan parents. And I hear he never had a magic teacher because the eastern capital's beastfolk saw him as an outsider. Shamed as I am to admit it, anti-beastfolk prejudice in my homeland runs deep. He got hit with the blowback."

Not even the Leinsters' intelligence network had managed to identify his birth parents. The beastfolk community had gradually opened up to him, but the chieftains had refused to accept him as one of their own. No one but his adoptive family and a few other beastfolk had stood up for him before he came to the royal capital, where he'd met Lydia, Princess Cheryl Wainwright, and the late Zelbert Régnier.

"I bet Allen practiced magic because he wanted a way out," I mused. "The knight orders put too much stress on lineage to give him much hope, but the court sorcerers make allowances for skill."

"B-But…" Artie fumbled for words. "How could anyone but a prodigy hold his own against dragons and devils?"

"I got him to show me his training regimen just once, back in the royal capital," I said, thinking back to what he'd done while we watched Lydia and Princess Cheryl fight in the Royal Academy training ground. His method had been unremarkable, yet I'd never seen anything like it. "He ran through basic control exercises, just cycling through the eight classical elements over and over again. There was no trick to it. Allen practiced the same routine every single day, more times than you'd think possible. It added up to thousands, millions, billions, trillions, *quadrillions* of repetitions—more than the rest of us do in a lifetime."

Artie gaped, speechless.

Sorcerers needed fundamentals every bit as much as swordsmen. Only those seemingly endless drills set Allen apart. Most people couldn't come down that hard on themselves.

I squinted up at the moon. My brother-in-arms must have been making his own final preparations outside a different abandoned chapel. In the end, we never had figured out why the apostles cared so much about these relics of the cult of the "Great Moon," whatever that was.

"He didn't have a talent for magic," I said. "What he had was determination stronger than most of us can imagine. At the time, I failed to understand that, so I lost to my cousin when she found that same resolve."

I recalled the heat of her blade at my throat and the blazing fire in her eyes. "You're strong, Ridley. A lot stronger than me," she had said. "But I can't lose while he's watching. I can't! I swore I wouldn't, so I won't."

No one would ever get the better of my cousin, Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, while she had *him* at her side.

"Remember, Artie." I clenched my fist and touched it to the young lord's heart. "Relentless determination beats raw talent. You can't turn to an enemy and say, 'Please spare me; I'm not cut out for this!' And don't you want to keep Isolde safe?"

The boy's eyes flashed at the name of the girl a strange twist of fate had placed in his house's care. Isolde's father led the Heaven and Earth Party.

"Thank you, Ridley!" he cried, nodding vigorously.

"When this mission's over, treat me to a pastry I've never had before," I said, taking one last look at my watch before pocketing it. Minié and the other soldiers fell into formation, spell-guns in hand.

I gave Artie a thump on the back. "It's time. Let's move."

"Yes, sir!"

I led the unit down a somber stone passage by the light of antique mana lamps. We had ringed ourselves in silencing spells. Given who we were up against, though, I couldn't rule out an ambush.

"I had no idea this was here," Artie murmured, taking in the walls, ceiling, and massive stone pillars, all moss-covered and crumbling in places.

"It reminds me of a place in the southern capital. I used to

play there all the time as a kid," I said. "Halt."

The group obeyed as one. Skewed stone doors gave on to a large chamber.

Minié drew his saber. "My lord, Sir Ridley, allow us to take the lead." To the troops—and the tense young male officer behind him—he added, "Remember: not a sound."

The spell-gunners advanced with a muted chorus of "Yes, sir." I would have liked to call for detection spells, but knowing Artie's skill, the enemy would just trace them back to us.

As the doors drew nearer, I felt a slight tremor. Our targets were here all right.

Minié silently raised his hand and pointed his saber at the lamplit chamber ahead. The spell-gunners advanced to the doors in neat formation.

I saw a group of robed men, several in gray and two in pristine white: inquisitors and apostles of the Church of the Holy Spirit.

"Fire!"

Minié's command unleashed a barrage of light from several dozen spell-guns. Each blast had about the force of the elementary spell Divine Light Shot, but they added up to a serious blow. A crash rang out, a flash engulfed the chamber, and dust filled the air.

"Charge, if you please!" Artie shouted, swinging his staff with dignity, and we all plunged in. The soldiers held ranks, launching even more spell-bullets into the dust cloud.

We managed to catch them off guard, but they won't go down this easily.

The soldiers gave a start as spell formulae slithered up the pillars to the ceiling. They reminded me of nothing so much as congealing blood. A shower of shadowy chains gouged chunks out of the floor. The doorway closed behind us.

This looks like...

"We're caught in a barrier!"

"Well spotted. I never dreamed you'd divide your forces and walk into our trap so readily. I only wish our search here had proven as fruitful. Still, one can't have everything."

A gust of sinister black wind revealed a slender apostle, staff in hand. His deep hood hid his face.

They knew we were coming?!

The other apostle, a hulking man, appeared behind us with

the inquisitors, their single-edged daggers drawn.

"Fire!" Minié barked again, urgency in his voice.

A rapid volley answered, but every shot bounced off a wall of gray: remnants of the great spell Radiant Shield that Gerard Wainwright had leaked into their hands.

"I've test-fired a few spell-guns myself," the thin apostle said. "They pale in comparison to their namesakes from the days gods walked the earth. Those slew wyrms with ease, but yours might as well be toys before Her Holiness's glorious might. Don't you agree, Ifur?"

"It goes without saying, Ibush-nur." The larger apostle swept his cloak aside, drew a magnificent longsword from his belt, and brandished it aloft. The thin apostle touched his staff to it, and dark water sped through the air as an enormous spell formula took shape.

"N-Nothing human has mana like this!" Artie wailed, backing away while the whole chamber shook.

"Defensive positions! And be quick about it!" Minié snapped.

"Y-Yes, sir!" The soldiers unfurled scrolls, raising barriers in rapid succession.

The thin apostle sneered. "A witch who warred against the world five hundred years ago crafted this tactical taboo: Wail of Wasting Waters. The likes of you could never withstand its—"

I stopped listening and sprinted, low to the ground. Flames rose with my fighting spirit, dominating the space around me as I closed in.

"Not so fast!"

"Heretic!"

"Leave the apostles to their great work!"

The gray-robed inquisitors shouted, rapidly conjuring chains. Several hundred soon sought to seize me with their ruthless grasp. I leapt to a pillar, kicked off it for all I was worth, and dove, slipping between them. My trusty sword flashed from its scabbard in a sweeping slash as I landed. An inferno followed in the blade's wake, annihilating the floating spell formula.

The inquisitors landed near me, lips twisting into grimaces despite their consternation. I laid into them with my flaming sword, slicing through their torsos before they had a chance to react. To the men's shock, their vestiges of the great spell Resurrection flickered and died amid my flames. I swept my blade around toward the thin apostle—and the screech of steel

on steel filled the chamber. The big apostle's longsword had blocked my strike.

"Well now," I said, "that's a fine blade you've got there."

A staff swept down in lieu of an answer. The thin apostle had cast the advanced spell Ocean Orb at point-blank range.

I knocked the longsword aside and fell back, slicing through the oncoming ball on my backswing. Fire met inky water in an explosion of force. Scorching wind from the blast blew our hoods back as we moved apart.

Ibush-nur narrowed his eyes. "Swordmaster Ridley Leinster," he said, sweat running down his cheeks, "you fled the kingdom. What brings you to this land?"

"I take it that's one of the flaming swords the Leinsters had the long-lived races forge after the war, as weapons against the Dark Lord," the big apostle added, adjusting his grip on his longsword amid the growing blaze. "True Scarlet is the most famous, but I had heard that others existed. Yours easily contains more mana than a supreme spell."

"It's called 'Devoted Blossom.' Nice name, don't you think?" I said, glancing behind me. Artie and Minié looked pale, but they hadn't lost heart.

I leveled my flaming sword at the apostles. "Earl Raymond Despenser and Marchese Fossi Folonto—or would you prefer 'Fifth Apostle Ibush-nur' and 'Sixth Apostle Ifur,' servants of the dubious so-called 'Saint'?" I taunted as the flames leapt higher, spreading to the actual wards hemming us in. "There are only seven of you—six since we put down your number four, Idris. You should have taken Lalannoyan intelligence more seriously."

Marquess Addison had left no stone unturned once he'd caught on to the church's machinations. These fanatics would stop at nothing, but we'd still found out who some of them really were.

The apostles radiated silent fury. Serpentine marks appeared on their cheeks, amplifying their mana. They were no pushovers. Still, I could take them with my companions backing me up.

"So, what now?" I pressed. "I'd be happy to accept your surrender. I'd love to know what brings you here, for one thing. You gentlemen have skill, but you don't measure up to the old vampire we already— Hm?"

"L-Lord Ridley! I sense powerful mana!" Artie shouted as a twist in space interrupted my appraisal of the lesser apostles.

Without warning, the contorted space blossomed into an eight-petaled black flower. At nearly the same moment, I caught a lightning-quick slash on my trusty sword and locked blades with a new foe: a brown-eyed girl in a hooded gray robe who had just teleported in. Her hands gripped a crimson-stained sword with a single edge on its large curved blade.

A "katana"! I've heard a land far to the east forged them in ancient times.

"You make handling that unwieldy thing look easy!" I exclaimed as sparks flew from our blades. Friend or foe, her swordplay was formidable.

I swept my sword to one side, holding off the katana-wielder with a burst of fire. I started to charge through the blaze—then swerved back, Artie's startled cry ringing in my ears. A long spear imbued with spiraling wind magic shot down from over my head, leaving a gash on my cheek. I'd sensed no trace of mana. I could never have dodged it if not for my Leinster intuition.

Still off-balance, I kicked the ground and spun. My blade slit open the hood of a second gray-robed girl as I fell back. She had teleported in on a delay.

I glared at the newcomers. Both outclassed Ibush-nur and Ifur.

"A katana-wielder out of some old fairy tale and a beastfolk spearwoman," I said. "Did that last technique come from the old Atlas Kingdom? You must be Viola Kokonoe, the Saint's agent who appeared in the city of water, and Third Apostle Levi Atlas, who wears an inquisitor's robe despite her rank!"

The spear-wielding apostle whose hood I'd split was a young cat-clan girl. Her short straw-colored hair faded to white halfway down its length. Her eyes showed no emotion, but hatred swirled in their depths. Viola resheathed her long katana and leaned forward, poised to kill. She was the biggest threat in the room. Even Ibush-nur and Ifur started deploying a dizzying array of spells.

The tables had turned. I needed to make sure at least Artie and the soldiers got away. My grip tightened on my sword. Then my orb blinked.

Really?!

"Throw all you've got into magical defense!" I shouted, launching myself backward without a moment's delay. "Don't count on him to hold back!"

“What?” Artie gaped. “L-Lord Ridley, y-you don’t mean—”

“Yes, sir!” Minié interrupted, raising the toughest barrier he could manage. The other soldiers followed suit.

A moment later, a ray of light shot through the chapel ceiling, slicing it open along with the wards confining us. While silent screams burst from my allies and flames raged, a lone young knight landed majestically on the central pillar. He wore a fearless grin on an impossibly handsome face framed by gleaming blond hair and silver-gold eyes. Armored in pure white and azure with a gold-embroidered cape, he carried twin white-scabbarded swords: enchanted blades forged in the Old Empire by the House of Shiki at the height of its prowess.

Noting the apostles’ wary looks, I turned to the man who had just made this flashy entrance and said, “You’re late, Arthur.”

“The star always enters last!” Lalannoy’s guardian angel answered, with a loud laugh. “Don’t you agree, my friend? The other site was a decoy, but I cut them all down just in case!”

“Shove it. What if I’d died? Wouldn’t you hate to see my path of swords and sweets end here?”

“You won’t die—not now that I’m here!”

I resisted the urge to argue.

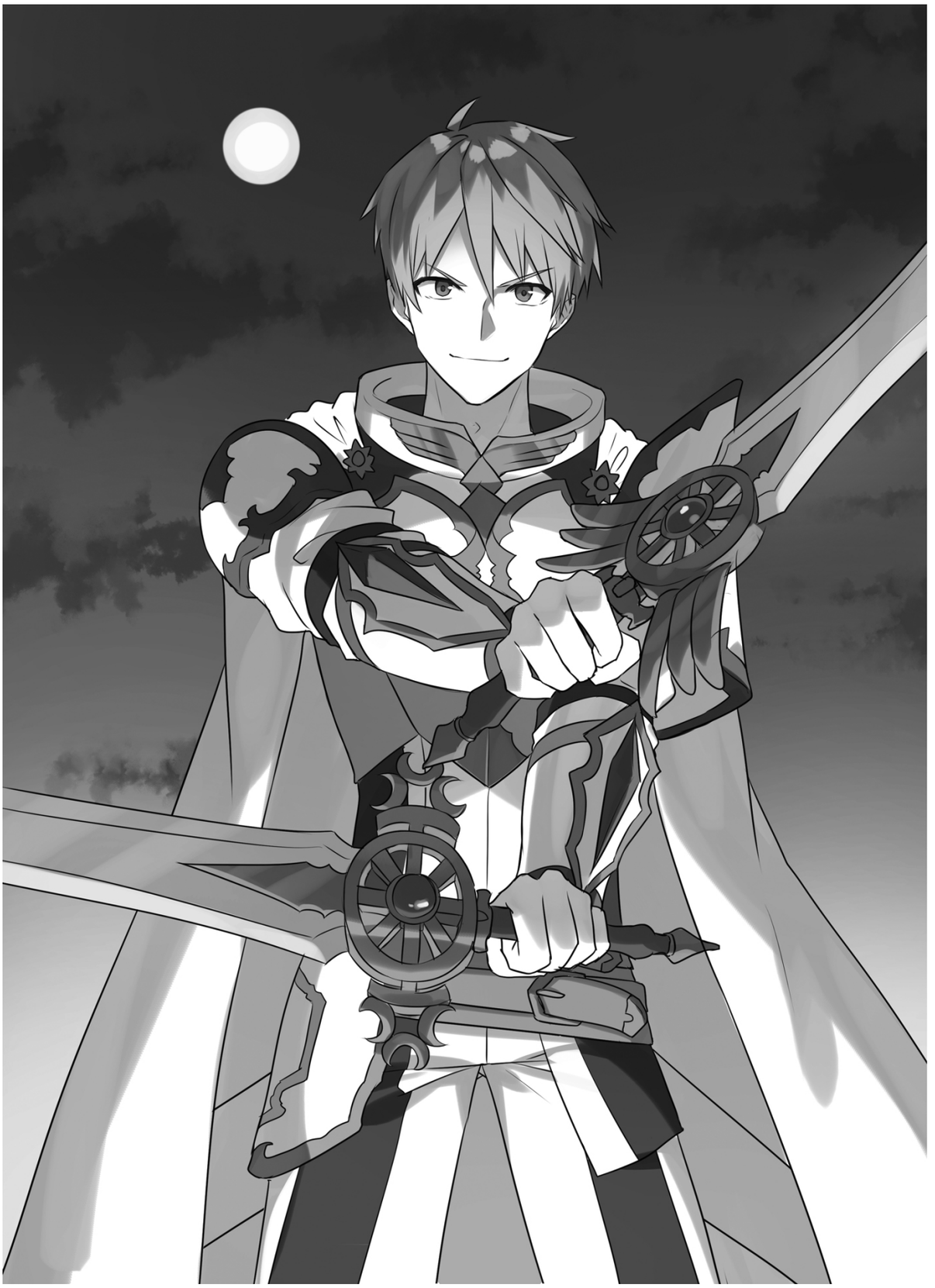
“Lady Elna,” I called to the beautiful sorceress who had landed in front of Artie and the soldiers. Arthur’s cousin and fiancée had short lilac hair and silver-gold eyes. She wore small spectacles and a white-and-purple robe, and she held an ancient staff.

“I beg your pardon,” Lady Elna Lothringen said, with a frown and a sigh. “I’ll discipline him later.”

“What?!” Arthur cried. “I hope you’ll go easy—your ‘discipline’ makes even *my* heart quail. Now…”

He started to draw his swords. The apostles didn’t—couldn’t—move. If they stirred a muscle, he would cut them down.

“Apostles of the false Saint, thank you for waiting!” the champion shouted, his breathtaking blades flashing amid the rising flames. “I am Heaven’s Sword, Arthur Lothringen of the Lalannoy Republic! It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, however briefly. Now that I’m here, your wicked schemes are finished. Have at you!”



Chapter 1

The girls' blasts of lightning and ice met and shattered, canceling each other out. Glowing mana rained down within the intricate wards that enclosed the Leinster courtyard in the royal capital.

A wolf-clan girl backed off slightly and regained her balance. My sister Caren, vice president of the Royal Academy student council, flashed a daredevil smile. Her silver-gray tail swayed happily.

"Looks like you're back in top form, Stella!" she called to her opponent while she dusted off her beret and winter uniform. "But you don't need to push yourself that hard, even if my brother *did* agree to watch us spar. You can't be used to that staff yet. Between the raid and examining the Great Tree, we've barely had class in ten days."

Another girl wearing the same uniform, her long, azure-tinged platinum hair tied with a sky-blue ribbon, raised her weapons for another round. The eldest daughter of the northern Ducal House of Howard and president of the Royal Academy student council held a training sword in her right hand and a beautiful staff crowned with a flower-shaped jewel in her left. The latter still held many mysteries. I doubted it could cause any harm while I kept a shallow mana link with both girls, but one never knew.

Stella shot a glance at my seat outside the barrier. Her platinum hair glistened in the winter sunlight.

"I'm just getting warmed up!" she shouted back. "Mr. Allen sacrificed his time off to watch us on a Lightningday—I can't show him less than my best! But I think *you'd* better start learning to live without him. I mean, we'll be going to university next year."

"I'll *never* leave Allen!" Caren roared, conjuring a short lightning spear in each hand and sweeping them through the air. A colossal blade of lightning burst forth, barreling toward the girl with a right to demand we call her "Highness"...only to crash against a thick wall of pale-azure ice.

"You'll have to do better than that!" Stella shouted, brimming

with confidence.

I honestly hadn't planned to watch them spar. Our lessons didn't resume until the next afternoon. I had only stopped by to question Sida Stinton, a Leinster maid in training. And I couldn't forget the unofficial council at the Lebufera mansion I'd been summoned to attend later in the day. But I supposed my luck had run out when I'd bumped into Caren and Stella at the café with the sky-blue roof—they had already parted ways with the younger girls, who still had classes. I couldn't very well refuse a request from my dear little sister and student.

I would need to thank Duchess Lisa Leinster later. She had agreed, via magical creature, to lend us the venue on almost no notice.

Suddenly, the thin silver bracelet on my right wrist caught my eye. For a moment, I thought I heard the Black-and-White Angel—Princess Carina Wainwright, a legend of a century before—laugh and say, "Look after Stella, won't you, Allen the kindhearted 'key'?" I hoped I had imagined it.

Until just a few days earlier, Stella had suffered from an inability to cast any magic except for a select few light spells. Curing her symptoms had sent us well beyond the realm of common sense. That went for the flower dragon, who had sent us through the uncanny Sealed Archive to the sprawling "angel creation" altar below the palace, as well as for Carina, whom we'd found sealed there. Who knew what she'd imbued this transformed bracelet with?

While I grimaced, my sister clothed herself in electricity: Lightning Apotheosis.

"I'm coming for you, Stella!"

"But you won't beat me, Caren!"

Their clash tore holes in the barrier, but Leinster maids standing by mended it on the spot.

Magnificent! Talk about skill.

"Allen!" A musical voice interrupted my mental adulation. "Both so strong!"

"Whoa there!" I cried as a child with a violet ribbon in her long white hair sprang onto my lap, ears and tail twitching all the while. Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the great elementals, looked adorable bundled up in her fluffy winter cloak.

"It's good to see you again," I said. "Did you have fun exploring the mansion?"

Atra beamed and waved her little hands. The maids who had accompanied her waved back cheerfully. Two walked over carrying a tray.

"S-So sorry to keep you waiting, sir," said the trainee with her lustrous brown hair in pigtails.

"Your tea, Mr. Allen," added a maid with an air of nobility. She had gorgeous blonde hair, and no one who saw her gem-bright, silver-gold eyes would ever forget them.

I rose and bowed to the girl I'd come to interview and the maid corps's number eight, who was currently acting as her bodyguard. "Sida, please pardon the imposition. Cordelia, thank you for erecting the barrier. Not many places can stand up to a serious bout between the two of them, so I truly appreciate it."

"I-It's no trouble, really!" The tense trainee frantically shook her head and waved her hands. "I o-only hope I can help."

The maid I could have taken for a foreign princess set her tray on a round table and gracefully began pouring tea. "It's an honor to be of service," she said. "Waiting on you, sir, and the young ladies has become quite a popular duty among us. I also volunteered for a post at Allen & Co., but Emma's team intervened. 'You can't come, Cordelia!' they said. 'You'll snatch away Miss Fosse!' They're simply heartless."

I forced a laugh, unable to come up with a better response. The maids assigned to the company *did* tend to spoil our head clerk.

Caren's long lightning spear clashed with the icy blades Stella had formed around her staff and training sword. While the wards shuddered, Atra tugged at Cordelia's skirt—the maid had finished pouring tea.

"Princess! Hug!"

"What? I'm not a p-prin— Mr. Allen?" The flustered maid looked to me for help. I nodded, enjoying this new side of her.

"W-Well, then, by your leave, Miss Atra." Cordelia tenderly lifted the happy child in her arms. Her eyes held undiluted affection.

The maids standing by burst into a flood of admiration.

"My!"

"Ms. Cordelia and Miss Atra. What a divine combination."

"N-No. I can't fall yet. I must press on."

"Captain Cordelia, so pretty. Miss Atra, so cute."

Silly me. I ought to know what the Leinster maids are like by now.

“Would you mind showing her the outer gardens?” I asked Cordelia while she petted Atra’s head. “I worry about bad influences here.”

Caren deployed multiple Imperial Thunder Lances, even though I’d only just given her the formula for the advanced spell in the café. Stella countered by bringing out a new advanced spell of her own: Momentary Flash Ray. Atra watched with stars in her eyes until the elegant maid distracted her with a small parcel of cookies.

“Certainly, sir,” she said, bowing so gracefully that I caught myself thinking she might be a foreign princess after all. “I would be delighted to look after Miss Atra once again.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “Have fun, Atra.”

“Okay!” the beast-eared child piped cheerily, then handed me a star-shaped cookie from the bag.

“Thank you.” I patted her head and sped Cordelia on her way with a look.

I was still watching the maid walk off toward the mansion when a massive impact shook the ground. I bit into the cookie and turned to look, Sida’s squeal ringing in my ears.

The platinum-haired noblewoman was down on one knee, surrounded by countless lightning spears. Caren stood tall, crackling with violet sparks.

“You’ve got nowhere left to run!” she shouted. “I win this round!”

The noblewoman rose silently and resheathed her broken training sword. Amid a flurry of pale-azure ice flakes, Stella shot me a brief look and gave a slight nod. She twirled her staff, leveling the tip at Caren just as crystal clear light shone from its orb.

“We’ll see about that,” she said. “I may not look like much, but I learned from the best sorcerer in the kingdom.”

“And I’m his one and only sister!” Caren shot back while her lightning spears rained down.

“Careful,” I said, steadying Sida with my left hand when she shrieked and nearly fell. Levitation spells saved the table and chairs.

Caren’s magic kicked up a stiff breeze, swiftly clearing the air and restoring our view of the courtyard. Ice crystals danced. Mana beyond anything thus far made my skin tingle.

I’d call that a success.

“Are you all right?” I smiled at the rigid, red-faced young maid in training.

“I’m s-so sorry,” Sida mumbled, pulling out an emblem. “O G-Great Moon, what should I do at a time like this?”

I maneuvered her into a chair and looked up at the sky, where an angel with two wings of pale azure—Stella Howard—hovered on clean, icy gusts.

My sister’s eyes widened as she connected the dots. “Don’t tell me you tapped into angelic power. You look just like Lydia and Tina when— Allen?”

I raised my teacup as a shield against her glare. “After what happened the other day, I managed to reconstruct a small portion of Carina’s spell formulae,” I explained. “Stella had just gotten better, remember, so I thought a celebration was in order.”

“That’s no excuse to keep secrets from your lovely little sister with her birthday right around the—”

“The tables have turned, Caren!” Stella cut in, launching her counterattack. Icy winds turned to razor-sharp blades, closing in on Caren with unerring precision—until she vanished in a scatter of sparks.

“A *lightning* illusion? I’ve never seen anything like—”

The noblewoman jerked around and blocked an overhead strike from Caren’s cross-tipped lightning spear with the advanced spell Imperial Snow Blade. Arcs of electricity and shards of ice threatened to cover the whole courtyard.

Locked blade to blade, Caren bared her canines in a grin. “You’re not the only one Allen cooked up a new spell for!”

The pale-azure angel groaned and gave way, retreating. The lightning wolf cast Heavenly Wind Bound and gave chase. I turned back to Sida, who couldn’t seem to take her eyes off their mock combat.

“It looks like they’ll be at it for a while yet,” I said. “Now, would you mind telling me about the worshippers of the Great Moon?”

“O-Of course!” the trainee answered with a start. Then she slumped and hung her head. “Only, well, I don’t think I’ll be much use.”

I took a sip of tea and replaced my cup on its saucer. “I’d still love to hear what little you can tell me as your religion’s only adherent in the city. I’m told the Great Moon is an ancient deity worshipped in quite a limited area east of the League of

Principalities, that the dragons are their messengers, and that the faith has roots in the age of gods. It seems as though only a select few adherents possess scriptures. Do I have that right?"

I poured tea into a spare cup and set it before Sida. A pleasant fragrance filled my nostrils.

No authority in the city had known more than I'd just said. Even so, I'd caught glimpses of the cult of the Great Moon behind the apostles who had taken a shadowy part in so many incidents on their false Saint's orders. Their leader, Aster Etherfield, the Sage, and their second-in-command, Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield, had both invoked unknown spells that seemed to derive from the faith. I couldn't afford to ignore it any longer.

Sida trembled slightly as she drank her tea. "Y-Yes, sir. We pass down most things by word of mouth. Even the scriptures only have abstract pictures in them. And I heard we lost the originals after big wars left fewer and fewer believers. A-All the faithful are normal as can be. I don't think any of us know any special magic or anything like that."

I took a notebook from my pocket and jotted down notes.

So, the cult has dwindled practically to nothing. It doesn't sound like an organization with any practical influence.

"Lynne mentioned that the scriptures show a wolf cloaked in lightning," I continued after checking my pocket watch.

"The Divine Wolf who follows the Great Moon to do really big magic," Sida confirmed. "Oh! They say the Great Moon was an incredible magician who saved the world."

"I see. Next, I'd like you to look at something."

An "incredible magician"? I thought, looking down to see the ring on the third finger of my right hand flash crimson. *That bears investigating.*

I sketched a design of seven crooked crescents arranged to resemble a flower and passed the notebook to Sida. Fear entered her gaze.

"M-Mr. Allen..." She faltered. "Wh-Where did you find this mark?"

"Among the effects of the late Atlasian general Robson Atlas," I said. "Impressed on the cover of a thin volume titled *Apocrypha of the Great Moon*. Do you know something about it?"

Sida drew her insignia from the neck of her dress, squeezed her eyes shut, and shook her head. "I...I'm s-so sorry. I don't

know much about the Apostate said to have made that mark. It's forbidden knowledge. I closed my eyes the other day too, when it appeared in the sky over the city. I've seen my father railing against him in the chapel. 'The faithful would never have fallen on such hard times if not for him!' He's always such a gentle man, but, well, he scared me."

Tina and Stella's mother, the late Duchess Rosa Howard, had written words to similar effect in the city of water: "Master's nemesis: the Apostate of the Great Moon."

I glanced at Caren and Stella's raging battle, scribbled another note, and tore two pages from the notebook.

"Forgive me," I said. "I didn't mean to dredge up unpleasant memories."

"O-Oh, no!" Sida protested, suddenly bursting with enthusiasm. "I'll try to ask my parents next time I write to them! Without letting on!"

She reminds me just a little of Tina. I can see why Lynne took a liking to her.

"Please do," I said. "It looks like they're almost done."

I pocketed my watch just as a little bird with black and scarlet plumage alighted on my shoulder and vanished.

"Hurry up and get yourself to the Lebufera house."

Lady Lydia Leinster sounded less than pleased. We had barely gotten to see each other since the apostles' attack on the city, although we exchanged messages via magical creatures morning, noon, evening, and before bed.

I picked up the wand Stella used day-to-day and strode out onto the sheet of ice that had once been a courtyard. The combatants were facing each other, one in midair and the other atop a broken icicle.

"Don't you think it's time we settled this?" the platinum-haired noblewoman asked, panting as she spread her pale-azure wings wide.

"Good idea. How about the winner goes shopping with Allen?" Caren said, her armor of lightning swelling to even grander proportions. She shaped it into a ferocious wolf head as she imbued her lightning spear with every spark of mana she could muster.

"I suddenly feel a lot more motivated." Stella raised her staff high, sounding like she was having the time of her life. "Don't blame me if I beat you."

“You won’t. Sisters protect brothers. Don’t you know that’s the way of the world?”

They shared a chuckle, then conversation ceased. The pale-azure angel and lightning wolf raised their weapons to strike.

“Caren!”

“Stella!”

“This ends now!” they roared in unison.

Caren kicked off her foothold on the broken icicle, beginning her charge at the airborne Stella. On the tip of her weapon, she had multi-cast Thunder Fang Spear, an advanced spell tailored for maximum piercing power. A tremendous flash of lightning shattered a thick wall of ice.

“Not so fast!” Stella brought her rod down, casting the supreme spell Frost-Gleam Hawks—and immediately converting it into an array of gleaming Azure Shields to take Caren’s charge head-on. The very air groaned under the force of the impact, but my sister advanced no farther.

“You’ll have to do better than that!” Caren howled.

“You’ve lost, Caren!” Stella shouted back, converting her staff into an Azure Sword to deal the finishing blow. “Not even Mr. Allen’s advanced spells can break through my Azure Shields! Today’s the day I finally— What? I-Is that…? No!”

The wolf of lightning shrouding Caren suddenly began to change, taking on a new shape.

There were a grand total of eight recognized supreme spells in existence. I had seen five of them with my own eyes. First, the magic of the Four Great Ducal Houses, pride of the kingdom: the Howards’ Blizzard Wolf, the Leinsters’ Firebird, the Lebuferas’ Gale Dragon, and the Algrens’ Lightning Lord Tiger. Then Water-Fang Whale, inheritance of the League of Principalities. With so many examples to work from, I hadn’t found it so difficult to weave a new supreme spell for my adorable little sister whose skill and mana reserves had grown so dramatically in the past few months.

“Sorry, Stella. While we’re at it, I’ll let you in on a secret. You might not guess it…” Caren’s mana skyrocketed. Her wolf gained an aura of divinity as it morphed into a deep-violet dragon and began pushing forward, knocking Stella’s staff skyward as it ate through her Azure Shields. “But Allen has a real soft spot for his sister!”

“But…but I haven’t lost yet!” Though shaken, Stella pulled

herself together and reinforced her icy shields to weather the onslaught.

Their eyes flashed fiercely. Both girls knew that they could win.



“All right, that’s enough,” I said, flicking the wand and reaching into their magic. To their shock—and a startled squawk from Sida—every spell vanished. At the same time, I cast levitation on the pair and Stella’s staff, bringing them gently down beside me.

“Really, Allen?” Caren demanded, drawing out each syllable.

“Really, Mr. Allen.” Even Stella sounded put out.

Sida opened and closed her mouth in mute amazement.

I calmed the blazing orb atop the staff, which stood embedded in the earth, then straightened the girls’ berets and severed our mana links.

“Time’s up,” I said. “I expect you to have put this courtyard back the way it was by the time Tina, Ellie, and Lynne get home. Stella, thank you for lending me your wand.”

The pair looked at each other, then reluctantly buried the hatchet.

“Oh, all right.”

“Very well.”

“Also, here are my thoughts on your sparring just— E-Excuse me? Caren? Stella?” Both girls turned cold stares on me as I held out the sheets of notepaper.

My sister crossed her arms and sighed. “Brace yourself, Allen. We’re going to have words tonight.”

“I hope you won’t be too harsh with me,” I said, forcing a laugh. With her birthday only a day away, Caren would be visiting my lodgings in the working district that evening.

“Tonight?” Stella repeated, stowing the wand I’d returned at her hip before timidly closing her fingers on my sleeve. “Mr. Allen.”

The sight of our “White Saint” blushing up at me sent her devotees—Stella had a following even among the Leinster maids—into a frenzy.

“Aaah.”

“Oh, Your Holiness!”

“Lady Stella is too charming for words.”

They’re uninhibited, I’ll give them that.

At last, the young noblewoman found the courage to voice her request.

“I’d, um, l-like to come too! To stay with you tonight!”

“No. It’s not fit for a duke’s daughter,” Caren cut in, placing herself like a wall in Stella’s path. Her ears and tail bristled, alert

to danger.

“R-Really, Caren, don’t you think that’s a bit high-handed?”

“N-O! No!”

The girls didn’t seem to care who saw them argue, though they would go on to carry the kingdom’s future on their shoulders. I felt a slight pang as I watched. The scene brought back memories of my best friend Zelbert Régnier, now reduced to the fourth of the church’s apostles.

Leaving Caren and Stella, I stopped to convey my gratitude to the maid in training.

“Thank you, Sida. I really appreciate your help.”

“N-Not at all! I o-only hope it repaid your time,” she answered with overblown deference. Judging by the way she’d jumped when I spoke to her, she must have lost herself in watching the sparring again.

“Allen!” With a light pitter-patter of running feet, Atra threw her arms around me. I inclined my head to Cordelia and the other maids I could see smiling a short distance off.

“Welcome back, Atra,” I said. “Would you go fetch Caren and Stella for me?”

“Okay!”

No sooner had I set her down on the ground than the white-haired child took off toward the pair, violet ribbon fluttering. I was savoring the calm that came over me when, out of the blue, I recalled a certain place. Lydia had gone there to quiet her mind back when I’d first met her at the Royal Academy, and so had the highborn would-be maid I’d first encountered in the southern capital.

“Sida,” I said, turning back, “one last question. You know that nameless chapel in the southern capital? Does it have any connection to the Great Moon?”

The girl gave me a puzzled look. Then, “Y-Yes, sir! I remember going there to pray when I was little.”

It wasn’t much, but it was a clue.

I waved to Caren and Stella as they returned with Atra tugging at their skirts. “That’s the biggest find of the day,” I told the maid in training. “You won’t find me ungrateful. I hope you’ll keep looking out for Lydia and Lynne.”

“Yes, sir. Sida Stinton, maid in training to the Ducal House of Leinster, will do her very best!”

✽

“Fashionably late, I see, Allen—or the great ‘Emissary of the Water Dragon,’ as they say in the city of water,” said a beauty with long scarlet hair. She was dressed like a sword fighter, complete with the enchanted blade Cresset Fox hanging from her belt, and she had accosted Atra and me the instant an elderly elven butler showed us into the Lebufera mansion.

“I’ve missed you too, Lydia,” I replied.

“Humph.”

This grouchy young woman was Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter, also known as the Lady of the Sword. My partner through thick and thin, she currently served as a bodyguard to our former classmate Princess Cheryl Wainwright. She must have left Lia—the great elemental Blazing Qilin—in the council chamber.

I thanked the butler, who responded with a deep bow despite his obvious seniority. I puzzled over the oddly formal reception while I attached an invisible thread to Atra, who was intent on scrutinizing every painting and piece of pottery in sight. A dainty finger prodded my cheek.

“So, what’s your excuse today?” its owner demanded. “Questioning Sida shouldn’t have taken nearly this long.”

“I’d just finished running errands when I bumped into Caren and Stella at our usual café,” I explained. “I guess the Royal Academy cut down on class time after what happened with the Great Tree. Anyway, I ended up watching them spar.”

“You don’t say? Well, we don’t have any more time to waste.” Lydia turned on her heel and started walking, making no attempt to hide her ill humor.

I shrugged, called, “Atra, time to go!” and followed after her.

We climbed the stairs to the third floor, proceeded along a lavishly carpeted corridor, and soon found ourselves alone. I had expected more guards. Perhaps the aftermath of the recent disturbance was proving a drain on manpower. Regardless, the young woman strode ahead of me in silence.

“Excuse me,” I ventured, “but, um, is Cheryl already in the council chamber? I don’t know if you should really leave her alone at a time like—”

“Don’t mention that scheming princess *now*!” Lydia whirled round, launching kicks and chops faster than the eye could see. I

evacuated Atra with a levitation spell and dodged nimbly around them as I leapt back.

"Wait. Hold it together, Lydia. You don't want to cut loose *here*."

"You heartless wretch! What kind of servant just leaves his mistress trapped in the palace?!" the noblewoman snarled, mana making her scarlet hair stand on end. "You never even *tried* to rescue me. Where did I go wrong training you, I wonder."

What did she expect me to do, sneak into her room? Maybe at the Leinster mansion, but she had been sleeping at the palace for ten days now. The princess might have appointed me her personal investigator, but that didn't give me a free pass. Many nobles still didn't take kindly to a beastfolk adoptee without even a house name—although recent events had admittedly put a significant dent in their numbers—and I would have hated to cause trouble for Lydia and Cheryl. The brilliant young woman in front of me knew that perfectly well. She simply missed me more than she let on.

"Honestly," I sighed, "when will the great Lady of the Sword learn to be reasonable?"

"Humph! Anyone would agree you're in the wrong here!" She sounded like a sulky child, although she was actually a bit older than me.

I'd planned to wait and give her this later, but oh well.

After checking that no one else was about, I drew a plain little box from an inner pocket. "Here you are," I said, handing it to Lydia. She was starting to pout.

"Really? If you think you can butter me up with presents after neglecting me all this time, you've got another thing coming," Lydia grumbled, although she dutifully accepted the box and opened it. "You should know better than anyone that I'm not so easily bou— A-Allen?"

She froze at the sight of the contents: a pure-white ribbon embroidered with pale-scarlet and silver thread. It had been woven in a far eastern land, according to the man from the Thirteen Free Cities who had sold it to me.

"We promised to pick out a new ribbon for you, remember? Outside the cathedral," I said, turning to look out the window as embarrassment overcame me. "It hasn't been easy finding time to meet since then, though, so I took a look through the bazaar before coming here. Atra helped me pick."

The floating child broke into a pleased song, while Lydia stared down at the floor. Her ears and what I could see of her neck had turned bright red.

"I don't just have a thing for long hair," I added. "I like a girl who looks good with a hair ribbon just as much. I must have mentioned that, right?"

Lydia pressed her face against my chest, still clasping the box tight in both hands. "I heard the long hair part at our Royal Academy entrance exam, but you never said anything about ribbons. Unbelievable."

"Really? I could have sworn I told you everything," I said, waving my hand to dispel the plumes of pale fire that had started flitting about in tune with her emotions.

"Unbelievable," Lydia repeated under her breath. "Simply unbelievable. That was a low blow, and you know it."

She pulled back slightly to give Atra a "Thank you" and a tender pat on the head, then turned back to me and made a show of touching her right ring finger. It glowed with a pale-blue light: power from what little water I'd gleaned from a sanctuary during our time abroad. "So, when are you going to reconnect this? I'd say we need it, given all the trouble lately."

Thanks to the magical pact we'd sealed, Lydia and I could currently more or less sense each other's locations from anywhere in the city. Unfortunately, I had used the last of my sacred water and flowers during our latest emergency. So, this noblewoman with a stray lock of scarlet hair swaying in delight was really asking, "Would you link mana with me all the time?"

How could she offer up all her mana on a platter like that? Where did I go wrong teaching her?

I lowered Atra to the floor and shook my head. "No."

"Don't be stingy." My senior by a narrow margin pouted.

"Don't be stin-gy?" the white-haired child echoed, confused.

She's a bad influence! We need to have serious words about this before she turns Lia into a little scamp! That said…

The scarlet-haired young woman looked so joyous as she scooped up the little girl and started dancing that I couldn't hold it against her—although I did hear a chorus in my head.

"You spoil Lydia, sir!" my platinum-haired student would say.

"I agree with Tina on all counts!" my sister would add.

"A-Allen, sir, would you link mana with m-me too?" an angelic maid might ask, tugging on my sleeve. She had learned to speak

her mind.

“Dear brother?” A red-haired young noblewoman would pout. She had taken to sulking ever since the raid on the city. “I hope you haven’t forgotten m—”

“I think it should be *my* turn next!” a maid I hadn’t seen in several days would cut in, palms together in a winning gesture.

I can’t say I agree.

The Lady of the Sword had stopped spinning and started nuzzling Atra cheek to cheek.



I cleared my throat. “Lydia, before the council meeting, I’d like to have a serious talk about—”

“Allen!” came a musical cry as a child with long scarlet hair—Lia—came bounding through the window astride Chiffon, Cheryl’s white-wolf companion.

Excuse me? I believe this is the third floor.

No sooner had Chiffon landed lightly on the floor than the little girl clambered off and stood tall, wrapped in a cloak just like Atra’s.

“Lia here!” she announced.

“You sure are,” I said once I’d gotten over my shock enough to tousle her hair. “You look well.”

A smile lit up the girl’s face as her rounded, leonine ears and tail swayed. Chiffon lay down behind her. She must have made the wolf race all around the mansion.

Once I removed my hand from her head, Lia looked around and shouted, “Atra!”

“Lia!” the white-haired child responded, and they started chasing each other.

Lydia and I shared a look and chuckled. I couldn’t imagine anything more peaceful.

I bent down to give Cheryl’s beloved companion a few words of gratitude: “Thank you, Chiffon. You must be tired.”

The wolf’s big tail wagged languidly. *I’m used to it,* a soft woof seemed to say.

I was picturing what my old classmate must have been like in her younger years when the rambunctious children ran up to me.

“Allen, Lydia!” Lia shouted, while Atra sang wordlessly.

“Hm? Do you want to hold hands?” I said, taking Lia’s.

“What is it, Atra?” Lydia asked, following suit with the white-haired girl.

“Lydia,” I said.

“O-Oh, all right. Here.” Lydia relented, and we gave in to the singing children’s unspoken demand. We had held hands any number of times before, yet Lydia and I both became strangely self-conscious, stammering and unable to look each other in the eye. The sight seemed to satisfy the children.

“Friends!” they shouted together.

So, um…how am I supposed to react to this?

Two voices cut my musings short as their owners walked

toward us down the corridor.

"My, my, my! What have we here?!" exclaimed the Ducal House of Leinster's svelte, chestnut-haired head maid, Anna.

"Wh-What loveliness. Oh, my heart," murmured Romy, her bespectacled, dark-skinned second-in-command with a lovely head of short black hair. Her cheeks looked flushed. I hoped she wasn't feeling under the weather.

I glanced at Lydia. She was staring at the floor, but she made no move to let go of my hand, so I turned to the maids and said, "Thank you for all your help with security."

"And thank you, sir." Anna smiled, laughing musically.

"All in a maid's work," Romy said, suddenly prim and proper. Had I imagined her discomposure a moment ago?

All the while, the head maid's smile kept widening.

"Um, pardon me, Anna," I said, "but is there something we should know about?"

"Oh, no. I only thought…"

"Yes?" I pressed. Lydia, who had come back to her senses, looked as puzzled as I felt.

Anna pressed her palms together and beamed. "This feels like a glimpse into your future!"

Her words hung in the air for a moment.

She loves to blow things out of proportion. We hold hands with Atra and Lia all the time—they both like it. I guess this might be a first for the four of us together, though.

"We're always like this," I said. "Aren't we, Lydia? Lydia?"

Turning my head, I found Lydia frozen stiff and blushing furiously. And not only her face—she'd turned bright red from head to toe.

"O-Our future?" she mumbled, releasing my and Atra's hands and stumbling over to a window. "Does she mean…? She does, doesn't she? I'm one of three siblings, but we grew up with Lily and her family, so we could have more kids than that. But I know Allen would make a great father, and the children would love him. That might mean he has less time for me. I can't let that happen. I won't. B-But if he asks me…"

"U-Um…?" I scratched my cheek. What else could I do? The noblewoman was off in her own world. Still, we needed to get to the council chamber before—

A shuddering chill ran up my spine.

"Lydiaaa! Allennn!"

A lovely young woman in a white dress barreled toward us, making the whole mansion shake. I would recognize Princess Cheryl Wainwright's dazzling blonde tresses anywhere.

"Oh dear." I trembled.

Lydia clicked her tongue. "Princess Schemer always picks the worst times to catch on."

The head maid remained unfazed. Her second-in-command was already ushering the children to safety behind her back with a brisk "This way, my ladies."

"Anna, Romy, may I ask you to look after Atra and Lia for me?" I said. "I need to quell Her Royal Highness's royal wrath. Chiffon, lend them a paw."

✽

"Of all the rotten tricks! How could you leave me alone in the council chamber?! And Allen, you're guilty by association! What do you think Lydia told me when she left? 'Oh, I forgot something. Just let me run and get it.' She lied through her teeth just to beat me to you!"

Cheryl fumed, arms crossed. Her long golden locks bounced as she turned her face away. Her fury had yet to abate, although we had returned with her to the lavishly appointed council chamber. I was starting to regret asking Chiffon to watch the children.

A group of eminent personages looked up from the seats near the far wall where they'd been holding preliminary discussions. Dukes Walter Howard and Liam Leinster wore military uniforms in the azure and scarlet of their respective houses. Lord Rodde, the Archmage and elven headmaster of the Royal Academy, had chosen white sorcerer's robes, although dark circles had formed under his eyes. All of them stared at me, their gazes a silent command: "Do something."

"Step up, Allen," a stunning woman called from the couch by a window where she sat sipping tea. Duchess Lisa Leinster, the former Lady of the Sword, wore her scarlet military dress.

"Indeed! Show us your mettle!" her green-clad companion—Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale—added cheerfully. The great ladies' scarlet and jade locks glistened in the sunlight filtering through the curtains.

The Howards' head butler, Graham "the Abyss" Walker,

rounded out the company in his capacity as bodyguard. What had become of Under-duke Lucas Leinster and his wife Fiane, “the Smiling Lady”? I couldn’t help but wonder, but placating my former classmate took priority.

“Your Royal Highness, please be calm.”

“I forbid you to call me ‘Highness’!” Cheryl snapped. “I want to hear, ‘Forgive me. From now on, I’ll make you my number one—’”

Dainty fingers snaked out and pinched her cheek.

“Is Your Royal Highness *ever* satisfied?” The scarlet-haired noblewoman shrugged. She had left her new little box in Anna’s care. “I’ve spoken nothing but the truth.”

“What?! How can you say that after—”

“Here’s the ‘thing’ I forgot. See?” Lydia darted behind me, poking her head out to eye the raging princess.

Cheryl gaped, then rose with deliberate slowness and flashed a dazzling smile. “Lydia, I see I need to have words with you.”

“What a shame. *I* have nothing to say to *you*,” Lydia retorted. “I mean, I’ve already won.”

“W-Won? Won what?! You were as gloomy as a wilted flower until just now! H-How did you bounce back so fast?! A little alone time with Allen still doesn’t explain it!”

“I wonder.” Lydia chuckled.

“That does it! Why, you…you…!”

Before Cheryl could reach out and grab her, Duke Walter raised his left hand. “I believe it’s time,” he said. “We’re still missing one person, but I suggest we begin. Allen, take a seat. No need to stand on ceremony here—we’ve assembled for an *informal* exchange of information.”

“Thank you,” I replied. The duke had given his permission offhandedly. Yet I couldn’t put words to the feelings it inspired in me. Beastfolk still faced persecution in the kingdom, and here I was, a houseless adoptee sitting in council with dukes and living legends.

Cheryl cleared her throat, managing to sound charming. “Allen, you’ll sit next to—”

“Me, of cou—”

“Allen,” Lisa calmly interrupted her daughter.

“Join us,” Duchess Letty added, patting the couch. They wanted me to sit between them.

I want to refuse. But who could say no to the Bloodstained Lady and the Emerald Gale?

I resigned myself and took my place on the couch. Lydia and Cheryl flapped their lips in astonishment, then took their seats in frighteningly silent unison.

Oh dear.

I heard someone let out their breath. Dukes Walter and Liam exchanged a look, then a nod.

"To begin, I'd like to review the current state of affairs in—"

The door swung open.

"Why, hello. I see you're all here. I stepped in to mediate a dispute between my dear students, and before I knew it, I was running late. You must forgive me. Oh, Allen! How have you been?"

"Professor," I groaned, unable to resist the urge to massage my temples. I felt a weight on my lap: Anko, a familiar in the form of a black cat.

The late arrival—not that I had ever expected to come on time—had overseen Lydia's and my university education and boasted an international reputation as the kingdom's most dangerous sorcerer. He wore his usual spectacles, hat, and coat. A smattering of soot stains provoked no comment—he reaped what he sowed.

"Have you no sense of duty, young one?" the headmaster demanded coldly. "Or do you consider this council unimportant?"

"Life doesn't always oblige us, old one," the professor replied. "And I'd thank you to remember that I hold no official post. Shepherding university students is my duty now."

They'd fallen into their usual routine. I glanced at Lydia, but she didn't acknowledge me, instead beginning a whispered conversation with Cheryl. Didn't she realize our dear old underclassmen could be involved?

While I sheepishly accepted tea from Lisa and a share of Duchess Letty's pastry, Duke Walter stroked his beard and resumed speaking in a solemn tone.

"We're all here at last. Let me begin. Turmoil in the city is subsiding, but now the Dark Lord's armies are making moves in the west. Leo has returned to the western capital, while His Majesty is deliberating with his ministers in the palace. Prince John is searching through secret documents. Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner is absent due to the assassination of Marquesses Crom and Gardner by 'Black Blossom' on the city's western outskirts and all the cleanup in and around the Sealed

Archive. We have yet to locate any of the secret documents that the marquesses presumably possessed. The apostles may have taken them, or the marquesses may have disposed of the material themselves. We have no idea which."

Both lords had held the ancient title of "Record Keeper" since the kingdom's founding. Their assassination came as a major blow on the intelligence front. The church's puppet master, the false Saint, might even have sent her apostles to attack the city purely to distract us from the killings.

"The cathedral in the western quarter, where the fighting was fiercest, has become a sanctuary like that in the city of water." The headmaster took up the report from his seat beside the dukes. "The Royal House of Wainwright's holy blade, 'the Blue-Rose Sword,' rests at the center of the sacred ground. I'd like to ask Allen and Stella to explore it in the coming days. The Great Tree has blocked access to the Sealed Archive, but it seems to pose no threat. Nevertheless, our investigation continues."

I glanced at the angel-transformed bracelet on my right wrist. I couldn't forget my promise to Carina.

"Hot on the heels of peace with the League of Principalities, we've informally reconciled with the Yustinians as well," Duke Liam said, drumming his fingers on the table. "While I feel for our imperial guest, Princess Yana, the treaty will have to wait. The city is in no state to hold a signing ceremony just yet. That leaves our talks with Lalannoy, which supplied spell-guns and other magical devices to the Algren rebels and harmed a group of our kingdom's nobles during their insurrection. Unfortunately, negotiations are at a standstill. The republic seems to be on the brink of civil war itself."

Lalannoy. The young republic had won its independence from the Yustinian Empire roughly a century ago under the leadership of Marquess Addison, master of the supreme spell of light. Its origins went a long way toward explaining the constant skirmishing with imperial forces on its western front. It faced the kingdom across the Four Heroes Sea, the continent's largest saltwater lake, located northeast of our royal capital.

"Professor, I trust you'll fill in anything we've missed," Duke Walter resumed. "And keep your digressions to a minimum. Liam and I will leave the city soon ourselves. We don't have time to waste."

Dukes Lebufera, Howard, and Leinster were returning to their

own domains. That meant only one thing: the orders that had convened them in the royal capital in case Stella became an angel, then a devil, had been lifted.

Thank goodness. Really, thank goodness.

While I tried not to keep my mind off Lalannoy, the professor snapped his fingers. Light shot through the chamber, projecting a map of the continent.

"In that case, I'll be brief," he said, indicating countries with a black pointer he hadn't held a moment ago. "News of the apostles' raid on our capital has already reached foreign powers. The Yustinian Empire in the north and the League of Principalities and Covenant of Southern Isles to our south all perceive it as a serious threat. On the other hand, the eastern nations, including the Lalannoy Republic, have held their peace. The Knightdom of the Holy Spirit hardly bears mentioning."

"They've kept themselves to the shadows ever since they puppeteered the addlepated Algren lordlings," Duchess Letty murmured gravely.

"But I suppose that phase has passed," said Lisa. "The fighting will only get fiercer from now on."

The church's apostles had avoided taking to the battlefield themselves except at decisive moments—until the recent raid, that was. The prime apostle had just shown himself in broad daylight.

"This string of battles has exhausted us," Duke Liam groaned. "We'll have a hard time if they rally the east against us."

"Winning individual battles won't get us anywhere. You must have read Allen's analysis. The 'Saint' directing the apostles, inquisitors, and knights of the Holy Spirit achieved all of her goals in this string of debacles," the platinum-haired "god of war" spat. "She used the Algren boys, aristocratic diehards, beastfolk traitors, the empire, the league, and even our own actions to get everything she wanted."

All along, the false Saint had pushed us into tactical victories that masked little strategic defeats.

"Now, a question for our esteemed company: What is the best thing our kingdom can do now?" the professor said, spreading his arms in a theatrical gesture calculated to shake off the gloomy mood. His pointer traveled east from the royal capital, passed over the Duchy of Algren, and stopped. "Ignore the damage we've suffered and launch a massive invasion into the

Knightdom of the Holy Spirit? Hardly. We could win every battle, and the war would still bog down interminably. We would have a repeat of the Continental War from five hundred years ago, albeit on a lesser scale. Who would that benefit? Allen?"

So, he planned to rope me in all along.

"The demonfolk west of Blood River," I said, conscious that I'd become the center of attention. "If the Dark Lord who crossed blades with Allen the Shooting Star still lives, I doubt a war-ravaged human race would stand much chance against them."

"I wouldn't relish a rematch." The headmaster, a survivor of the War of the Dark Lord, grimaced.

"I can't imagine a mere two centuries claiming that one's life." Duchess Letty frowned. She had fought beside the great Shooting Star of the wolf clan. The kingdom's two-hundred-year standoff with the Dark Lord's armies across Blood River made an all-out foreign war a difficult proposition.

The professor shifted his pointer again, moving northeast from the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit. It came to rest on one of the smallest among a cluster of minor nations: the pontiff's domain.

"In that case, shall we sneak into the heart of the church and slay their so-called Saint?"

"Impossible," Lydia and I answered immediately. We knew that the apostles were ranked, and experience had taught us that even the least of them would invoke taboo spells without hesitation. Who knew what their leaders were capable of?

The professor pulled his hat low. "In the recent disturbance, the old one, Graham, young Lynne, and I battled a facsimile of the 'Sage,' Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield. I couldn't even grasp the limits of his power."

A glacial silence filled the air. That the professor and headmaster numbered among the kingdom's finest sorcerers went without saying. Graham Walker was a veteran of many battles, as his ominous nickname testified. Even Lynne could cast Firebird, symbol of the Ducal House of Leinster. And Aster had kept all four of them occupied, not in the flesh but through an ice sculpture he controlled from a distance.

The apostles' names arranged themselves in midair, and the professor's pointer indicated each in turn. "A variety of sources confirm that the apostles are seven in number," he said. "In addition, we have to contend with the pair Allen and Lydia faced

in the city of water: the vampiress Alicia Coalfield and the enigmatic swordswoman Viola Kokonoe. The former claims the name of Crescent Moon, supposed to have perished at the Battle of Blood River during the War of the Dark Lord. The latter claimed the left arm of Marchesa Regina ‘the Impaler’ Rondoiro.”

“The pair Lydia and Letty crossed blades with,” Duchess Lisa remarked.

“Both quite skilled, I hear,” added Duke Liam. Their eyes betrayed concern and doubt. To my knowledge, apart from Lisa, Under-duchess Fiane, and Duchess Letty, only Lily’s elder brother, Ridley the Swordmaster, had ever bested Lydia in swordplay.

The professor indicated the fourth spot on his list. “Just recently, the Lalannoyan champion Heaven’s Sword and our old runaway Swordmaster, Ridley Leinster, are supposed to have slain the fourth apostle, the ancient vampire Idris. However…” I glimpsed intense regret behind his spectacles and braced for his next words. I could feel the concern in Lydia’s and Cheryl’s gazes. “They have seized the last remains of the dhampir Baron Régnier, hero of the kingdom, who laid a four-winged devil to rest. We’ve seen them employ spell-soldiers made from vestiges of the great spells and manufactured vampires along with mass-teleportation spells, by all rights a closely guarded secret of the demisprites. We cannot afford to take them lightly.”

A new name appeared in the place of the fourth apostle’s: Zelbert Régnier.

My best friend’s last words in the cathedral came back to me. “I’ll be waiting in Lalannoy,” he had said. I felt a stab in my heart.

Anko leapt onto my left shoulder and rubbed against me.

Thank you.

The professor tapped more apostles with his pointer. The fifth, “Raymond Despenser, former earl of the kingdom,” went by the name Ibush-nur. The sixth, “Fossi Folonto, former marchese of the league,” had taken to calling himself Ifur.

“According to Edith, the seventh and least of the apostles, whom Stella battled at Rostlay,” the professor continued, “the false Saint aims to reconstitute the true Resurrection, put an end to death, and create a world without discrimination. Aster likewise claimed that ‘this repulsive mortal world will end at his hand.’ Collecting the great spells and other relics no doubt furthers that goal.”

Duchess Letty gave a derisive snort. Wind rustled her jade-green hair. She was furious.

"I find that hard to credit. Whatever they make, mortal hands will wield it, and not even the gods could conquer death." After a brief lull, she flared up again. "And I don't believe a word about their 'Alicia' either! She's a fraud, pure and simple!"

As "the Comet," surviving companion of Shooting Star and Crescent Moon, her words carried weight. But if she were right, who was the vampiress we'd fought? Her tales of the past had seemed genuine, although parts of them had contradicted the false Saint's story.

It's no use. I don't have enough information.

I rose from my seat and stood erect. "Now for what we most need to do, and to learn," I said, feeling all eyes turn to me as I walked forward to the center of the room with Anko still on my shoulder. "I propose coordinating our efforts with those of the Yustinian Empire, the League of Principalities, and the Lalannoy Republic. If possible, we should forge an alliance. The cult of the Great Moon, all houses whose names end in 'field' or 'heart,' and the altars meant to create angels require thorough investigation. All bear closely on the goals of Aster and the false Saint. And we mustn't forget Floral Heaven, the legendary demisprite spellcaster who pursued the 'apostate of the Great Moon'"—I stared at Duke Walter Howard, listening in silence—"or Floral Heaven's apprentice, Duchess Rosa Howard."

The sunlight dimmed, casting the chamber into gloom. Duke Walter folded his hands on the table before him. At last, he let out a long breath and surveyed the whole room. No one raised an objection.

"Professor, Rodde, compile our findings and submit a written opinion to His Majesty. See that Leo in the western capital and Acting Duke Gil Algren in the eastern capital get copies as well," he said, a steely look coming over his face. "The continent's three greatest powers, united? I like the sound of that!"

"The league won't prove hard to convince," said Duke Liam. "They've experienced what the apostles are capable of. And if that weren't enough, the proposal comes from the Emissary of the Water Dragon himself. Negotiations won't take long."

"R-Really, that overblown title doesn't, well..." My feeble protest trailed off. The red-haired duke merely grinned.

What else was I expecting? Richard, Lydia, and Lynne are all his

children.

"Graham and I are about to leave for the Yustinian imperial capital." The professor shook his head in annoyance. "Yes, we've settled on peace terms, but they managed to saddle us with the northern territory of Shiki. We have a wily old schemer to bargain with."

"The young should never sit idle," Lord Rodde cut in with relish. "Work like a cart horse. Or would you rather remain here to bandy words with panicked ministers and good-for-nothing blue bloods who never spare a thought for anything but their own interests?"

The professor pulled paper and a pen out of thin air and started jotting off letters by magic. I could never help envying him the handy trick, although it guzzled mana like no tomorrow.

"I think not," he said. "May I suggest you close the Royal Academy for the time being? It won't be easy on the students, but you can always shorten the winter recess to make up for lost time."

The headmaster paused for a moment, then sank into thought, muttering, "Hm. I hadn't thought of that."

What will I do about the girls' lessons if he goes through with it? I need to put in time at Allen & Co. the first half of each week. I could make more time for tutoring by giving up my one day off, but then—

Duke Walter clapped his hands. "Thank you all for your time. Let us each do as best we can," he said. "Allen, I'm sorry, but would you stay a little longer? I have a matter to discuss with you."

After the council, I showed a strangely amenable Cheryl and Lydia back to the palace, then returned to face Duke Walter and Mr. Walker in the council chamber. You could cut the tension with a knife.

The one and only Duke Howard, practically royalty, bowed low to me. "First, allow me to express my gratitude," he said. "Thank you for saving Stella. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. If not for you, I…I would have been forced to take my own daughter's…" Sobs shook his massive shoulders.

He hasn't changed since I first went north to tutor Tina. He loves his daughters with all his heart, even if he doesn't always know how to show it. At the same time, in his role as Duke Howard, he steeled himself to serve the kingdom and its people, no matter how deeply it

pained him personally.

I brushed my slender bracelet and thanked a kind angel.

"Duke Walter," I replied, "please, raise your head. You needn't fear for Stella's safety any longer—although some may revere her as a saint or call her an angel when she sprouts wings and takes flight now and then."

"That sounds worrisome enough in its own right." The duke slowly looked up and gave me a bemused smile. "I hope you'll be understanding with her. And with Tina too, of course."

His eldest daughter had just added the power of flight and tremendous healing magic to the supreme spell Frost-Gleam Hawks and the secret Azure Sword and Shield. His younger girl had mastered the supreme spell Blizzard Wolf. Her magic was improving by leaps and bounds, and she housed the great elemental Frigid Crane. The Howard sisters had a bright future ahead of them—a far cry from their predicament mere months before. I knew they would surpass me. And that certainty made me all the more determined to find a way of freeing Frigid Crane and sparing them from the threat of the church.

"Mr. Walker," I said, turning to the head butler who stood ready a respectful distance behind his master, "as I said in my report, Ellie's mother, Millie, may still live. Remire Walker left his last testament in the formulae governing the Sealed Archive."

The Abyss, renowned for his icy calm, the man who had overpowered Aster's facsimile, looked shaken. "I read your report, sir," he said slowly, "but can it be true? I still don't dare hope."

"To learn that answer, we'll need to uncover Duchess Rosa's journey with Floral Heaven, before Earl Coalheart adopted her," I replied. "The magic Remire left in the archive used Duchess Rosa's formulae. She may have worked with the Walkers to combat ten-day fever. This calls for a fresh investigation—including an appeal to the Royal House of Wainwright, which tacitly approved her adoption."

In the northern capital, Duke Walter had told me of a suspicion that we had yet to share with Stella or Tina. He believed that someone may have laid a fatal curse on Duchess Rosa Howard. And after long years of searching, we might finally have our hands on a lead.

Beyond the windows, rain was falling. Would Caren be all right? She had said she planned to spend the night in my

lodgings.

"Very well," said the undefeated general, eyes alight with determination. "I'll see to any political obstacles personally."

"And we Walkers will spare no effort in this new investigation," added the aged butler, his gaze equally adamant.

"I appreciate it." I bowed and turned toward the door. I needed to collect Atra and then—

"Allen."

I looked back to find a grave frown on Duke Walter's face.

"His Majesty gave me a message for you," he said. "'I hereby grant the sanctuaries in the city of water and our own royal capital to Allen of the wolf clan, and I officially guarantee his station as Cheryl's investigator.'"

He's placing me *in charge of sacred ground?! And guaranteeing my role as investigator? Cheryl and Lydia must have known!*

"He also grants your fervent request to lay Carina Wainwright's hair ornament and the Silver Wolf's last remains to rest in the royal capital sanctuary. Liam, Leo, the bedridden Guido Algren, and I all gave our signatures." The duke paused. "Lalannoy is in a worse state than we imagined. We plan to dispatch an emissary in the near future, but His Majesty wishes you to accompany the delegation."

"To Lalannoy?" I said. "I understand."

What perfect timing. I needed to go there regardless—to end my dear friend Zelbert Régnier's eternal night.

"And one last thing," the duke said.

"Superfluous, no doubt, but let us make ourselves clear," his butler added as both men seized me by the shoulders.

I...I can hear my bones creaking!

"I shouldn't have to remind you, but Stella and Tina are still young. *Never* forget that. Are we clear?"

"And the same applies to Ellie."

After a few moments, I managed a meek, "Yes." In their capacities as doting father and grandfather, the Wolf of the North and the Abyss might frighten me more than any dragon.

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After leaving the Lebufera mansion, I went straight to a market to buy groceries—more than usual, since Caren was staying the night and Lydia might join us. I'd known that

something was up when she left without a fuss.

I made my way through the streets of the working quarter by the soft light of mana lamps, a paper sack in my left hand, an umbrella in my right, and Atra at my side. Romy had lent the child rain gear. The way it accommodated her tail made me suspect that the maid had been preparing it for some time, but I dismissed the notion. Why would she go to so much trouble?

The raid had barely touched the working quarter. The same jumble of buildings that I'd found on my arrival in the royal capital spread out around us. At last, I spotted the imposing tree that marked my lodgings' courtyard. The lights were on. I folded my umbrella, stood it to dry, and tried the doorknob. It turned at my touch.

No surprise there.

Stepping inside, I found two pairs of shoes sitting neatly to one side. I followed the customs of the eastern capital beastfolk here, and that meant leaving footwear at the door. After hollering a quick "I'm home!" I helped Atra out of her rain gear and was just wiping her hair with a white cloth left out on a nearby table when...

"Allen! Atra!"

"Whoa there!" I caught scarlet-haired Lia as she rushed out and flung herself on me, rounded ears alert and tail waving. She looked adorable in a little apron decorated with red birds and a pair of indoor slippers. The pleasant aroma of cooking meat wafted out with her. My guests must have started making dinner without me.

"Are you cooking something tasty for us, Lia?" I asked.

"Yup! Lydia and Caren helping!" the child replied.

"Really? Thank you."

"Allen, me too," Atra said, looking at the delighted Lia and tugging on my robe. She wanted an apron of her own.

The children pulled me farther inside. In the kitchen, warmed by a spellstone of fire, two young women stood cooking side by side.

"Lydia, Caren," I called.

Lydia was the first to stop what she was doing. "Oh? I didn't think you'd make it back this early," she said. "Give us a little more time."

The noblewoman went back to cooking as if nothing could be more natural. She had tied her hair back with a cord and wore an

apron with a black cat in one corner over a pale-scarlet sweater and white skirt. She seemed to be grilling a thick cut of meat.

Caren turned to me next. She had paired an apron with a white cat in one corner with a light-purple sweater and gray skirt, and she was in the middle of making soup.

"Welcome back," she said. "But really, Allen…"

"She didn't give me any warning either—not even at the Lebufera mansion," I replied, neglecting to mention that our exchanges via magical creatures had been growing ever more frequent. As a general rule, Lydia didn't like to do anything without me.

"Even bodyguards get time off," the noblewoman chimed in, turning the meat with a fork. "Do you realize how many days straight I've been cooped up in the palace?"

"B-But you still didn't have to come to stay at Allen's place on __"

The scarlet-haired child clutched my sister's skirt, her rounded ears flattened. "Caren no want together with Lydia and Lia?" she asked, looking up with tears in her eyes.

Caren visibly reeled, then crouched and wrapped her arms around Lia. "Of course not. I'm glad to have you."

"Yay!"

"Oh, all right." Caren sighed, and that seemed to be that. She had a kind heart—even if she might have played right into the hands of a certain noblewoman currently whistling a tune with unusual skill.

I hung my coat on a chair and turned to the white-haired child. "Now, Atra, let's wash those hands. Then we'll get you into an apron."

She sang a happy note in answer.

I cleaned my hands in the washbasin and stared into the mirror. Lydia and Caren's laughter carried from the kitchen. Nothing could be more peaceful. And yet…

I activated a spellstone of water for no real purpose. In my mind's eye, I saw the look of regret that my best friend had shown me when we'd faced each other in the cathedral on the western outskirts.

Zel, I swear I'll track you down in Lalannoy.

I felt tugs on both of my shirt sleeves. Looking down, I saw…

"Atra? Lia?"

The children stared worriedly up at me. I thought I'd left them in the kitchen. Bending down, I gave them both a hug.

"Allen," Atra said.

"Lia here," added her companion.

I was stunned speechless. How could they have known? But no. The girls might have lost the lion's share of their power, but they were still the Thunder Fox and Blazing Qilin, two of the Eight Great Elementals. Seeing into people's hearts must have been child's play to them.

"I know you are," I said, tenderly rubbing their heads. "Thank you. You both have such kind hearts."

The children nodded happily, then returned to the kitchen hand in hand. I exhaled, stood, and deactivated the spellstone.

"Allen," a new voice called. I turned to find my sister hanging off my right elbow. She had removed her apron.

"Caren, I'll be right—"

I had no time to finish my answer before she flung herself at my chest and squeezed me in a bear hug.

"Um... Whatever is the matter?"

"It's not just Atra and Lia," she said, looking up at me with big tears in her eyes. "You have me! I can help you too. I can protect you. So please, don't brood about Régnier alone."

"Caren," I murmured again, taking out a handkerchief to dry her eyes. She must have witnessed the earlier scene. I returned her hug, though with less force. "Do I really look like I've been doing that much brooding lately?"

"You do," she said. "I think everyone's worried about you, even if they don't say so."

"It sounds like I still need to work on myself."

I remembered the way Zel used to lecture me at the Royal Academy: "You need to take better care of yourself, Allen." I wished that I had come a little further since then.

Caren's ears still lay flat.

"But thank you," I said, giving her head a light pat. "I'll be fine. I made up my own mind to forge ahead. That's all."

"You really mean that?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'd never lie to the world's cutest little sister."

"And I've lost count of how many times my big brother has run off and gotten himself into trouble without me."

"He sounds like a real scoundrel."

Caren groaned and pounded her fists on my chest. It didn't

hurt a bit, so I let her go at it while I slid a small box from my pouch. Once my sister got tired of punching and started pressing her head against me, I held the box out to her.

“This is for you.”

Caren froze. “What’s this?” she murmured as she accepted the box with both hands, eyes shining. She tensed as she opened it. Then…

“It’s beautiful,” she gasped as she withdrew a lovely silver hair ornament modeled on a leafy sprig.

I smiled at my one and only sister, who would turn sixteen tomorrow. “It’s a day early, but I hope you like your birthday present. Remember what you told me in the eastern capital, about growing your hair out? I thought you could wear it when you start university in the spring.”

“You…you never play fair.” Caren dropped her gaze, cradling the hair ornament in both hands and blushing. A few arcs of electricity slipped free of her control. “I’ll treasure it.” Her voice shrank to a whisper. I only caught the word “love.”

“I’m so glad you like it,” I replied.

Little Caren would be off to the university next spring. How time flew. But the sister carefully replacing her gift in its box hadn’t changed since we were children.

“And of course, I wrote up a collection of problems I think might turn up on your exam! You can work on them with Stella over winter vacation,” I added with a wink and raised my right index finger. My ring and bracelet caught the light.

“I appreciate the help, but when exactly did you find time to write it? An investigation is in order.” Caren drew closer and prodded my cheek with her finger. The scent of flowers from the eastern capital came with her.

I gave my sister a fond look and reached out to tousle her silver-gray ha—

“In case you didn’t notice, dinner is ready.”

We spun around, startled by the glacial reminder. Sure enough, there stood the scarlet-haired noblewoman, still wearing her apron and smiling with her hands on her hips. Atra and Lia looked adorable peering out from behind her legs, but their charms failed to pacify my sister.

“Read the room, Lydia!” Caren fumed. “It was my turn!”

“Oh really?”

Fiery plumes and violet sparks collided as the pair squared off

in the cramped room. Lydia crossed her arms and launched the first verbal salvo.

"Caren, when will you learn how to talk to your sister-in-law?"

"When will *you* learn that I don't *have* a sister-in-law?" my sister countered. "Oh, and would you look at this?" She opened the little box and showed off its contents.

Lydia squinted at it. "A hair clip? What does that have to do with…?" She staggered back. "D-Don't tell me…?"

"Allen gave it to me," Caren declared, bold as brass. "I think I'll ask him for a magical pact soon."

"What?!" Lydia rounded on me. "*Excuse* me?"

I made my way to Atra and Lia, extinguishing flames and sparks as I went, and gave my left hand a slight wave. "Tomorrow *is* her birthday, you know. And I won't be forging any pacts."

"A-Allen, how could you?!" whined the second-in-command of the Royal Academy's student council. She still pouted like a child. "This is tyranny! Only making one with Lydia goes beyond unfair! Big brothers are supposed to indulge their little sisters. Don't you know that's the way of the world? Take off that ring and bracelet this instant!"

"No," I replied. "I don't have the skill to remove either."

Caren groaned in frustration, digging her nails into the arms of her sweater. The ring and bracelet flashed as if to say, "Remove us if you can."

A wicked look came over Lydia's face as she watched this clash of siblings. "What a shame, Caren," she said, chuckling, "but you really must learn to live without your brother."

"Why don't you take your own advice, Lady Crybaby?!" Caren snapped.

"Who are you calling a crybaby?!"

"The 'Lady of the Sword' who's always looking for an excuse to spend the night alone with my brother."

I sighed and massaged my forehead while I dispelled the mana radiating from my partner and my sister. They acted like best friends one moment and mortal enemies the next. I watched them out of the corner of my eye as I tousled the children's hair.

"Come on, Atra, Lia," I said. "Let's start dinner without them. It looks like they'll be at this a while."

✽

“Hey! Wait right there, Atra! And you too, Lia! Stop running away!” Caren shouted behind me, struggling to comb out the children’s bed head.

“Lia fast!” came an answering cry, matched by an equally cheerful song. The pair had certainly woken up full of energy.

The rain continued, but my heater kept us comfortable indoors. *Thank goodness for magical appliances*, I thought, melting butter in a frying pan heated on a spellstone of fire before pouring beaten eggs into it. I gave them a quick stir, then added ground meat, lightly fried. Using the rim of the pan, I folded the mixture into a neat half-moon.

Lydia’s dainty fingers reached over from my left. We had on matching aprons, although she wore hers over a sword-fighting outfit. A cord secured her hair. It was “not quite time” for the ribbon, apparently.

“Pass that salt and pepper,” she said.

“Sure.” I handed her the wooden containers and glanced over my shoulder at Caren. She was wearing her school uniform, sitting in a chair, and combing out the children’s hair. What a pleasant scene.

“That will burn if you don’t watch it,” Lydia reminded me.

“Yes, yes.”

“One ‘yes’ will do! You should feel honored for the chance to eat *my* home cooking, so at least try to act like it,” she said while adding salt and pepper to her soup.

Says the woman who couldn’t cook a thing when we met at the Royal Academy.

“What?” she demanded. “Didn’t you ever learn it’s rude to stare at people? Has my beauty finally dawned on you?”

“Huh? But you’ve always been pretty.”

“I-It’s way too early for— Oh, honestly.” The scarlet-haired young woman blushed and dropped her gaze.

“Allen! Watch what you say!” my sister roared while she gave the girls her loving care. “You’ll give the Lady of the Sword a swollen head!”

“Don’t shout, Caren. You’ll scare Lia and Atra,” Lydia said, then giggled.

“Allen?” Caren growled. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Would you dress Atra and Lia too?” I asked my disgruntled sister. The omelet looked just right, so I transferred it to a platter.

“Jeez. Atra, Lia! It’s time to get dressed!” Caren backed down and led the happy girls away. She must have decided that she couldn’t get in the way of making breakfast.

“Lydia,” I said casually, cutting thick slices of ham.

“Yes?” the noblewoman replied, fetching a cup she’d brought off an upper shelf. The ham sizzled appetizingly in the frying pan.

“If I do end up going to Lalannoy, like we discussed yesterday, I’d like to ask Lynne and Lily to do something for me in the meantime. Would you mind?”

I had explained my potential trip to Lalannoy to Lydia and Caren the night before. I had also asked Lydia to remain in the royal capital and guard Cheryl, whom the apostles would likely target in their next attempt to make an angel. The old Lydia would never have agreed, but now she’d simply said, “All right, if that’s what you’ve decided. I’ll stay in the city and move forward with the investigation.” I could count on my partner to come through.

I wasn’t planning to bring Atra with me either. Whatever the false Saint hoped to accomplish, I knew she wanted the great spells and the great elementals. I might not be able to keep Atra safe traveling in a lightly guarded delegation, but I could trust Caren to look after her in the royal capital.

“I don’t see a problem, although it depends on the request,” Lydia said, apportioning her vegetable soup. “Here. Plates.”

“Thank you. Sida confirmed my suspicions.” I took the proffered stack of five white plates and set about topping each with now fully cooked ham while Lydia fetched a container of salad from the icebox. “She mentioned an old ruined chapel to the Great Moon in the southern capital. And right now, I want all the information I can get.”

“Hm…” The noblewoman poured oil, salt, and pepper into a small bowl and mixed them well before drizzling the result over the salad. “Niccolò’s still delayed in the southern capital. Why not ask him to help? And Saki is good at detection.”

“Oh, good idea. No wonder you graduated the Royal Academy first in our class. Whatever would I do without you?”

I had met young Niccolò Nitti, the second son of an illustrious house, in the capital of the League of Principalities. He had a

brilliant mind for deciphering old and forbidden tomes.

Saki of the bird clan was the Leinster Maid Corps's number six, along with Cindy, her sister from the same orphanage. She currently served as Niccolò's bodyguard.

Lydia swiftly divvied up the salad onto every plate. "Only because *someone* gave up his spot," she said, glaring at me. "Don't get too cheeky, or I'll run away with you—to the southern isles this time."

"What happened to the city of water and Lalannoy?!"

"One calls you the 'Emissary of the Water Dragon,' so that rules it out. Niche Nitti would never leave us alone there, anyway. The other's on the brink of civil war."

I'm with her on the nickname. Still, I wish she wouldn't leap to abduction at the first sign of trouble.

I sliced bread and started toasting it in a fresh frying pan. The children loved to put honey and jam on theirs. So did Lydia and Caren, for that matter. Lydia carried all the cups and plates to the table, then divided up the omelet with a large knife.

"I know I agreed with you last night," she sighed, "but what if we threaten Princess Schemer into appointing me an investigator too? Or I could resign and go with you."

"Hm... I don't think so. Imagine what the stress would do to Duke Liam," I replied. I couldn't bring myself to add to his burdens. Gaining the Principality of Atlas as a client state on top of war with the league had given him enough to worry about.

"Unbelievable. Give me *something*, you dolt. Or does leaving me behind not bother you?"

Even with our pact, we wouldn't be able to sense each other's mana from different countries. I did feel guilty about that, remembering the time during the Algren rebellion when I'd been held on an island in the Four Heroes Sea.

"The Lady Lydia Leinster I know cares about her friends," I said, depositing the browned toast in a wicker basket and deactivating the spellstone of fire. "She might *talk* about forsaking her duty, but she would never actually do it."

I felt a bump as Lydia's head flopped onto my shoulder. "Unbelievable," she muttered. "Simply unbelievable."

I really wish she'd wear that ribbon.

"You don't need to worry," I said, levitating the bread basket to the table. "They say Lalannoy is unstable, but I doubt war will break out any day now. And anyway, formal negotiations are

bound to have top-notch guards."

Lydia let out a long breath. "How many times have you said the same thing and ended up neck-deep in trouble?" she demanded, glowering, and thrust her index finger at me even though we were already nearly touching. "You never realize when you could be in danger! This calls for retraining. Wouldn't you agree, Caren?"

"You can't trust Allen's judgment on matters that relate to him." My sister nodded sagely, having just helped Atra and Lia into their seats. "When we're concerned, no amount of caution is ever enough. He jumps at every shadow and still doesn't feel satisfied after he's searched all of them. It's one of his worst habits—a fault so deplorable that not even treating me to one of those seasonal tarts at the café with the sky-blue roof could make up for it."

"And there you have it." The scarlet-haired noblewoman stood proud and triumphant.

I avoided her eyes while I quickly folded my apron. "I really don't mean—"

"You do too."

"You absolutely do!"

"Do too!" the children chorused, adding their singsong voices to Lydia's and Caren's. I could see I had no allies here.

"I'll do my utmost to reform," I said, raising my hands in token of surrender.

"Actions speak louder than words," Lydia retorted.

"If you go back on that, you have to do whatever I ask you to."

"Caren?" Lydia turned. "Is this a betrayal?"

"Little sisters get their big brothers to spoil them. That's the way of the world."

"Yes, yes," I said. "Don't turn this into a fight."

"One 'yes' is enough!" they snapped in unison.

I knew it. They do *get along.*

With a rueful grin, I pulled out two chairs and made my most obsequious bow.

A little bell in the entryway rang not long after we started eating. I could barely sense the visitor's mana.

"Who could be calling this early?" Caren wondered, wiping Atra's mouth with a napkin.

"Not many people come here in the first place," Lydia added,

doing the same for Lia.

"I'll go see," I said.

My lodgings really didn't get many visitors. Even Lydia shouldn't really have been staying here. As I made my way to the front door and opened it, I resolved to stop the younger girls from following her example.

"Good morning, Mr. Allen."

Much to my surprise, there stood Duke Howard's elderly head butler. He had somehow contrived to stay perfectly dry in the rain despite his lack of an umbrella.

"Good morning, Mr. Walker," I said. "Is anything the matter?"

"My master sends this. An emergency council convened in the palace yesterday evening." The butler produced a sheet of paper from an inner pocket. For all his suave manner, I caught a nervous flicker in the depths of his eyes.

An emergency council? Well now.

"So, what happened?" Lydia asked, coming to peer over my shoulder.

"What does it say?" Caren chimed in, following suit.

The paper's contents took our collective breath away. The solid hand of Duke Walter Howard spelled out a development that none of us had seen coming.

"The merchant house of Toretto relayed a message from Lalannoy requesting immediate talks. The republic will agree to any demands we make, on the condition that we send them an envoy and the Brain of the Lady of the Sword at once. Make preparations with all due haste."

The Torettos, a major merchant house with its base in the east of the kingdom, had been making inroads into Lalannoyan markets.

I don't believe it. My predictions didn't even last a day.

Lydia and Caren murmured my name, each squeezing one of my arms.

"You were right. You can't trust my judgment," I said, gazing up into the dark clouds. The situation in Lalannoy seemed to be deteriorating faster than any of us had imagined.

Chapter 2

“Y-You mean…you’re going to the Lalannoy Republic?!”

Three girls’ cries filled a room of the Leinsters’ royal capital mansion. Atra’s ears perked up as she slept on a nearby couch, hugging a cushion.

Duke Howard’s younger daughter, Tina, sat directly across from me, an ornate clip in her platinum hair and surprise plain on her face. Her personal maid, Ellie Walker, sat on her left, blonde pigtails tied with white ribbons and hands over her mouth. On Tina’s right, Duke Leinster’s younger daughter, Lynne, toyed with her own red locks. All three girls had just returned from school and still wore their berets and winter uniforms.

It was a rainy Iceday afternoon—one of our tutoring days. Stella and Caren would normally have joined us, but a meeting about the unscheduled closure starting next week and other student council business had delayed them. The birthday party would have to wait till evening.

“You leave on Fireday even though you only got notified this morning. That’s awfully sudden. And they asked for you by name, but they’ll ‘explain their reasons for doing so on your arrival,’” said a bespectacled girl with long chestnut hair, wearing a white sweater, black skirt, and high socks. Felicia Fosse had been using her enforced break time to rest on the sofa and stroke Atra.

“Marquess Addison seems awfully hard-pressed, for all that he effectively rules the republic,” I replied. “The head of the House of Toretto, who acted as intermediary, says that His Lordship gave him carte blanche to beg for the kingdom’s aid.”

The girls gasped, at a loss for words.

I know I was planning on a trip to Lalannoy, but this is too sudden, and the terms are so strange. Why ask for me?

Light glinted ominously off Felicia’s spectacles as she took a pen and notebook from the small table in front of her. “When you say ‘Toretto,’ do you mean the same Toretto Company that has roots in the east and strong ties to the Ducal House of Algren? Allen, this could be a golden opportunity to expand our sphere of—”

“No.” I flatly shot down the head clerk’s proposal and confiscated her pen and paper with a levitation spell. The offending implements floated out of her hands and into mine.

Felicia rose in fury, her left eye not hidden by her bangs for once. Her bosom bounced, as ample as the rest of her looked undernourished. Tina and Lynne lowered their gazes, then bit their lips in frustration.

“That sweater looks lovely on you,” Ellie chimed in. What an angel.

The head clerk paid them no mind. “Ah! A-Allen!” she wailed. “G-Give those back!”

“Did you forget that you’re banned from working today, Felicia?” I said. “When you have time off, rest! Remember our promise. The company staff have been insistent on that point.”

The bespectacled girl whom future historians would name as “one of the architects of victory in the Fourth Southern War” lost her nerve. “I’m perfectly healthy,” she sulked, puffing up her cheeks.



“Would you like me to assign you *more* mandatory rest days? Ellie, please pour Felicia a cup of tea.”

“Yessir!” The blonde angel dashed off to the room’s kitchenette.

“O-Of all the underhanded…! Is that any way for a business leader to behave?!” Felicia demanded, taking a vacant chair.

“The whole company agrees with me,” I replied. “And I do mean the *whole* company.”

The workaholic head clerk let out a cry of frustration and rained blows down on me. Whatever were we going to do with her?

Tina, who had been glaring at Felicia’s sweater-enhanced chest as she might her worst enemy, returned to her senses and raised her hand. “Sir!” she shouted, a stray lock of her hair shooting to attention. “Classes are canceled starting next week, so I nominate myself to guard you!”

Lynne’s eyes widened. So did Ellie’s as she returned bearing tea.

Not long ago, I could have judged their skills inadequate. But my students had come so far in the past few months that they now ranked among the finest sorceresses and swordswomen in the kingdom. They were eminently qualified for guard duty. But in this case, they were out of luck.

“Unfortunately,” I explained, biting into one of Ellie’s homemade cookies, “my guards have already been chosen. I think Lydia saw to that.”

“What?!” Tina exclaimed, while Ellie let out a cry of surprise. Rain and wind rattled the windowpanes.

“Who will be guarding you, then, dear brother?” the red-haired young noblewoman asked calmly.

“Students of the professor. Lydia and I studied with them. I got a report from Teto earlier,” I replied, reaching into my bag on the floor for a bundle of papers thicker than many books. Titled “On the Bodyguard-Selection Tournament,” the stitch-bound report detailed a clash between seven candidates—the new students who didn’t know Lydia and me hadn’t taken part. The competition had nearly demolished the university training ground, despite the innumerable barriers protecting it. Teto had even bound the university’s written complaint into her report, and they had addressed it not to the professor but to me. What a nightmare.

The girls and Felicia gasped as they paged through the document and finally turned exasperated stares on me. Tina groaned.

"U-Um..." Ellie faltered.

"Really, dear brother," Lynne murmured.

"Well," said Felicia, "this *is* Allen we're talking about."

"You *do* realize I didn't choose the selection method, don't you?" I ventured in my own defense. Lydia hadn't said a word to me, but she must have given Teto ideas in the wake of the raid on the city. For better or worse, my lady had a brilliant mind.

"Hm... He looks guilty to me," Felicia said, cupping her chin and looking devious. "What do you think, Justice Tina?"

The platinum-haired young noblewoman gave a start, but swiftly nodded. "I concur! What say you, Justice Lynne?"

"It pains me to accuse a relative, but I believe my dear sister had a hand in the crime," her red-haired peer pronounced gravely.

"B-But according to this report, only the first-year students and Acting Duke Gil Algren sat out the tournament," Ellie chimed in while she expertly filled teacups. "I think I would have f-fought too, in their place."

"Ellie?" the young noblewomen said slowly. The blonde maid shrieked under their baleful glares. This glimpse of normalcy did my heart good.

While I sipped my tea, Felicia picked up her own cup and paused, looking puzzled. "But Teto won't be guarding you herself. Both spots went to...Soi and Uri, was it? Stella and Caren gushed about what a great sorceress Teto is, so I thought she'd be a shoo-in."

"Apparently she came up against a spell designed to counter talismans and lost her composure at the very end," I explained.

My witch-hat-wearing former schoolmate had come to the café with the sky-blue roof with a bit of white bandage still plastered to her cheek. "I managed to keep the upper hand until the last moment, so I got complacent and let my guard down," she had said bitterly, biting into a seasonal fruit tart. "Tell me, Allen: Did that anti-talisman spell come from the notes *you* left behind?"

My old schoolmate had a sharp mind. I couldn't believe she remembered those old notes. But I also had to hand it to Uri for taking the time to learn such a situational spell. As for Soi, I only

hoped she would make peace with his family, the western noble house of Solnhofen.

I looked my students in the eye. “I’m leaving Atra in Caren’s care, so I hope you’ll be good playmates for her. I expect to be gone two weeks at the longest. Now, let me give you your assignments.”

“We’re ready!” the trio chorused. They sat taller, their eyes sparkling.

I drew three brand-new notebooks from my bag and held them out before the girls. “First, Ellie,” I said. “I’ve tried my hand at improving botanical magic using the formulae that Mr. Remire Walker and Mrs. Millie Walker left in the Sealed Archive. I’d like you to practice them along with any exercises Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe suggests in her letters. You might even be able to convince the Great Tree blocking the archive to answer your call.”

“My parents’ magic?” the blonde girl gasped, then clasped her hands as if in prayer. Her father had carried on the legacy of one of the most renowned families in the kingdom, while the Flower Sage ranked among the greatest of demisprite sorceresses. Their combined power would defy comparison, but I knew Ellie could master it.

“R-Right. Yessir. Thank you,” she said. “I’ll try my very best.”

“I bet you’ll be better than me by the time I get back.”

“Absolutely not! Oh.” Ellie blushed, ashamed of her unusual outburst. Atra burrowed under her blanket.

“Next, Lynne,” I said.

“Dear brother, if you’ll excuse me, this strikes me as a perfect opportunity to voice a request. My dear sister, Lady Stella, Caren, Tina, and most recently, Ellie.” The red-haired blue blood fixed me with a glare of extraordinary force. “This order makes no sense! It’s utterly deplorable! I…I want you to link mana with me too!”

By forging links with others, I could grant them my control in exchange for the use of their mana. Put that way, the ability sounded mutually beneficial. However…

“Lynne, a link never really goes away; it only deepens,” I said. “Lydia accepts that without turning a hair. But if you follow in her footsteps, I just might weep.”

“What? But dear brother!” Lynne’s face fell.

“Don’t be a sore loser,” Tina smugly chimed in. “Give up while you still have your dignity.”

The red-haired noblewoman's mana ruffled the curtains. "Tina," she said, stirring her tea with a spoon, "don't you think it's time I took first place from you?"

"Ha! Do you really think you can beat me? Did you forget I linked mana with Mr. Allen *again* in that last battle?"

"You don't scare me!"

"I'll defend my title!"

Flickers of flame met snow flurries. These girls would shoulder their houses' fates in the not-too-distant future.

"Oh, p-please, my ladies, not inside." Ellie started to panic, while mere proximity to the clash caused Felicia to squeak and swoon. I caught the latter with a levitation spell and deposited her on the sofa.

I waved my right hand. A faint white glow shot from my bracelet, and then…

"How pretty," Ellie murmured as her highborn friends' eyes widened.

A cage of white flowers enclosed both sparks and snow before black light consumed and extinguished them all. I hadn't meddled with their spells—my old standby. I had drawn on the black-and-white angel's power, although I only grasped a tiny fraction of the principles behind it.

I'd love to let Stella have this, assuming I can ever take it off.

"Now, where were we?" I said. "Lynne, I'd like you to swear off all offensive magic and focus on pure physical enhancement until I get back. The chieftains of the long-lived races will send you a new enchanted sword from the west before much longer, and you need to be ready to make the most of it."

A moment passed in silence. Then Lynne struck the sheathed dagger at her hip. "Yes, dear brother," she said, with a firm nod.

Thank goodness she takes instructions so well.

"And one other thing," I said, taking out my own notebook and handing her a sheet of paper I'd kept between its pages. "I'd like to ask a favor of you. Will you hear me out?"

"You're asking *me*? Not my dear sister or Lily?"

"That's right."

With Tina and Ellie, Lynne quickly ran her eyes over my request to investigate the ruined chapel of the Great Moon in the southern capital. No sooner had she finished reading than she stood and performed a perfect curtsy.

"Lynne, second daughter of Duke and Duchess Leinster, will

gladly undertake this task on behalf of Allen of the wolf clan!”

“Thank you,” I said. “Remember to talk it over with Sida as well as with Tina and Ellie.”

“With Sida?” Lynne repeated, nonplussed. Then realization dawned, and she nodded emphatically. “Oh! Of course, dear brother!”

I’d better discuss this with Duke Liam, Lisa, and Anna before I leave the city. And with Lily too, if I see her.

“And last but not least, Tina,” I said, handing the platinum-haired noblewoman her notebook while I added a note to my mental planner.

“I’m ready for anything!” The girl thumped her chest, swelling with pride. “I’ll master all the new supreme spells and secret arts you can throw at me!”

I hate to break it to her, but…

“Stick to practicing your spell control.”

I felt a few of my hairs freeze solid. Sure enough, the girl genius to rival Lydia seemed less than thrilled.

“Siiir…”

“It’s the shortest path to progress,” I said, picking up one of her ice crystals and tossing it into the air. It fell, sparkling, toward the table and stopped, suspended in space. Darkness entered the ice, turning it deep azure.

“I lack the mana to do much with this,” I continued, “but you have it in spades. Learn to wield silver-snow at will, and no sorcerer will be able to match you in a contest of spells. Above all…” The girls let out a collective cry of surprise as the ice transformed into a perfect snowflake. “You’ll need greater control if you want to master Duchess Rosa Howard’s spells.”

“My mother’s…?” Tina cupped the snowflake in both hands, her gaze resolute. “I’ll do it!”

A snowy breeze brushed my cheek, carrying a hint of warmth. I knew she would succeed.

I reached out and gave each girl a pat on her beret. “Keep moving forward, one step at a time. I’ll be right there with you.”

“Yes, sir!” my students chorused, faces flushed.

I couldn’t be prouder of them. Still, I’ll have to work even harder if I want to keep up.

Watching the girls join hands, I cast a stealthy wind spell, carrying my voice to the newly awakened head clerk.

“That goes for you too, Felicia,” I whispered. “I promise I’ll

bring Mr. Fosse back safe."

"And I'll gather the western folklore you asked me for from here," she whispered back. She would have made a name for herself as a sorceress someday if I hadn't dragged her into business.

The church had abducted her father during the Algren rebellion. I didn't fancy my odds of finding him in Lalannoy—the reported sighting might even be a trap—but there was a chance.

"Still," Tina said, nibbling a cookie and dangling her legs in flagrant disregard of proper manners, "I wonder who the actual envoy could b—"

There came a reserved knock on the door. It swung quietly open without waiting for us to answer it.

I know this mana.

"Pardon the intrusion," said a voice calm, refined—and familiar. Into the room stepped a scarlet-haired beauty in a scarlet-and-white dress and cape.

The girls gaped at her.

"U-Um..."

"Oh."

"Don't tell me..."

"By other countries' standards," Felicia murmured, "one of our dukes' daughters counts as..."

It sounds like she already figured it out.

"I wondered why Under-duke Lucas and Under-duchess Fiane didn't attend the council, but now I think I can guess," I said, pouring another cup of tea. "Would you care to explain, Lily?"

The scarlet-haired beauty bobbed a slight curtsy. Lydia and Lynne's cousin hadn't shown herself in a little while, and she looked uncharacteristically serious.

"I, Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps's number three, have been appointed envoy to Lalannoy. As my birth to a cadet branch of a ducal house entitles me to the style 'Highness' and the right to be regarded as royalty by foreign powers, my standing has been judged 'appropriate' to these informal negotiations. Naturally, I will entrust all practical matters to you, Allen of the wolf clan. I hope we'll enjoy a fruitful partnership!"

✽

I groaned as my mind stumbled toward wakefulness. I

smelled flowers.

Wait. I had lessons with Mr. Allen today, then we all celebrated Caren's birthday at night. After that, I went to bed in the Leinster house with Tina and the others. So why…?

I sat up. What was I wearing? My usual nightgown. So far, so good. But on my head…

"A sea-green griffin feather and the hair clip Carina left with Mr. Allen? I know I put them both away for safekeeping," I mused, looking around in confusion.

A carpet of pure-white flowers spread out in all directions, broken by the remains of what looked like walls. Lodged in the center of the field stood the blue-rose sword, enmeshed in brambles and radiating cool, clear mana.

"Could this be the sanctuary?" I murmured, getting to my feet and—

"Stella!"

Someone tackled me from behind. I let out a cry and tumbled into the flowers. Rolling over, I saw a gorgeous young woman in white grinning at me, her radiant golden hair falling to her waist.

"C-Carina?" I gasped.

"It's so good to see you again." She giggled. "It looks like I was even more amazing than I realized. I managed to bend the planet's laws a little, and I got free of that awful mana and that *voice*." She took my hand and pulled me into a sitting position.

I took another look at the girl who had lost her love at the Sage's hands yet still spent the hundred years since resisting the eight-winged devil she had almost become. "I…I beg your pardon, but—"

"Stella, we don't have much time. Let me be brief." Carina cut my question short. I glimpsed sorrow in her eyes. "Go with your gentle wolf, and bring Frigid Crane. Otherwise…he'll die."

"What?" It was all too sudden. I couldn't keep up.

Die? Who's going to die? Not Mr. Allen?!

The mere thought sent uncontrollable shudders through my whole body. Tears blurred my vision. I had grown far stronger since meeting Mr. Allen—as a swordswoman, as a sorceress, and as a person. But at the same time, I could no longer imagine a world without him in it.

Dainty fingers brushed the tears from my cheeks and touched the ornament in my hair. "Don't look so sad," their owner said. "It will all work out. I'll even lend you a hand."

“You’re right,” I replied after a moment, drying my eyes on my sleeve.

Carina caught me in a hug. “He has a cruel destiny, and he can do some things no one else can. But gentle souls put others’ lives before their own. Whenever he does…”

Our eyes met, and we both nodded. I *would* keep Mr. Allen safe.

White petals scattered and whirled as the world rapidly crumbled around us.

“Thank you, Carina,” I said.

“Best of luck, saint in love,” she replied. “I promise we’ll meet again.”

✽

I opened my eyes, and the ceiling of a Leinster guest room rushed in on me.

Was it all a dream?

Caren lay on the bed next to mine. She looked sweltering, sandwiched between Ellie and Lynne with Atra hugging her around the middle. Felicia had gone back to her own home, saying that she had papers to prepare for an important business negotiation at the start of the week. She would be dealing with Margrave Solnhofen, whom rumor made the wealthiest man in the west.

I sat up just as my sister, lying beside me, opened her own eyes. Softly, we called to each other.

“Tina.”

“Stella.”

The grave look on her face told me I hadn’t been dreaming.

“You look so serious,” I said. “Did you get a warning too? From Frigid Crane?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Did Princess Carina warn you, then?”

“That’s right.” I got out of bed and walked to the window. The moon and stars shone down on the royal capital. “What will you do? Classes are canceled starting next week, but I know father will object if we explain things to him. I can practically hear him. ‘Join the mission to Lalannoy?! I won’t hear of it!’”

“That goes without saying!” my sister cheerfully declared, Frigid Crane’s mark flashing on the back of her right hand as she strode up to me. “You feel the same way, don’t you?”

I felt a surge of sisterly pride. She really had grown strong. Still, I couldn't let myself fall behind.

"Mr. Allen will leave the city for the eastern capital at noon tomorrow," I said, giving her a gentle hug. "We'd better lay our plans."

"Right!"

"You know, you really ought to keep your voices down when you talk secrets."

We both started as a mana lamp brightened the room. Caren walked over, cradling Atra and wearing one of the matching nightgowns we'd all bought together a few days earlier. A drowsy Ellie and Lynne followed close behind her.

"Big Sis Stella? Lady Tina?"

"What are you doing up?"

Tina and I burst out laughing. Not long ago, neither of us would have taken action. I was straining under the weight of being "the future Duchess Howard." Tina had been struggling against the scorn heaped on "the Howards' cursed child." But now?

I hugged my sister again, from behind this time, and smiled at my best friend and my other sisters in all but name. "Forgive us for waking you at this hour," I said. "I have an important favor to ask of you. Will you help me and Tina? Without a word to Mr. Allen or Lily, of course!"

✽

"Would you look at that? I know why Lydia's not here—Princess Cheryl has her practically imprisoned in the palace, conferring with the Yustinian princess before she goes home to the empire. But I can't believe none of the girls came to see you off. Not that I'm complaining, since it gives me something to lord over you."

Fireday, the start of a new week, found me at Central Station. I glanced at the tracks, where a train was making ready for its journey to the eastern capital, then turned to my curly-red-haired companion and shrugged. A pristine white knight's uniform became the vice commander of the royal guard so well I felt a twinge of jealousy.

"I don't spend every waking moment with the girls, Richard," I said. "Apparently, they're all making me lunch to eat on the trip."

“Are they, now? You sure have it rough with so many ladies falling all over themselves for you. I don’t know how you bear it,” said the man whose dashing looks earned him a staggering amount of feminine attention despite his charming fiancée.

I flashed a hand signal to Bertrand and the other seasoned knights standing guard by a row of planted trees not far off. My fellow veterans of the fierce battle for the eastern capital avoided my gaze. Was this how they treated a comrade in arms?

I set my leather valise on the ground and glanced at Lily. She stood near a small clock tower, chatting animatedly with Lisa, Fiane, and her fellow maids. She wore a white cloth hat, a pale-scarlet dress, and a white cape. She had even taken off her bracelet. From a distance, anyone would take her for a ladylike and sheltered daughter of high nobility.

I saw nothing strange about the royal guard providing security for her departure. Still, our visit to Lalannoy would only be a prelude to formal negotiations. Why, then, could I sense the mana of Anna, Romy, and Royal Guard Commander Owain Albright inside the station, not to mention every other ranking maid not assigned to Allen & Co.? An unknown personage of some importance would coincidentally be arriving in the royal capital today, according to the letter Sui of the fox clan—my merchant friend who had studied martial arts under the same master as me—had taken time out of his honeymoon to send me from the western capital. But even if this security was meant mainly for the esteemed visitor, I found it hard to justify the forces assembled. Add Lydia, Cheryl, and Duchess Letty—who had joined in their talks with Imperial Princess Yana Yustin—and I might imagine we were on the eve of war.

Margrave Solos Solnhofen has an appointment with Felicia this afternoon, but this can’t all be for him, can it? He’s supposed to be traveling with “Lucky” Valery Lockheart of the royal guard, among others, but even so…

While I puzzled, the umpteenth bird from the palace that morning alighted on my finger. The Lady of the Sword had taken it upon herself to send me messages whenever the princess’s back was turned. Richard watched me receive this latest with a look somewhere between exasperation and smirking amusement.

“So?” I asked him. “What went on behind the scenes to get Lily made an envoy?”

Who best to send to Lalannoy? My social betters had apparently differed on the question. The chosen envoy would negotiate with Marquess Oswald Addison, leader of the Bright Wings Party and of the republic, not to mention the heir of its renowned founder. His country had initiated hostilities against the kingdom and expelled its diplomats under his rule, although supposedly not of his volition. I understood why the council had hesitated to appoint any ordinary agent, although I failed to see why they had accepted the professor's suggestion that "Allen should do the actual negotiating."

"They eventually narrowed it down to Lily or me," Richard said, massaging his brows in evident exhaustion. "The style 'Highness' gives scions of our ducal houses enough clout to impress foreign powers. After that, it came down to a test of ability. But, well…"

The screech of a steam whistle split the air. Departure time was drawing near. Would the girls make it? I didn't see our two bodyguards either.

"You know what my cousin can do." The red-haired knight threw up his hands, watching Lily and Fiane chat merrily. "I didn't acquit myself too badly, but she overwhelmed me in the end."

"I don't doubt Lily's competence," I said. "Still, I'm amazed the under-duke gave his approval."

Under-duke Lucas Leinster governed the former principalities of Etna and Zana in the extreme south of the kingdom, and he positively doted on his daughter, for all that she had set her heart on maidhood.

A gloomy look came over Richard's face. "Allen, you know what our house is like. The women have the upper hand. And my mother and aunt both backed Lily."

"I see," I said slowly. I wouldn't advise anyone to cross a Leinster woman, although I did pray that Lynne's apple would fall a little farther from the tree.

"Besides," Richard whispered, toying with his cigarette case, "I've already told you how our esteemed Swordmaster helped slay the fourth apostle in Lalannoy. I don't think my uncle could have argued regardless." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "If you see that idiot, tell him Richard and Owain are furious."

The Swordmaster, Ridley Leinster, was the under-duke's eldest son—which made him Lily's elder brother. He had also preceded Richard as vice commander of the royal guard, until he'd lost a duel to Lydia—not yet the Lady of the Sword—and left the city.

“Consider it done.” I bumped fists with the red-haired knight, making a mental note to get the full story of Idris’s demise from Ridley.

“I’m wishing you luck. Keep an eye on my cousin, and come back before my sister throws a fit.” He clapped me on the shoulder and walked off to join Bertrand.

I was busy dispatching magical birds when Lily came up beside me, luggage in hand. “A message to Lydia?” she asked.

“To Teto and Cheryl too,” I replied.

The steam whistle blew a second time. I couldn’t sense the girls’ mana, or Soi’s and Uri’s, for that matter.

The noblewoman placed her bag against mine, holding back her long scarlet hair with her free hand.

“Your Highness—”

“I *chose* to serve as envoy,” she said, taking my right hand and touching the silver bracelet on my wrist. Sullen anger smoldered in her eyes.

“First you take off my bracelet, then an angel gives it a makeover,” she grumbled in her normal tone, taking the time to cast a sound-dampening spell. “Now I can’t track your mana anymore. It’s awful—simply, simply awful.” After a few moments, she added, “I’m rather upset.”

For the past few months, Lily and I had worn matching bracelets that my father had made us. But then Carina, acting on some whim I couldn’t begin to explain, had not only reshaped mine but altered the mana imbued in it as well.

Lily advanced a few steps. “The moment my mother told me they had more or less decided on sending you to Lalannoy, I thought, ‘Princess Cheryl can’t go anywhere—a Wainwright makes too tempting a target. The same goes for her bodyguard, Lady Lydia, and Ladies Tina and Stella now that one of them is that black-and-white angel and the other houses Frigid Crane. Miss Walker and Lady Lynne will still need protecting themselves if the apostles attack, and Miss Caren doesn’t have the social standing to conduct diplomacy.’”

A coolheaded analysis of circumstance, ability, and status. She’s a Leinster, all right.

“So, I reached my conclusion: I’d better step up and keep you safe like I couldn’t last time!” The maid twirled to face me and clenched her fists in determination. “What’s so funny about that?!”

That settles it. I feel so much more comfortable when she's being herself.

"Nothing," I replied, keeping my thoughts to myself. "But be warned: given who we're up against, I'll demand all the help you can give."

The apostles posed a serious threat, each wielding Twin Heavens' tactical taboo magic in addition to the vestiges of Resurrection and Radiant shield. I would struggle to match any of them alone.

"Of course!" A smile lit up Lily's face. She pressed her hands together, giggling. "And if we find my brother…" Her hair clip flashed black as her grin broadened.

"Try not to be too hard on him," I managed, scratching my cheek to hide my terror.

"I don't think I will!" she practically sang.

Honestly. What am I to do with this highborn would-be maid?

Lily dismissed her sound-dampening spell just as Lisa and Fiane waved to us. The steam whistle's loudest screech yet filled the station.

"The girls aren't here, and neither are our guards," I said, levitating our luggage and extending my left hand to the beautiful envoy, "but would Your Highness allow me to help you aboard?"

"Certainly, Allen of the wolf clan." Lily took my hand in a firm grip, blushing ever so slightly.

Didn't we hold hands just like this in the southern capital, the first time we met?

I thought back fondly as we approached the spacious doorway of the special car attached to the rear of the train. I deposited our luggage inside, then boarded myself, leading Lily by the hand—and caught her as she cried out and nearly fell. The look on her face, like a cat that had just accomplished some mischief, told me all I needed to know.

I…I've been had! She tripped on purpose!

Not far from the train, Fiane beamed. "Oh me, oh my!"

Lisa, meanwhile, raised a hand to her forehead with a gloomy sigh. The maids let out a collective cheer, video orbs at the ready. Even Cordelia had joined in.

Richard and his knights only took enough time out of blockading the area to give me a thumbs-up. Some comrades in arms they'd turned out to be.

While I levitated the luggage farther inside, the opposite end of the station erupted in tumult. I leaned out the doors before shutting them, then exchanged a look with Lily.

"What could that be?" I wondered.

"It doesn't *sound* like a train from the west pulling in," she mused.

At last, the train began to move.

An earsplitting thunderclap drew almost all eyes skyward.

The station's wards against lightning look sound enou— Wait. Lightning? In such a clear sky?

A chill breeze brushed snow against my hair and cheeks. Lisa, Fiane, and the ranking maids appeared unruffled, but the knights and other maids gave a start as a staggering quantity of snowflakes and fiery sparks whirled into a blinding dance of reflected light.

I know this mana. Stella, Tina, Lynne... Of course! I couldn't sense them because Ellie kept them camouflaged.

"Hm?! What's—"

Lily's question ended in a squeak as I thrust her behind me.

Every tree near the station reached its branches out at once, arching high over the knights' heads. And riding them came a pair of staff-wielding sisters with unmistakable platinum hair.

Wind magic carried Caren's, Lynne's, and Ellie's voices from the roof of the station building.

"Allen!"

"Dear brother, Lily!"

"W-We're so sorry!"

Atra sang and danced, my scarf wrapped around her neck. No wonder the girls' magic seemed so strong.

The branches gained speed, chasing after the train, but we were still pulling steadily ahead of them. Tina and Stella stood up on their moving footholds, matching white cloaks flapping about them, and shouted:

"Sir!"

"Mr. Allen!"

Then, in unison: "Catch us!"

With that, they launched themselves into the air. They didn't even seem to consider the possibility that I might refuse.

Like sister, like sister, I suppose.

I propelled the wayward girls forward with a blast of wind, adding a levitation spell to catch them. I took a few liberties with

Ellie's magic for good measure. Branches shot out, pulling the pair's luggage into the train.

No sooner had Tina and Stella seized hold of my arms than they poked their heads outside, heedless of what the wind was doing to their hair. They waved wildly to their friends, who had made their way down to the platform.

"Ellie! Lynne!" Tina shouted. "Thank you!"

"We'll see you soon, Caren!" Stella added. "And you too, Atra!"

"Yes'm!"

"You owe me for this!"

"Keep a firm grip on Allen, Stella!"

Atra went on singing—from Romy's arms, for some reason. I noticed she wasn't wearing her purple hair ribbon.

✽

"Talk about a big send-off. Then again, I guess it suits him," I said, forcing a grin as my knights and I watched the train carry Allen and company off to the eastern capital. "Did you all see that? Those girls have come a long way, and you'd all better keep up—especially if you're still young."

The younger knights responded with a tense "Yes, sir," while the veterans shrugged. I couldn't blame them. That trick of Caren's had sounded like an actual thunderclap. Tina, Stella, and Lynne had pooled their skills to blind the lot of us. Ellie's jaw-dropping stealth had kept them all hidden, and then she'd sprung that botanical spell on us. Everything they'd done had gone well beyond the level of ordinary magic. The kingdom's future was riding on those girls.

I sighed, watching out of the corner of my eye as my mother and aunt gave them hugs instead of a scolding.

How much easier life would be if Allen had even a shred of interest in fame and fortune. Who knows what Lydia will do when she finds out about this? Or Princess Cheryl, for that matter.

While I reflected on my younger friend's few faults, the air shimmered nearby.

"Oh, I missed them!" groaned the girl who had just teleported in, biting her lip and striking the ground with her staff. Teto Tijerina wore a black witch hat and a robe that reminded me a lot of Allen's. On her left shoulder rode a black cat—Anko, the professor's familiar, or so they told me.

“Hello there, Teto,” I called. “If you’re looking for Allen, his train just left.”

“Lord Richard,” she murmured and lowered the brim of her hat. I’d met her a few times through Allen, and I knew she was one of the university’s top sorceresses. Still, she didn’t usually seem this tense.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “You look like the sky’s falling. The bodyguards never—”

“We found them unconscious in an alleyway on the west side of the station! Soi and Uri both!”

Her words hung in the air for a moment. At last, I managed a stunned “Huh?”

Someone knocked out a pair who studied magic under “the kingdom’s most dangerous sorcerer,” the Lady of the Sword, and *her brain? Those girls don’t have the skill to pull that off. And anyway, it wouldn’t be like them. But who does that leave?*

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Teto. I heard those bodyguards both know a thing or two about—”

A piercing gaze from Allen’s star pupil shut me up in mid-sentence.

It looks like things are worse than I thought.

“Lord Richard, may I ask you to send Allen a message on the train?” Teto said rapidly, stroking Anko. “Tell him ‘Both bodyguards unable to join you.’ That should be all he needs to figure out what happened, and a longer message risks being intercepted.”

“Bertrand,” I said.

“Yes, sir!” The seasoned knight took my meaning and raced off. He hadn’t survived the defense of the eastern capital for nothing.

I handed a spare communication orb to the girl in the witch hat, who looked ready to spring into action at any moment. “Call me if anything comes up. I’ll pass the word to my mother.”

“I’ll knock those two awake and get the whole story out of them,” she said. “Jeez! Why is the professor never around when you need him?! Bye!”

Anko let out a meow, and Teto vanished from sight.

My communication orb flashed—a summons from our chief staff officer, Renown Bor. Something might have happened to our honored guest from the western capital.

The winter wind rustled my hair.

“You know,” I muttered, “Tina and Stella might have had the right idea, getting on that train.”

✽

“Complete success! Praise me, sir!” crowed the overenergetic student in the seat to my right. She even threw in a smug laugh.

“Honestly, Tina,” I sighed, massaging my forehead.

We had the special car all to ourselves. It boasted luxurious seats, perfect temperature control, and even its own kitchenette in a separate room. Unfortunately, I hadn’t gotten much of a chance to enjoy it. Our slapstick departure had left me apologizing profusely to a young conductor while Lydia bombarded me with more messenger birds than I could count.

I shot a look at Lily, who had removed her hat and made herself comfortable in the seat next to Tina. Then I delivered a light chop to the young noblewoman’s platinum-haired noggin while the envoy prodded her cheek.

“Hey! Siiir! Lilyyy!”

“Think harder about your methods next time,” I said, ignoring her whining. “Stella, would you care to explain?”

Saint Wolf sat on my left, looking vaguely embarrassed.

“O-Of course!” She started to rise. “You see—”

The train jolted as it picked up speed, and she toppled toward me with a cry—matched by indignant outbursts from Tina and Lily. I scrambled to catch her and ended up staring her full in the face.

“Are you all right?” I said. “Watch your footing on the train.”

“I…I’m fine,” Stella groaned. “Thank you.”

Tina loudly cleared her throat twice.

Lily’s left hand shot up. “Allen, I think what we just saw merits a formal review.”

Stella was leaning on my chest and arm, so I felt her twitch as she stammered, “I didn’t do it on purpose. Really, I didn’t!” before returning to her seat. Not only her cheeks but her neck had turned bright red, so I cooled the air around her with a spell. Then, at last, she explained why she had forced her way on board.

“Carina appeared in my dreams Iceday night. She told me not to let the ‘gentle wolf’ go off alone.”

“The same thing happened to me!” Tina chimed in. “Frigid

Crane told me to ‘accompany the final key to the land of jewels and clockwork’!”

“Carina and Frigid Crane warned you?” I repeated, staring at the Howard sisters.

They have no reason to lie. “The land of jewels and clockwork” must be Lalannoy. I hear it did a thriving trade in jewelry until a few hundred years ago.

I drew a notebook and pen from an inner pocket and neatly tore loose a few pages. I would need to send messages to the royal capital from a station along the way, lest a furious Duke Howard chase us down with military griffins.

The sisters were waiting on my judgment with bated breath.

“Oh, very well,” I said at last. “I can’t argue with an angel and a great elemental.”

“You won’t regret it, sir!” Tina assured me.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help too,” Stella added, taking her sister’s hand. Their family resemblance seemed stronger than ever.

“I’ll make us tea,” I said. “Wait just a moment.”

“Allen!” Lily cried. “That’s a maid’s job! *My* job!”

“Your Highness is an envoy,” I replied. “And it can’t be easy to work in that dress.”

“B-Betrayed by my own concern for appearances!” wailed my scarlet-haired companion. She might have worked her way up to the Leinster Maid Corps’s number-three spot in less than five years, but I had won this round.

I made for the kitchenette, leaving Tina and Stella to soothe the anguished Lily.

Slowly, carefully, I poured hot water into the teapot. The full-bodied aroma of the finest leaves the southern principalities could produce filled the little room. I mentally congratulated myself on buying tarts from the café with the sky-blue roof to share with everyone.

I hope Soi and Uri are all right. I’ll have to ask them what happened later.

A nervous knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. “From the royal capital,” the young conductor said, then left before I could say thank you.

I arranged the white porcelain teapot and cups on a tray, casting a levitation spell to ensure nothing would break. Then I

took the sheet of paper wedged in the door.

It's from…the royal guard. Richard, then.

"Both bodyguards unable to join you. Be on your guard. Teto."

Something had happened at Central Station, and neither Soi nor Uri was in any state to answer questions about it. Teto had withheld details and kept her message short, meaning she worried it might be intercepted. The methods didn't seem in keeping with the apostles. Still, this certainly spelled trouble.

I incinerated the paper with a spell, then cast probes with light, darkness, and lightning just to be safe. Tray in hand, I returned to the happily chatting girls.

"I appreciate your patience, my ladies," I greeted them theatrically.

The Howard sisters blushed and stammered a "Thank you."

"D-Don't tell me… Are you a b-butler?! Is that your butler impression?!" Lily fumed like a child. "I told you, serving tea is a maid's job! *My* job!"

I pulled out a folding table and secured the tray in place.

"Now," I said, sitting beside Tina and starting to pour, "let's make sure we're all on the same page about this journey to Lalannoy. Stella, would you mind projecting a map for us?"

"N-Not at all." Saint Wolf, always the eager student, waved her hand and sent lights darting through the air. In no time at all, they formed a map of the west of the continent. I had explained the method in her assignment notebook, but she had clearly been practicing.

Is she lacking anything, except self-confidence?

"So, um…" Stella looked timidly up at me as I fetched a paper bag down off a shelf. "Wh-What do you think?"

"Perfect, my lady," I replied, opening a paper box emblazoned with the image of a black cat to release a subtly sweet aroma—the aforementioned tarts. "May I offer you first choice to celebrate your accomplishment?"

"Wh-Why, thank you." Stella giggled shyly, raising her dainty fingers to her cheeks. Glittering snowflakes glanced. I could practically see little white wings fluttering behind her.

Quoth Caren: "Stella's popularity has skyrocketed this semester." People in the southern capital and city of water revered her as a saint. Then again, she *had* become an angel, so perhaps I shouldn't be surprised that she'd attracted a following.

"Now, Tina," I said, turning to the great sorceress in the

making as she sipped her tea. “Would you kindly give us a brief overview of Lalannoyan history?”

“Yes, sir.” Tina set her cup on the table and cheerfully reached for the map. Her fingers traced the major powers of the north as she said, “The Lalannoy Republic lies north of the kingdom, across the continent’s largest saltwater lake, the Four Heroes Sea. It originated as a province of the Yustinian Empire.”

Few nations on the continent could claim imperial status—only the Yustinians and the Elder Empire to the southwest, so far as I knew. To this day, both claimed the mantle of the Old Empire, which had once united the world under its rule.

Tina’s finger crossed the Four Heroes Sea and came to a halt. “However, roughly a hundred years ago, the empire’s eastern nobles revolted and declared independence. Wielding the supreme spell of light, Shining Stag, Marquess Addison championed their cause and founded a new nation. That historical context helps to explain the constant skirmishing with the main Yustinian army and its commander, the Castle Breaker, on Lalannoy’s western border. The republic sometimes joins forces with the eastern nations devoted to the Church of the Holy Spirit and sometimes opposes them.”

Having said that much, the platinum-haired girl paused to sip her tea. As I’d said before, Tina Howard could rival Lydia Leinster for brilliance.

“Although Lalannoy prides itself on being a republic,” she continued, “in point of fact, the House of Addison and their Bright Wings Party have always controlled its government, and each successive marquess has inherited the mantle of leadership. Nevertheless, the house’s martial prowess has gradually declined since the war for independence, and no living Addison can cast Shining Stag.”

Easy as it could be to forget with these girls in my life, magic was declining the world over. Going by my own experience, I suspected the waning powers of the “World Tree saplings” that we called Great Trees and of the Eight Great Elementals were at the root of the problem. On the other hand, I couldn’t explain why Lydia, Caren, and my students continued to grow in magical power, and even their mana reserves were increasing—myself excepted.

“On the economic front, Lalannoy produces a wealth of magical devices.” Tina’s finger tapped the republic’s capital.

“Tabatha has earned a reputation at home and abroad as the ‘workshop city’ or ‘city of craft.’ Lalannoyan artificers produced the first modern spell-guns. The capital boasts the world’s longest metal bridge, which connects its eastern and western districts, and an enormous clock tower, built to commemorate the republic’s founding. The old capital, site of the final battle for independence, is another famous spot. And who could forget Lalannoyan pastry! How was that, sir?”

A swaying lock of platinum hair gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

“Well put,” I said, bowing slightly. “Would my lady care for a tart as well?”

“Would I ever! Now, which one should I—?”

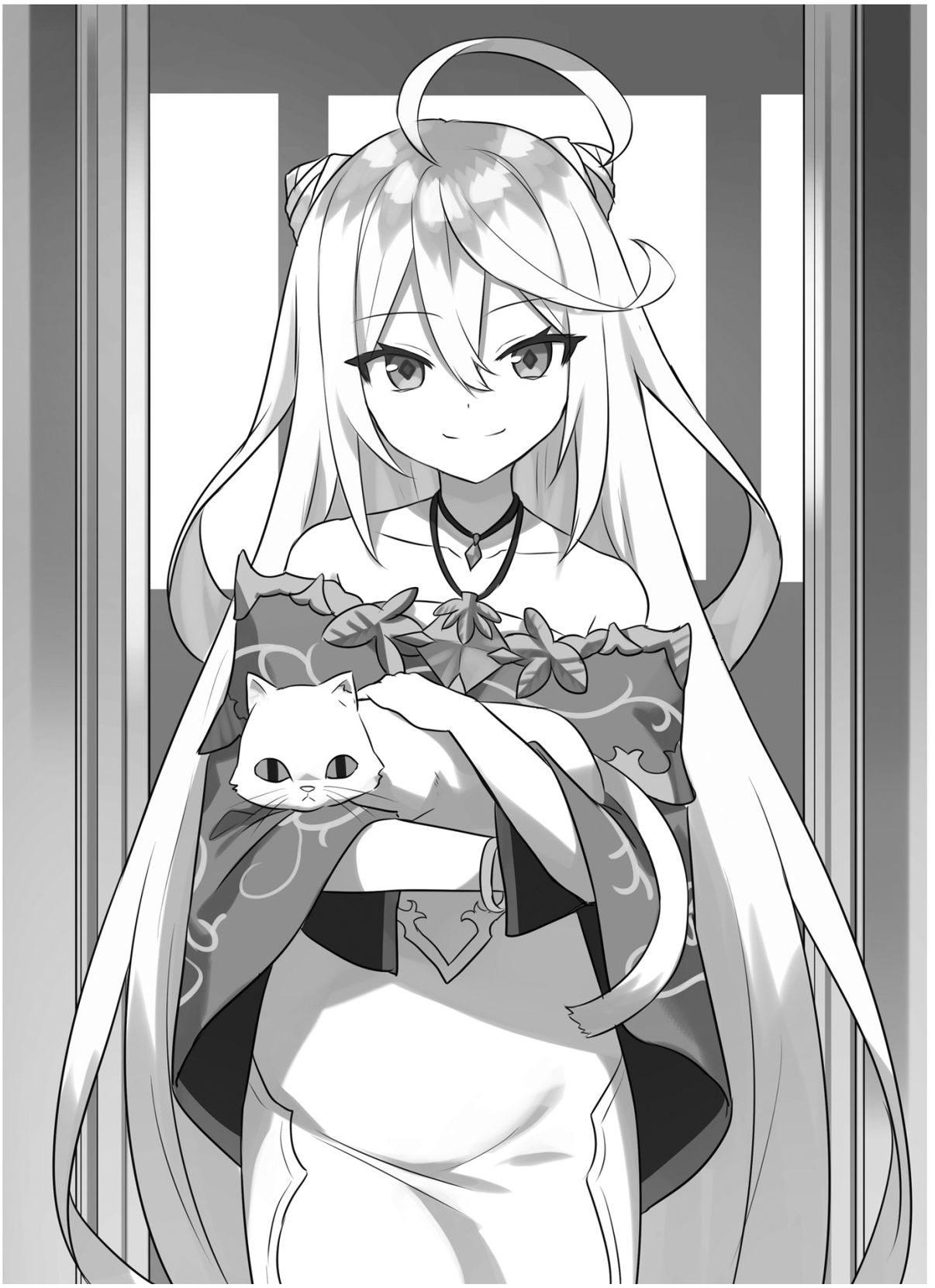
“They look delectable. Might I choose one as well?”

“Huh?” Tina gaped. The unfamiliar girl’s voice had taken us all by surprise.

Darting my eyes around the car, I spotted a young beauty in the corridor. She had snow-white skin and long silver hair, tied in two buns with black and blue ribbons. Startlingly slight, she looked even shorter than Tina. She wore a cloak over traditional elven garb, all in shades of white and pale green, but her ears weren’t pointed. A white cat sat at her feet.

How did three separate detection spells fail to find her?

While I scrutinized her, the girl scooped up her cat and said, “Here now. Don’t you know better than to stare at people? Or do you *wish* to embarrass me?”



“And, um, you are?” I asked. I sensed no hostility and no mana either, but we couldn’t be too careful. I signed to Lily and stealthily readied spells.

The girl appeared unperturbed. “Oh, well,” she said, “I was told that I would depart the west for the royal capital, then proceed through what was once the divine city to Lalannoy, yet I became separated from my companions at the station. I came to the rearmost car thinking perchance to find them, but I see neither hide nor hair.”

She sounded half amused and half put out. And if she knew the eastern capital as “the divine city,” then she might be older than she looked.

“Oh, okay.” Tina clapped her hands, undaunted. “So, you’re lost, then?”

The strange girl grunted as if struck. “I-It stings to hear it put so plainly.”

The white cat slipped out of her arms and curled up on my lap. No mistrust of strangers here.

Soon enough, the girl rallied from Tina’s verbal assault and donned an intrepid grin. “But that’s beside the point,” she declared. “I take it anyone who tells you of Lalannoy earns the right to choose from those pastries? Then allow me to join the game! My stomach is empty and my throat, parched. I assure you, no good comes of abandoning helpless girls in need.”

“Sir?” Tina turned to me.

“Mr. Allen?” Stella followed suit, awaiting my decision.

“Allen, I don’t mind if you don’t,” added Lily. Even she seemed to have relaxed her guard.

I checked my ring and bracelet but saw no reaction. I petted the white cat, and it commenced purring.

“All right, miss,” I said. “Would you please tell us your name for a start?”

“Oh, no need for formalities. I’ve had more than my fill of stuffy ceremony. As for my name, let me see…” The girl pondered.

So, she hesitated to give her real name. Unless I missed my guess, she belonged to one of the long-lived races of the west, likely the daughter of a person of some importance. She didn’t strike me as an elf, dwarf, or dragonfolk, so she might be of mixed parentage. I hadn’t heard anything of another mission to Lalannoy, but a secret plot wouldn’t surprise me at this juncture.

It might even explain the hubbub at the station.

"I have it!" The girl clapped her little hands. "Call me Rill. My companion is Kifune. Pleased to meet you."

I warmed a spare cup with a spell and filled it with tea. "Well then, Rill, would you tell us anything we've missed?" I said, indicating the seat next to Lily. "Oh, and I'm Allen of the wolf clan."

"Very well," she replied. "Consider yourselves in good hands. I may not look it, but I know a thing or two."

✽

The next afternoon, the train arrived on schedule in the eastern, or "forest," capital, the linchpin of the kingdom's eastern territories. The air was clean, and the weather, fine.

I led the charge onto the wooden platform. A sparse crowd of other passengers walked off toward the station building while I levitated our party's luggage out after me. That done, I offered my hand to the scarlet-haired noblewoman hampered by her hat and dress. Despite reverting to her usual attire that very morning, she had changed for the occasion.

"Lady Lily, if I may?"

"Why, of course, Allen. This job has its perks!" She giggled and gently took my hand, descending onto the platform. The Great Tree, symbol of the city, towered behind her. A flock of sea-green griffins winged through the air.

Oh, it feels good to be home!

While I waxed sentimental, Kifune clambered onto my right shoulder and let out a meow.

Whoops. That's enough of that. I'm not here on vacation.

While I searched for our welcome, Tina disembarked wearing her Royal Academy uniform, complete with beret, and carrying her rod slung on her back. Rill came with her, dressed in a borrowed set of Tina's everyday wear. The pair took up positions on either side of me as though nothing could be more natural.

"Oh-ho," Rill was saying. "So, you use a glass conservatory to grow fruits, vegetables, and other flora even in your snowy home. You have a good head on your shoulders, even if you are small for your age. Compared to Stella—"

"Leave my height out of this! Anyway, you're even shorter than I am!" Tina snapped. "And don't think I didn't see how you

snagged the seat next to Mr. Allen at breakfast!"

"You've quite a tongue too," Rill scoffed. "It feels like eons since anyone has dared find fault with me."

They had already become fast friends. Tina had always had a good heart, and despite Rill's antiquated speech and odd familiarity with historical details, she didn't seem a bad sort either. I'd enjoyed the legends she'd shared with us yesterday, about the "wyrms" that had inhabited Lalannoy in the distant past. Her digressions about the great spells had also piqued my interest. "The Hero's Thunderbolt came first," she had said. "Resurrection, I know not. The great spell of fire sleeps in Lalannoy. That of earth was hidden. Wind, the Dark Lord keeps. There is no great spell of ice—it would violate the Star Oath."

The whereabouts of Blaze of Ruin, Quake Array, and Dividing Wind came as news to me, but I had no way to confirm them. I couldn't explain why Rill hadn't tripped my detection spells either.

Really, who on earth is she? She had a ticket, and even a spare for Kifune, but... Hmm.

I pondered the question while I helped Stella, also dressed in her school uniform, down onto the platform. Just then, I heard running feet, and a familiar voice cried, "Allen!"

I broke into a grin as I spotted a tall, handsome young man dressed for sorcery, with a pale-violet streak toward the front of his light-blond hair. Acting Duke Gil Algren, the old duke's fourth son as well as Lydia's and my old schoolmate, bounded toward us, his black-haired maid in menswear not far behind.

"Hello, Gil. Glad to see you looking well," I said. "Konoha, I haven't seen you since Sui's wedding."

"I sure don't *feel* well. Who knows if I'll be able to go back to the royal capital next spring," Gil grumbled, gesturing theatrically as he reached us. I had already pulled a few strings and secured him a spot in the royal guard.

Konoha, whom I'd seen so recently in the royal capital, made a silent bow.

"Watch the girls for a moment. And don't forget Kifune!" I told Lily and Stella, then took a seat on a nearby bench with Gil. Konoha cast a spell of silence.

"How are things on the eastern frontier?" I asked. Gil had been leading troops there in his father's stead ever since he'd been roped into the rebellion *ostensibly* plotted by his three elder

brothers: Grant, Greck, and Gregory.

“The Knights of the Holy Spirit haven’t caused much trouble lately, so I’ve been giving units leave and sending them back to the city on vacation,” he replied. “I tried to turn it down for myself, but my pair of ex-grand knights wouldn’t shut up about it.”

The Algrens’ “Wings”—Haag Harclay and Haig Hayden—had been stripped of their knighthoods after taking part in the rebellion. Even so, they had returned to the front to support Gil as soon as their war wounds had healed.

“Their lordships are right,” I said. “How is old Duke Guido?”

Gil’s father had been poisoned by his eldest son, Grant. At one point, we had feared for his life. A true patriot, he had planned to purge old-guard aristocrats tied to the Church of the Holy Spirit even if his own house fell with them.

My old school friend turned serious and gave a slight bow. “He’ll live, thanks to you, but he’s not always up to talking. Grant admitted he got the poison from the church, so there isn’t much more we can do. Oh, but the other day, when he felt strong enough for a short conversation, he said he had something to tell you personally.”

“I hope I get the chance to hear it,” I said slowly. A person of my social standing had no real right to converse with a duke. It would be safer to communicate through Gil.

“Soi and Uri really no-showed, huh?” Gil scratched his head in irritation, watching the girls chat happily. “I hear someone finally spotted Gregory and his servant Ito in the city of craft. Allen, let me go with you in place of—”

“No.”

“A-At least let me finish my sentence!”

The false Saint had made a complete fool of Gregory Algren during the rebellion, pulling his strings from behind the scenes. But while reports did indeed place the duke’s third son and his female attendant in Lalannoy, the duke’s proxy couldn’t rush off to foreign lands. We each had our part to play.

“What about Tina and Stella?” Gil grumbled, looking me in the eyes. “Duke Howard shot off magical messages from the royal capital the first chance he got, and he wants them stopped here ‘no matter what.’”

“I did send him an explanation from a station on the way,” I sighed. “Either way, I’ll take them with me. Send him this in

reply."

I handed Gil a note I'd written that morning: "Her Royal Highness's personal investigator hereby appoints both ladies as bodyguards on the advice of an angel and a great elemental."

That should make sure they only punish me when we get back to the royal capital—I hope. If Cheryl takes some of the blame, I'll resign by way of apology. Wouldn't that *be nice?*

Gil must have heard something of the recent disturbance, because he asked no questions about the "angel."

"Man, you've got nerves of steel!" he said, smirking. "I bet you could search the whole continent and still not find another guy with the guts to give himself a guard of two ducal daughters. Oh, wait! Lily makes three! You know, Lydia might seriously run off with you when you get back. Maybe she'll go for the southern isles this time."

Oh? If that's how you want it, two can play at that game.

"You know, Gil," I said gravely, "I'm not nearly as tight-lipped as you'd think. Remember that letter you wrote me before Sui's wedding, asking me to take special care of Konoha? I might just let that detail slip around—"

My handsome friend let out an earsplitting yell.

"L-Lord Gil?!" his suit-clad maid cried with none of her usual calm.

I'd assumed the next wedding I attended would be Teto and Yen's, but Gil and Konoha might beat them to the punch.

"It wouldn't hurt to show your feelings once in a while. We're counting on you to get everything ready for tomorrow." I gave my friend a pat on the shoulder, stood, and broke the spell of silence. We would need military griffins for the next leg of our journey across the Four Heroes Sea.

I might not even get a chance to visit home.

"Oh, Aaallen!"

The soft, lilting call caught me off guard, and I wasn't the only one. Tina, Stella, and Lily stiffened as a diminutive wolf-clan woman walked over, waving to us. My mother, Ellyn, had the same silver-gray ears and tail as Caren, with hair that ended around her shoulders. She didn't stand much taller than Tina or Rill, and she could pass for far younger than her years. She wore a kimono, like many Old Town beastfolk, although she had covered it with a cloak today.

"M-Mom?!" I exclaimed. "Wh-Why are—?! How did—?!"

“Little Gil was nice enough to tell me,” she said.

Gil Algren!

I glared daggers at my old schoolmate, but he only lounged on the bench and whistled. He would rue the day.

Meanwhile, my mom circled around in front of me and spread her arms wide.

The serial hugger strikes again!

“I…I don’t know,” I ventured. “Th-There are so many people watching, and—”

“Squeeeeze!” She caught me in her embrace and I let her, cowed by her look of concern. Caren and I would never be a match for her. “Welcome home. But really! You ought to give us some warning if you’re coming to visit!”

After a moment, I murmured a sheepish “It’s good to be back.”

As I became uncomfortably aware of the girls’ eyes on my back, my mom laughed and continued in her musical way, “Have you lost weight? You need to eat right, no matter how busy you are. I think I’d better send Lydia and Caren a reminder.”

“Life has just been hectic lately,” I said. “Where’s dad?”

I didn’t see my father, a skilled artificer. Could he be in his workshop?

“Nathan is waiting for us at Duke Algren’s villa,” my mom announced, releasing me and pressing her hands together in delight.

“At Duke Algren’s…? Gil?” I shot my friend another glare. This was news to me!

“Just a bit of hospitality from your old pal! And anyway…” The acting duke crossed his legs and shook his head. “It’s high time you realized where you stand. If you take one step into the beastfolk districts, you won’t get out again without three days and three nights of partying. Did you forget you saved the city?”

“I really don’t think…” I couldn’t finish the sentence. Letting my gaze wander, I saw Tina and Lily nod vigorously. Even Rill and Kifune started mimicking them.

While I turned despondent, groaning inwardly, a nervous-looking Saint Wolf turned to my mom.

“M-Mother,” she said, “it’s me, Stella. I’m so glad to see you again.”

“Goodness! Stella, you’ve gotten so pretty I hardly recognized you. I’m glad to see you too, dear. Squeeze!” My mom caught

Stella in a hug, and the noblewoman happily squeezed back.

The aristocratic hard-liners would keel over if they saw this.

"St-Stella! Give me a turn already!" Tina whined, tugging on her sister's sleeve. My mom had become a hit with my students over their summer vacation.

Saint Wolf displayed her maturity by disentangling herself and coming to stand beside me without a fuss.

"Why, Tina." My mom cocked her head in mock puzzlement. "Have you gotten shorter?"

"M-Mother! Don't be cruel!"

"You looked so cute I couldn't resist. I do hope you'll forgive me. Squeeze!" My mom giggled as she hugged the fuming girl, who soon broke out in smiles. As Lydia had proven, no one could stand on their dignity with my mother.

Lily removed her cloth hat, psyching herself up. "C-Can it be my turn ne—"

"Out of the question," I cut in. "You'll rumple your dress."

The maid let out a stunned cry, her face the very picture of despair. Then she scooped up Kifune and buried her face in the white cat's back.

Did you forget you're supposed to be an envoy?

Having finally finished petting Tina's head, my mom next seized on a girl who looked thoroughly unimpressed.

"Allen, who is *this* lovely little lady? A new student?"

"This is Rill," I said. "She's lost. We met her on the train."

I had been probing her mana this whole time, but I sensed nothing amiss. The same went for Kifune.

"Like master, like pupil!" Rill fumed. "First my height, and now this! What manner of brute torments a fragile damsel so?! You'll rue this day, Allen of the wolf clan!"

"It's true, though," I pointed out.

"Simple fact," Tina agreed.

"W-Well..." Stella hesitated.

"You can't deny it," said Lily.

The girl who, by her own admission, didn't know what race she was groaned in the face of our united opposition.

My mother, meanwhile, stole stealthily up to her with a look of understanding. "Rill," she murmured. "What a lovely name. There was a great sorceress called Rill, once upon a time. Squeeze!"

"To think that any still know of— E-Embrace me not! Unhand me, I say!"

My mom delivered her hug without mercy, laughing sweetly as she patted the irate little girl. No one could stand against her.

Gil rose from the bench and planted his left hand on his hip. “I know I’m repeating myself, Allen, but stay at our villa tonight. Nathan is already waiting, and we’ve got a real feast with your name on it.”

✽

That evening found me in a room of the Algren villa, stealing occasional glances out the window at the Great Tree bathed in moonbeams while I composed a letter to the royal capital. Kifune sat curled up on the table, perhaps enjoying the warmth of the mana lamp.

The rest of my party was sound asleep, having retired to another room after discussing our plans for the morrow. With bellies full of my parents’ cooking, prepared from the most lavish ingredients, and a long, leisurely bath after, it was no wonder that the travel fatigue had caught up to them. The Howard sisters’ drowsy pleas of “Carry me, sir” and “If you wouldn’t mind, Mr. Allen” had been too precious for words. If we’d been in the royal capital, the maids would have had a field day.

As for our mysterious silver-haired companion, Gil was looking for her…guardian, I supposed. I hoped he would find them soon, but I had my doubts. The girl had carried a pair of third-class tickets. No one had taken names when they were purchased. They didn’t even include seat reservations. The hunt might prove an unexpected challenge. Still, I couldn’t take the girl to Lalannoy, so I would have to trust Gil to sort it out.

I glanced at the message from Duke Walter lying on the table. It had arrived just after dinner.

Allen of the wolf clan, personal investigator to Her Royal Highness Princess Cheryl Wainwright,

I appreciate your position. I will not stop either of them, nor will I demand a change of schedule. The kingdom cannot afford delay. But I’m not satisfied. I demand a thorough explanation.

Walter Howard

PS: As you are no doubt well aware, my daughters are still young —children, in fact. If, by any chance— No, it doesn’t bear saying. I await you in the royal capital.

A reasonable response. Duke Walter was a doting father, and even if he weren't, Tina and Stella had no earthly reason to accompany us to Lalannoy.

"But on the other hand..." I couldn't help muttering.

Frigid Crane and Carina went far beyond mortal understanding. They wouldn't give pointless advice. And I *had* brought that hair ornament along.

I had written Duke Walter a sincere record of my thoughts. Whatever came next would have to wait until I returned to the royal capital.

I sealed the letter in its envelope and took out the next sheet of paper. I hoped to catch up on all of my correspondence before bed, but Lydia and Caren came first—they would worry otherwise. Then I'd better ask Felicia to investigate that wyrm legend. I took up my pen, poised to write—when there came a polite knock on the door.

"Allen, may I come in?"

"Dad?" I said. "Of course."

The heavy door swung open, and a tall, bespectacled wolf-clan man entered. Seeing my father, Nathan, in his smock, I supposed that he had been fiddling with the pocket watch I'd left with him earlier. He carried a wine bottle in his right hand, along with a small cloth bag and two glasses.

Oh, I see.

I cleared away my correspondence and pulled out another chair beside me. As for Kifune, a swish of the cat's tail expressed a disinclination to go anywhere. I couldn't help thinking of Anko.

Meanwhile, my dad closed the door and set the wine bottle and bag of beans on the table, then took his seat. I didn't recognize the design on the printed label. It must have come from outside the city.

"Wine from our homeland," he explained. "Don't tell Ellyn, now? She won't be happy with me."

"My lips are sealed," I said. It sounded as though he had something to tell me.

I pried the cork free with a knife, releasing an aroma rich and, at the same time, familiar. *How strange*, I thought as I poured the dark-red liquid. *I don't even know where dad and mom come from.*

"Cheers."

Our glasses met with a pleasant *clink*. I took a sip.

“This is good stuff,” I murmured, impressed.

“I’m glad you like it,” my dad said. “Still, I never dreamed I’d find myself in Duke Algren’s villa.”

“Sorry. Gil gets, well… You know.”

We shared a laugh, then silence fell over the room. My dad was never exactly talkative, and I rarely felt a need to talk either. We sipped our wine and ate the beans my mom had roasted for us. Then…

“Allen.” A scarred yet warm hand came to rest on my head.

That tickles.

“D-Dad? What brought this on?”

“Oh, nothing, really.” My dad withdrew his hand, then removed his spectacles and wiped his eyes. I remembered this gentle gaze from my childhood. “You used to be so small, crying in Ellyn’s arms or mine. Now, every time you come home or send us a letter, you’ve grown into a more wonderful young man. Allen, I’ll say this as many dozens or hundreds of times as it takes: You are our pride and joy.”

“Dad.” My voice caught in my throat, and tears blurred my vision. I hastily wiped them on my shirtsleeve. I didn’t have a drop of my parents’ blood in my veins, but all my life, they had always, *always* shown me genuine love and affection, standing by me through thick and thin. I only hoped that I was managing to share even a fraction of what they’d given me with the people in my life.

“And that gives me all the more reason to say this.” My dad looked me straight in the eye. I sat up straighter and met the force of his gaze. He let out a heavy sigh, and his face turned grave. His spectacles creaked in his hands.

“Allen,” he said, “the kingdom’s great and powerful have high hopes for your future. I don’t doubt that many people will flock to you or that you’ll bear many weighty responsibilities. You could already count yourself among our champions—a living legend.”

In silence, I vividly recalled words my dad had once spoken to me: “You don’t need to become a legend. Truly you don’t!”

A look of loneliness stole over the most erudite of the city’s beastfolk as he gazed out the window. “No one makes themselves a legend. People’s wishes, their hopes, raise a few in every age. But you have a kind heart—too kind for your own good. The higher the rank you attain, the more you become

capable of, the more the world will try to crush you. The more it will torment you with the thought 'If only I'd done better!' Yes, I know. A whole host of people will come to your aid. Ladies Lydia and Tina gave me their word. But…but Allen…"

The mana lamp flickered, throwing my father's face into gloom. His eyes flashed in the dark, transfixing me with their piercing gleam.

"I'm your father," he said. "I know my history. I know the bitter ends that legends come to. Think of Shooting Star and the Silver Wolf and remember, Allen: If you find yourself in real danger, run. Even if people call you a coward, a failure, and a sneak, you must not die. *You must not die.* And hey, if worse comes to worst, roaming the continent again, as a family, doesn't sound so bad."

I clenched my teeth, unable to find the words. It was so sudden. I hadn't told my parents about my mission, or about Zel. Even so, I couldn't fool them. In effect, my dad had just told me, "Ellyn and I don't care if the kingdom, or even the whole world, turns against you. You mean so much more to us than the kingdom's future." As a declaration of love, it fairly took my breath away.

I always knew I used up half of my life's good luck the moment mom and dad found me, and getting Caren for a sister took the rest. Lydia, I would have met anyway.

"That does sound like fun," I managed, raising a hand to stem the tears that flowed unbidden down my cheeks.

"It is," my dad said. "Traveling wasn't easy, but I still remember the scenery and the atmosphere of everywhere we went, and the people we met there. I'll tell you all about them sometime. You ought to know about where we came from too."

My dad drained his wineglass. "A star-cat," he murmured to himself, stroking Kifune. "Now there's something you don't see every day."

He stood, donned his spectacles, and started to walk away, touching the windowpanes as he went. "I'm sure my thinking is old-fashioned, but Allen, if…if we must die, let the oldest go first. You're bearing so many burdens now it frightens me. And…" He turned back to me, distressed.

I never want to see that look on his face. I certainly don't want to put it there.

"Ellyn and I put some of those burdens on your shoulders. Sometimes, I wonder how high you would have risen by now if

you only had a house name.”

“Dad.” I stood, not caring that I’d knocked over my chair. Kifune let out a meow of protest. I ignored it, pressing my right hand to my heart and shaking my head over and over. “That…that’s not true. I’m Allen, son of Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan! No matter how many other names I get—‘Shooting Star,’ ‘Water Dragon’s Emissary,’ ‘Her Royal Highness’s Personal Investigator’—I’ll…I’ll always…” My head drooped, and tears fell, leaving damp spots on the carpet.

“Allen,” my dad murmured. I felt his big, warm hand on my right shoulder and looked up.

“I’ll be fine, dad,” I said, forcing a smile. “I’m not alone anymore. And I don’t want to be a bad son, so I’ll run the moment I bump into a real threat. I promise.”

My father nodded several times in silence and gave me a few hearty thumps on the shoulder. Then his expression softened. “Thank you, Allen. I’d better get to bed now, or Ellyn will start wondering what I’m up to. Help yourself to the wine. We have two more bottles saved: one for your wedding and one for Caren’s.”

“All right. I’ll dispose of the evidence.”

“I’m counting on it.”

I felt a weight on my right shoulder. Kifune had hopped aboard.

Suddenly, a thought struck me. I recalled an inexplicable detail of my mock duel with Duchess Letty, during my last visit to the eastern capital.

“Just one more thing,” I said. “Do you remember anything about a demisprite sorceress who gave mom singing lessons?”

My dad stopped just short of the door. After a brief pause, he shrugged and said, “She was a lovely person, albeit a bit eccentric. She told us she was roaming the continent, looking for someone. And that she’d been betrayed once—badly. Goodnight, Allen.”

“Goodnight, dad.”

✽

“Sir, we’re ready to go!”

“The weather’s lovely, Mr. Allen.”

Early the next morning, I found the Howard sisters waiting by

the military griffins they had already loaded with our luggage. They wore the same matching capes and white sorceress's garb as the day before, but Stella's wand and rapier now hung at her belt. We had decided the night before that she had better save her staff for an emergency. I didn't know what Carina had added to its already fine workmanship, but it was simply too powerful. That staff might even explain the wide berth that the sea-green griffins were giving us.

"I know this dress is pretty, but I'd still take a maid uniform over it any day," Lily grumbled when she joined us a little later, reluctantly still dressed for her role as envoy.

Rill followed, rubbing her eyes and wearing the long-sleeved shirt and pants that Konoha had fetched for her. "Setting out already?" she mumbled with a yawn.

"Rill," I called, petting the white cat on my right shoulder—evidently a comfortable perch, since the animal hadn't left it all morning. "You and Kifune will stay in the eastern—"

"Allen, come here for a sec," Gil interrupted, dashing out in his military uniform to yank on my left sleeve.

What could he need?

We left the girls and doubled back inside. Konoha popped up to surround us with numerous spells of silence and detection.

"From His Majesty in the royal capital," Gil said, looking tense as he held out a dispatch. "It's about Rill."

"Come again?" I couldn't help gaping at him.

His Majesty? As in, the king?!

Despite my confusion, I quickly scanned the message.

"The girl called Rill may accompany you by special exception. Following your mission, you are to return with her to the capital. I will accept no questions on this matter."

What was going on? I shot my old school friend a look, but he said only, "Beats me. But Allen, you really ought to control your 'natural way with young ladies' at this stage of the game." I would have his labmates interrogate him when I got back.

I flicked Gil on the forehead and went back out to the courtyard while he reeled.

"Stella, take Tina," I said. "Rill, please ride with me. We'll fly ahead and behind Lily's griffin."

"Yes, sir!" said the younger Howard sister.

"Rill is joining us?" asked Stella.

"I can control my own mount," announced the girl in question.

“Hm,” Lily murmured as they all mounted their griffins. “Getting protected might not be so bad.”

My mom ran out of the villa, beaming, with my dad close behind her.

“Here!” she said, handing me a large rattan basket wrapped in cloth. “I made you lunch!”

“Thank you.” I reached out to take it, and she seized my hand. “Mom?”

Tears welled in her eyes. “Be careful. I don’t want you getting hurt, okay?”

“I know.”

“That’s good, then,” she said. “Have a safe trip. I’ll just go give the girls some treats for the road as well.”

Watching her small, retreating back, I felt more determined than ever to do right by my parents.

“I swapped in a new protective amulet,” my dad said next, returning my pocket watch. “Don’t forget you promised you’d listen to my old stories.”

“I wouldn’t miss them for the world.”

We nodded to each other, and I turned away. The girls had finished their own goodbyes, so after a meaningful glance at Gil and Konoha, who would accompany us as far as the border, I called:

“Now, let’s be on our way. To the Four Heroes Sea!”

“Right!” the noblewomen chorused.

“That name stirs memories,” said our newest companion. “I can hardly wait.”

Chapter 3

“Let me get this straight, Teto. Soi and Uri followed a strange white cat into an alley near Central Station, where someone knocked them both out before they could so much as cast a spell? And to top it off…”

“The next thing they knew, they were lying on a bench—minus their tickets to the eastern capital and notes detailing their bodyguard assignment?”

The soft questions filled the palace chamber. Two beauties occupied the couch—Lady Lydia Leinster, dressed for a sword fight, and Princess Cheryl Wainwright, wearing a white dress—and I couldn’t pretend that either had a remotely understanding look in her eyes.

“W-Well, you see…” I faltered and broke eye contact. What was a humble university student like me doing here?

Chiffon had settled in front of the hearth, and Lia had lain down with Anko, using the white wolf’s belly for a pillow. The supposed great elemental’s ears and tail twitched in her sleep.

Oh, how precious.

“Teto.” Their Highnesses’ voices dragged me back to reality.

Suppressing a groan, I lowered the brim of my witch hat and smoothed out my robe before answering, “Yes, that’s what they tell me.”

Why had I been summoned to the royal palace? Simple: to report on the massive blunder that two of the professor’s other students, Soi Solnhofen and Uri, had made three days earlier at Central Station, on their way to guard Allen and our envoy to Lalannoy. The offending pair had taken to their beds with high fevers and low spirits.

If only Yen were here. Not that I can blame him when he’s off testing to join the royal guard. I heaved a mental sigh, gazing out a window at the cold rain while I thought none too kindly of my roommate.

A white porcelain cup painted with a design of swords and staves arrived on the table in front of me.

“Black tea from the league,” the princess said. “Drink it while it’s hot. Now, did either of them see their assailant?”

“Th-Thank you very much,” I managed. Had Her Royal Highness just served *me* personally? How could I stay calm while our future queen poured me tea? “And, w-well, they say the attacker was small in stature, but they couldn’t make out anything else. The whole lab scoured the area for traces of mana, but we found nothing. No witnesses have come forward either.”

Cold wind and rain buffeted the windowpanes.

Wh-Why won’t they say something? This silence can’t mean anything good. A-Allen, help!

The princess crossed her long legs. “What is the meaning of this, Lydia?” she demanded. “How could they fail to even identify who attacked them?”

“Neither of them lacked skill. Allen thought so, and so do I,” said the scarlet-haired Lady of the Sword, reaching into a pile of reports and books beside her and pulling out a booklet with an illustration of a long-haired woman on its cover. She flipped through the pages as she delivered her dispassionate analysis. “Soi Solnhofen may be awkward, but she could qualify for a royal bodyguard post right now if she wanted to. Her house name ought to tell you that she doesn’t go down easily.”

“I suppose you have a point,” the blonde princess admitted reluctantly. A slight frown creased her face.

Wait. To hear Soi tell it, her elven house disowned her because she “didn’t measure up.”

“Uri has put in more work than any of the professor’s students except Teto,” Lydia continued. “How else could a houseless orphan from the southern capital be attending the university on a scholarship he won’t even need to repay?”

“Allen has mentioned Uri to me as well. Wasn’t he raised in one of the orphanages you fund?”

“That wasn’t me. Don’t believe everything he tells you.” Lydia sounded annoyed, flipping faster through her booklet—a collection of women’s hairstyles.

Oh, I see. Allen had a hand in it.

“Anyway,” she said, “Uri idolizes Allen. I can’t imagine him letting his guard down.”

“No, I suppose he wouldn’t,” the princess grudgingly agreed. “Not if he holds Allen in such high regard.”

I was of the same opinion. And yet…

“Lydia, I must object!” I interjected, hand on my heart. It took

all the courage I could muster. “Yes, I’ve learned magic from Allen, and yes, I’ve even imitated him. But that still doesn’t justify speaking as though I’m anything but a normal—”

“The problem is that for all their skill, someone knocked Soi and Uri out before they could see who attacked them, let alone fight back,” Lydia continued. “Whoever did it gave away no hostility or malice, and they left nothing behind—not even mana. We have a real threat on our hands.”

How could she just ignore my heartfelt plea like that? It’s too cruel!

While I started tearfully munching cookies shaped like little birds, a shadow of worry clouded the princess’s lovely face. A log in the fireplace snapped loudly, scattering sparks.

“Since yesterday,” she said, “my father has been debating something with Duke Lebufera, who’s returned to the city, and Dukes Howard and Leinster, who delayed their departure, as well as the Emerald Gale, Lord Rodde, a group of ministers…and Margrave Solos Solnhofen. They seem to have sent a number of magical communications to the eastern capital.”

“I asked my mother and my Aunt Fiane, but I couldn’t get a straight answer,” Lydia added. “I hear the margrave stood Felicia up at a meeting *he* arranged.”

The Howards’ and Leinsters’ joint business venture, better known as Allen & Co., was becoming a major economic player both in and outside the kingdom. So why would anyone who had secured an appointment with its masterful head clerk then fail to keep it?

“Stella and Tiny went with him,” Lydia murmured, gazing out the window. “Maybe I should join them.”

“No, Lydia,” the princess swiftly countered. “Have you forgotten you’re *my* bodyguard?”

No one could catch up with the envoy’s party in time, anyway. Although knowing Lydia…

I watched with bated breath as the scarlet-haired noblewoman’s expression turned sinister. “Tell me, Cheryl,” she said. “Do you actually realize the danger we’re in?”

“Huh? Wh-What do you mean?” The princess wavered, recoiling slightly.

Lydia stuck a bookmark in her pamphlet. “Lily is my Aunt Fiane’s daughter, remember?” she said flatly, flipping to another page. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten how *she* married my Uncle

Lucas? Lily serving as envoy shows that the under-ducal house is serious about marrying her to Allen. And while Tiny doesn't worry me much, Stella can be bolder than she looks."

"L-Lydia?! Wh-What are you i-implying?" Cheryl blushed bright red. Anyone could see she was rattled, but I couldn't imagine why.

Tina and Stella aside, it sounded like the Under-ducal House of Leinster considered Allen a potential son-in-law. Normally, I would expect Lydia to act on that without bothering to consult anyone. The princess seemed to share my surprise once she calmed down, because she gave the Lady of the Sword a puzzled stare.

"Well, I don't plan on leaving the royal capital just yet," Lydia said, still perusing hairstyles.

The princess and I gasped in unison.

*L-Lydia—*the *Lydia—won't even* try *to chase after Allen?! Will the moon and stars fall down on us tomorrow?*

"What are you looking at me like that for?" Lydia demanded.

"A-Are you feeling well?" the princess asked.

"D-Did you have a fight with Allen?" I ventured. If my labmates had been here, we would all have responded the same way.

Wh-What's come over her?!

Lydia took out her pocket watch—a matching set with Allen's—and opened the lid. Then she gently touched her right ring finger, moving with such alluring grace that my heart skipped a beat. "I'm fine," she said. "He's done some growing up, and so have I. You can see Lia isn't worried, and according to Caren, Atra's been her usual self too. So I'll stay in the royal capital and do my duty."

H-Has Lydia always been this mature? I mean, she's been unbelievably pretty as long as I've known her. Of course she has! But now, she seems—I don't know—like she belongs with Allen more than ever, or maybe like she's gained confidence.

Princess Cheryl giggled, and I felt a chill on the back of my neck.

Oh no. This could mean trouble.

I lifted my chair and began a hasty retreat toward Chiffon.

"Tell me," the princess said. "What kind of spell did you get Allen to cast on you?"

"You can scour the world if you like," Lydia replied, "but you'll never find any earthly reason I should answer you."

They laughed prettily as flecks of light and fiery plumes collided. Furniture and windowpanes rattled.

"You haven't changed one bit since the Royal Academy!" Princess Cheryl shouted, jabbing her index finger at Lydia. "You always want Allen all to yourself! It's unchivalrous! It's unfair! I demand equal opportunity! And why have you been looking up hairstyles that use ribbons?!"

In her anger, she let her mana slip free to shake the dozens of barriers warding the palace. I considered interfering with her light magic to rein it in but quickly abandoned the idea. I couldn't dispel her magic in a million years. How did Allen make it look as easy as breathing?

I knew it! I really am the only person in our lab with a right to call myself "normal"!

While I mentally argued with the erstwhile upperclassman I revered, little Lia opened her eyes and mumbled, "Princess noisy."

"Oh! F-Forgive me." The flecks of light blinked out at once. Princess Cheryl was a lovely person. I might not know her nearly as well as I did Lydia, but I still found her a little more reasonable.

"Teto."

"Y-Yes?!" I hastily sat to attention in my chair.

The Lady of the Sword put away her booklet and issued her orders. "Pass a message to Soi and Uri: 'Do nothing rash, but redouble your efforts.' And I shouldn't have to say this, but I don't want any of you blaming them either."

"Of course! Thank you very much!"

Allen had saved every one of the professor's students at some point—myself included, of course. This failure stung. We would need to make up for it.

"And accompany my sister to the southern capital." Sweeping her scarlet hair aside, Lydia shut her pocket watch and slid a bundle of papers marked "Top Secret" across the table to me. I glanced over them.

Could it be?

"You want me to look into the links between the false Saint and some of her apostles and the cult of the Great Moon?" I asked. "And its adherents have left ruined chapels all over, not only in the southern capital?"

"We've collected the puzzle pieces," she said. "You just need to

slot them into place. I assume you've heard of Carlotta Carnien of the League of Principalities? I hear she's recovered her health. I'll arrange to have her summoned to the southern capital, but I want you to question her about ancient lore. Have Niccolò Nitti join you when you meet her."

"A-All right."

Niccolò was one thing, but she wanted me to deal with Marchesa Carnien? I mean, I would *try*.

"Surely arranging those pieces into a picture will be easier said than done," Princess Cheryl chimed in glumly from the couch she had settled back onto.

"I know my limits. Solving puzzles is Allen's job," Lydia said, caressing the pocket watch on her lap. I heard pure conviction in her voice. "I'm his sword. I just slash and burn and slash some more."

The princess and I murmured her name with concern. The force of her emotions threatened to crush me. The Lady of the Sword would never lose while she had Allen at her side, but I couldn't imagine that was what he wanted from her. I had never met a kinder person.

Sudden applause broke the silence.

"Well said! I commend your spirit!"

All three of us turned to the source of the jovial interjection.

"D-Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera?!" I exclaimed.

A gorgeous, jade-haired elven woman in pale green—the legendary Emerald Gale, holder of the western dukedom two generations before—smiled at us from the doorway.

"'Letty,' please," she chided me. "I did knock, by the way—though I couldn't resist casting a spell of silence first."

None of us said anything. Who could guess what went through the mind of a legend who had crossed blades with the Dark Lord alongside Shooting Star and lived?

Duchess Letty ignored our reproachful stares and grinned. "The lad's taken too much on his own shoulders again. Do what you can to lessen the burden. I grew bored of councils and slipped out to join you. Hm? Do I see Lia sleeping there?"

While Lydia maintained stony silence, Princess Cheryl repeated "slipped out" in disbelief, and I fumbled for something to say, the former duchess closed the door and strode to the fireside. Crouching down, she stroked Lia's little head. Then her face turned stern.

“I have an idea who ambushed the bodyguards. And for reasons best known to themselves, they’ve joined Allen’s party. I doubt they would harm him without good reason. Yet the time may come when we find ourselves needed in Lalannoy. Prepare yourselves for the worst.”

✽

“Sir, sir! I smell salt water! Wow! That must be the Four Heroes Sea!” Tina shouted, clinging to my back as I urged our military griffin forward. The white cat on my lap twitched its nose. A vast expanse of water spread out below us: the continent’s largest saltwater lake.

This was our second day since leaving the eastern capital. The night before, we had camped in a desolate hamlet without a proper building to speak of. Yet Tina still seemed full of energy, dressed in white with her rod slung across her back. I couldn’t help smiling.

According to Gil, our campsite had been near Gerard’s onetime hideout, where Richard had led a company of knights against him. And that villa had once belonged to the former Earl Rupert. The beastfolk of the eastern capital would never forget the tragedy he’d brought on little Atra of the fox clan. It was a small world.

Stella maneuvered her own griffin to our left flank, the sky-blue hair ribbon tied behind her head glistening in the gentle sunshine. Rill seemed to have dozed off in the saddle in front of her.

“Don’t fuss, Tina,” Stella said. “You don’t want to bother Mr. Allen, do you?”

“Okay!” Tina called back happily.

“Honestly. You should have just ridden behind me again.” Stella cast a glance at Tina and me, then worked her reins, mumbling something about “Mr. Allen’s back” as she guided her mount toward Lily’s.

I still couldn’t get a handle on Rill, but neither could I defy a royal order, so we had to take her with us to Lalannoy. I had allowed Tina and Rill to switch places in the hope of fostering friendship, but perhaps I should have minded my own business, if my companions’ conversation was anything to go by.

“Can you believe Mr. Allen?”

“I do wish he would learn a thing or two about women.”

Well, Stella and Lily—once again in her dress and hat—seemed to be enjoying their chat, so I would call it a wash.

A dozen or so seasoned knights flew around us. We had met this detachment of the east’s elite Violet Order in the deserted hamlet, where Gil had added them to our escort under his command.

“Allen, we’ll take the lead from here,” he called via the communication orb on my collar. “Don’t overtake us until we locate the Lalannoyan ship! I mean it!”

“That’s right!” Lily chimed in. “And I’ll fly ahead with—”

“You stay with us.”

“Allen! You never let me have any fun!” the maid whined, while her griffin assumed a hangdog look. Was it her Leinster blood, or the training she’d received from the chestnut-haired head maid and her bespectacled second-in-command, who would never let a little girl go unprotected? Either way, Lily seemed lamentably eager for a fight.

While I was distracted with the goings-on behind me, Gil gave a handsome salute from ahead and to my left, where he flew in full military uniform, attended by Konoha.

“Well then, Allen, I’ll see you soon! We’ll launch signal flares as soon as we spot the ship!” he shouted over the orb and put on a burst of speed. Two by two, he and his knights broke formation, fanning out ahead of us. Only four remained, flying to either side of us: elite fighters who had been our enemies in the battle for the eastern capital.

The Four Heroes Sea was too vast for easy navigation, even with a map, and the naval vessel scheduled to meet us would look like no more than a speck from the air. With that in mind, Gil meant to establish an aerial cordon—a risky gambit. If the Lalannoyans proved hostile, he would expose himself to a preemptive strike. Perhaps he felt responsible for Soi and Uri’s inability to join us.

“What are we going to do with an acting duke like him?” I said. “Stella, I hate to bother you, but—”

“I’ll watch our whole perimeter,” Stella finished for me.

“And so will I!” Lily chimed in.

The pair brought their griffins up on either side of mine and cast their spells in unison. Astonished gasps escaped the remaining knights as Tina’s and Stella’s snowflakes and Lily’s

fiery blossoms scattered in all directions. If anything happened to Gil's force now, we would know about it.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm counting on you both."

"I'm just glad I could help," Stella murmured bashfully.

"You can count on me for more than this!" Lily declared, proudly holding up her left hand. Her bracelet had grown thinner—she had gotten my dad to rework it to avoid unnecessary attention during talks with Lord Addison. I hadn't seen her wearing it in the royal capital because she had sent it east.

Because one could never be too careful, I prepared a spell of my own to—

"Sir." Tina tugged at my sleeve. "I can—"

I slid a cookie shaped like the Great Tree from a cloth bag lashed to the saddle and deposited it in the girl's mouth. Her look of determination dissolved into bliss.

"How was it?" I asked, straightening the snow-white ribbon tied behind her head.

"Delicious!" she declared. "Your mother baked it, didn't she?"

"Yes."

I considered my mom's desserts the best in the kingdom. While I fed Tina a second, Stella and Lily nudged their griffins as close as they could possibly manage.

"Mr. Allen, um..."

"Allen, me too!"

"What needy noblewomen," I sighed, levitating more cookies into the pair's mouths. I was still watching them savor the sweets when the silver-haired girl in front of Stella awakened.

"Those look delectable. Give me a share!" she demanded, eyes bright.

"Good morning, Rill," I said, levitating a bag and a canteen to our enigmatic companion.

No sooner had Rill wolfed down a cookie than her round eyes grew even rounder with surprise. "Scrumptious! Did Ellyn bake these as well? I must bring some as souvenirs for— Hm?"

"Rill? What's wrong?" I asked as, to our collective surprise, the girl leaned over and stared down—at where the islet on which I'd met Twin Heavens, Linaria Etherheart, no longer stood. The Hero had wiped it from the map in the wake of the Algren rebellion.

"R-Rill! That's not safe!" Stella cried. But even when she hooked an arm around the girl's waist, Rill just stared straight

ahead.

I was just about to call to her when Gil's signal flare burst high in the sky ahead of us. A thunderous boom shook the air.

("To think the isle of Heaven's Mage is no more. Has the land shifted? But wait. I sensed a disturbance in the World Tree's mana several months back. Could a gate have...? I see. Then, to prevent its use, the current Alvern...")

For a few moments, controlling my griffin took my full attention. By the time I looked back at Rill, she had settled back into her seat and was drinking tea from the canteen in silence.

"Have you visited the Four Heroes Sea before?" I asked her.

"Indeed," she said. "With my comrades in arms, though all have long since perished."

"You don't say."

I realized that she was older than she looked. She had seen decades of life—maybe even a century or more. If she were over two hundred, she might have marched in the War of the Dark Lord. If so, it would be a breach of etiquette for children like us to press her further, especially since we could claim only a few days' acquaintance.

My orb relayed Gil's excited shout.

"Allen, we've found it! The Lalannoyan naval escort!"

The enormous ship sat at anchor off a small island. A procession of masts rose above its decks, and it flew the sword-bearing-dragon flag of Lalannoy. Its sides, gleaming dull gray with armor plate, bore what looked like waterwheels—and at least a hundred spell-cannon ports. The lettering on its body read..."Roman"? Had it been named after a person, perhaps?

Even the league, a country built on trade, possessed only a few of these cutting-edge, paddle-wheel-driven ironclads. Marquess Addison must have placed considerable importance on mending relations with the kingdom if he had sent one to greet us.

Gil and his knights circled warily in the air above, menacing the nervous sailors on the deck below. I flew my own griffin directly above the warship, and the white cat immediately hopped onto my shoulder.

"Tina, take the reins," I said. "I'll make first contact."

"Right!" Stella called, drawing her wand.

"Be careful, now," Lily added, readying a Firebird.

“Hm? Kifune?” Rill looked up from gorging on desserts to mutter.

Tina, meanwhile, grasped the rod on her back in silence.

I stroked the griffins next and said, “Thank you. You’ve been a great help” before hailing my old school friend. “Gil, I’m going down there.”

“If they try anything even a little bit funny, we’ll sink them to the bottom of the sea!” he shouted back via orb.

With a strained grin, I answered, “Try to keep it within reason,” then stood up in the saddle and deployed an array of spells. I was just about to dismount when...

“Whoa there!”

“Sir!” Tina called, catching at my sleeve. Stella cried out, Lily made a thoughtful noise, and even Rill contributed a surprised “Oh-ho.”

“I want to help you too! I won’t be a burden!” the girl pleaded, right hand over her heart. Her eyes flashed with the same light I’d seen in them when she’d declared her intention to attend the Royal Academy. Innumerable ice flakes arose in answer to her passion, freezing a patch of the lake’s surface. She was a handful, but I couldn’t have been happier to see her grow.

“What are you waiting for?” I said, winking at the girl genius. “Hold on tight.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Tina’s eyes shone with delight when I took her outstretched hand.

Stella and Lily screamed, and Rill murmured another “Oh-ho”—impressed, this time—as I lifted my pupil in both arms and leapt off the griffin. The warship rushed toward us. On its deck, nearly a hundred sailors raised spell-guns, taking aim. I glanced down at Tina, her face pressed to my bosom, and started slowing our descent. Then I spotted a blond knight standing in the crow’s nest, wrapped in a cloak. His cheerful gaze met mine for just a moment before a combination of wind magic and levitation brought me down lightly in the midst of the naval force.

“Success! It pays to be a girl of action!” Tina proclaimed as I set her down and smoothed out her platinum hair while we waited for the sailors to get over their shock.



“L-Lieutenant Snider,” called a pale-faced young officer from the rear of the group.

“Calm yourself, Jäger!” barked the executive officer, also a young man, though with a bad scar on his left cheek and carrying a sort of revolving spell-gun I’d never seen before.

I recognize that name and face, and from the Four Heroes Sea.

“Pardon our sudden arrival,” I said, keeping a restraining hand on Tina lest she unleash a Blizzard Wolf in an excess of high spirits. “I am Allen of the wolf clan, aide to Her Highness Lady Lily Leinster, envoy of the Wainwright Kingdom. May I ask who commands this vessel?”

Silence fell over the deck. No one seemed inclined to answer, or to lower their weapons. The officer called Snider glared at me with hatred burning in his eyes. I gathered that negotiating with the kingdom had its detractors.

I’d better calm them down quick, before Stella and Lily dive down here and—

Boots struck the deck. Another young man in a blue uniform and tricorn hat stormed up from the stern, a saber and spell-pistol on his belt.

“Enough, Snider!” he roared. “And lower those weapons, you lot! Jäger, take command!”

“Sir.”

“Y-Yes, sir! All hands, stand down!”

The ranks encircling us rapidly disintegrated with a chorus of “P-Please forgive us, sir!”

The new arrival paused to note Tina gripping her rod in undisguised alarm before he inclined his head to us. “Minié Jonsson,” he said. “I command this ship, and I apologize for my executive officer and my sailors’ poor conduct. We mean you no harm. Would you ask the young lady and the griffin riders to stand down as well? They’re making my teeth chatter.”

Another name and voice I recognize. That settles it.

I gave my airborne companions a hand signal that combat was not in the cards. To Minié, I said, “Thank you for coming to meet us. Allow me to reintroduce myself. Allen of the wolf clan, at your service. I see you made it home safely after our little tussle on a certain island in this sea.”

The evidently seasoned sailor flinched and backed away. His second-in-command tensed.

“You fought these people, sir?” Tina asked with renewed

caution. Snowflakes began to dance.

"You don't mean," Minié stammered, face taut and eyes wide, "you remember the likes of us?"

"I never forget an acquaintance—one of my few talents. Now…" I materialized Silver Bloom and squinted up at the crow's nest. The violet ribbon that Atra had tied to my enchanted rod for good luck swayed in the wind. "Would you mind calling off your ambush? My little friend here doesn't know how to hold back, and neither do our companions up there. Surely you'd rather not sink your state-of-the-art ship or turn the Four Heroes Sea into a sheet of ice?"

"What? D-Did you say 'ambush'?!" Tina jumped and started deploying a Blizzard Wolf.

Minié clicked his tongue. "Boss! He's onto you!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Get down here and do something about it!"

"You must forgive me, Minié! Look out below!"

A knight plummeted from overhead, accompanied by his discarded cloak and hearty laugh. Despite his bright blue-and-white armor and flamboyantly lined cape, he landed as though he weighed nothing at all. The pair of white-scabbarded blades at his sides didn't even rattle.

Tina gasped and hugged my left arm. "H-He didn't use any strengthening spells…did he?"

"No," I answered slowly, watching the newcomer clap a tired-looking Minié on the shoulder. The unbelievably handsome knight, complete with gleaming blond hair and silver-gold eyes, had used no magic to enhance his physical abilities, but he had stealthily cast a spell I couldn't identify just before landing.

Who could he— Wait. Don't tell me…?

The knight released the evidently put-upon captain and turned to us.

"By your looks and the staggering quantity of mana you possess, I presume I have the honor of addressing the Brain of the Lady of the Sword and Lady Tina Howard. Call me Arthur—Arthur 'Heaven's Sword' Lothringen, at your service! I have left my post on the republic's western front to escort the esteemed Wainwright envoy to our capital."

✽

"Oh, wow, wow, wow! Did you see that big clock tower, sir?!

Wasn’t it gorgeous?! And all those redbrick buildings look so charming with their roofs painted orange! Oh! I think I just saw the arch of that famous bridge for a second!”

The evening sun was setting on the Lalannoyan capital, best known as the “workshop city” or “city of craft,” as Tina’s voice filled the luxurious carriage advancing along an avenue in the city’s western district. She had donned an azure dress and ornate hair clip for our meeting with Marquess Addison, although the latter kept threatening to fall off in her excitement. Six days had passed since we’d left the royal capital, including one spent detained in the port city of Suguri, but the Little Lady of Ice had lost none of her energy.

A forest of many-colored spires rose above the city, some military, others religious. Walls and tall buildings struck me as old fortifications given new purpose, while wooden signboards painted with hammers, jewels, leather, and more hung at the mouths of side streets. No doubt they marked the various workshops that gave the capital its nickname. Truly, a foreign cityscape. Still, I saw political posters pasted on every wall. Horses and carts thronged the stone-paved streets, and the passersby had a restless air about them.

Stella sat on my left, wearing a white-and-azure dress and a hair clip that matched her sister’s. “You really ought to keep your voice down, Tina,” she said, index finger raised. “You’ll wake Rill if you carry on like that.”

“Oh, all right.” Chastened by her levelheaded sister, Tina reseated herself by the window and watched Arthur riding with the mounted force ahead of us. Rill and her feline friend were sound asleep under a blanket.

“I knew this city by reputation, but it really does seem more forbidding than our royal and southern capitals, or maybe more imposing,” Lily mused from her seat to my right. She had changed into a dignified scarlet dress. “And something tells me the people are on edge.”

“That probably shows just how unstable the political situation is,” I said. “According to Arthur, the Bright Wings Party controls everything west of the bridge, and their opposition, the Heaven and Earth Party, effectively rules everything east of it. It really is one step shy of civil war.”

The Lalannoy Republic was the youngest nation in the west of the continent. A century ago, the then Yustinian emperor had

launched an invasion of the Duchy of Howard to sate his own greed. The undefeated “god of war” had served his armies defeat after humiliating defeat. It was then that the First Battle of Rostlay had gone down as a shining achievement in the annals of military history, costing the empire the famously fertile region of Galois and leaving its southern flank bare.

The emperor should have buried the hatchet and cut his losses then. Unfortunately, he had craved a rematch, levying heavy taxes to rebuild and strengthen his forces. Marquess Addison, one of the mightiest lords in the empire’s eastern provinces, had taken a stand. “Head-on war with the Howards is the height of folly,” he had declared. “Does Your Imperial Majesty fail to realize how much blood has watered the fields of Rostlay?!”

If the history books were to be believed, his speech to the emperor’s council had drawn support from many hard-pressed eastern nobles. Marquess Addison had only narrowly prevented the Howards from sweeping across the empire’s southern provinces unchallenged. He must have understood that the imperial armies couldn’t overcome the kingdom’s just then.

In the end, the emperor had backed down, but he had neither forgiven nor forgotten.

“A few years after the First Battle of Rostlay,” Tina took up the tale, “the emperor stripped the eastern lords of their lands and titles without warning. Marquess Addison and his fellows finally took up arms. They brought the power of Shining Stag to bear in warfare, ultimately winning a decisive battle in the old capital west of Tabatha and leading Lalannoy to full independence.”

“And now the Church of the Holy Spirit is trying to split the republic they founded in two.” Stella picked up where her sister left off. “That would come as a blow to the kingdom as well, since Lalannoy is one of the few eastern nations not already under the church’s sway.”

“I think Lord Addison fears that too,” Lily piped up. “And seeing the city for myself, I can understand why. Still…” She faltered and fell silent, fingering her bracelet.

Tina and Stella had doubts of their own, if their “Sir, um…” and “You know, Mr. Allen…” were anything to go by.

I drew the curtains and cast a spell of silence. The girls tensed.

“I know what you’re all thinking,” I said. “You can’t understand

why Lord Addison acts so desperate for aid when he has ‘Heaven’s Sword’ up his sleeve—or why he asked for me by name.”

The highborn trio exchanged uneasy looks.

Meeting him in the flesh had convinced me: Arthur Lothringen was the stuff of legend. He had told me something of his antecedents on the journey here, and the revelations made my head ache.

“I’m what you might call a scion of the ‘Old Empire’—the one that claimed universal dominion!” he had said. “The Lothringian Empire fell after a litany of tyrannical abuses earned it the whole world’s ire—but its heirs will never forget what the House of Addison did for us when it did! ‘Forget debts owed to you but never a debt you owe. Repay a good turn no matter the cost,’ as we say in my family. Forgetting that sealed the Old Empire’s fate!”

And again: “What, you want to know about the western front? I’ve crossed blades with the Yustinian grand marshal so many times I’ve lost count. That old man refuses to stick it out in single combat no matter how often I challenge him! I thought I was done for when I found myself going up against the veterans of the imperial guard single-handed! People say no other regiment can match them.”

Rumor made Grand Marshal Moss Saxe of the Yustinian Empire practically superhuman. Wielding the enchanted sword Castle Breaker, he had fought through the bloody civil wars at his emperor’s side, and together, just the two of them had brought peace. Some even said he had slain a crazed dragon in his younger days, although I didn’t know whether to credit that story. What kind of knight would a man of his caliber fear to duel?

“Unless I miss my guess,” I continued to the girls, “Arthur could easily go toe to toe with the upper echelons of the apostles, even the so-called ‘Sage’ who attacked the royal capital or their most prolific assassin, Black Blossom. If the Yustinians didn’t have their own champion in the grand marshal, he would have made far more of a name for himself by now. Not long ago, I got word that the fourth apostle, the elder vampire Idris, had been slain, and I don’t doubt that Arthur could have done it—especially since I hear he had help from the Swordmaster and my old teacher.”

“And unrest in the empire has freed Heaven’s Sword to act,” Tina added, eyes alight with a profound intelligence. “But even with an unbeatable agent under his command, Lord Addison still offered to let the kingdom dictate peace terms.”

The carriage swayed. Perhaps we had run over a small stone.

“We should have realized the moment he requested you by name,” Stella concluded. “I don’t doubt that Lord Addison desires peace with the kingdom and the political stability it would bring —”

“But first and foremost, he wanted to bring Allen to the city of craft,” Lily finished, meekly lowering her gaze. “Forgive me. My brother might bear some of the blame.”

“No.” I shook my head. “My old teacher might have given the marquess the wrong impression just as easily.”

“Excuse me, sir!” Tina raised her hand high, dispelling the atmosphere of gloom. “What is your old teacher like? You mean the one who taught you martial arts, don’t you?”

“To be honest, I don’t really know myself,” I said, giving her a look of gratitude. “He trained me, and he gave me his encouragement when I left for the royal capital. But as for the man himself…”

“Hm… Still, maybe we’ll get a chance to meet him while we’re in the city!”

“I wonder about that. He never stays in one place long.”

My master had only lingered in the eastern capital for a few years, from the time I entered the children’s school until my departure for the Royal Academy. In retrospect, I felt amazed that he had stayed even that long. The occasional letters he’d written me since had come from all over the continent.

The carriage started to slow before Tina could respond. We had evidently reached our destination. I opened the curtains and signaled to my companions. Tina, Stella, and Lily pressed their faces to the glass, each voicing her own reaction.

“Oh, wow.”

“It’s at least a match for the Sealed Archive, don’t you think?”

“It’s a fort—no, a full-blown castle!”

Before us loomed a chalk-white fortress of a mansion, its high iron fences and stone walls surrounded on all sides by a moat and manned by fully armed and armored knights and spell-gunners. The occupants must have feared a night attack, because rows of mana lamps made it bright as day.

I exchanged looks with the three noblewomen and steeled myself. I dreaded what impossible task our host might set me. Still, “I’ll be waiting in Lalannoy,” Zelbert Régnier had told me. There was every likelihood that the apostles would strike again here. And at the same time—

The carriage came to a complete stop, and my companions set about their final preparations.

“All set!” Tina declared. “I’m ready for anything!”

“Your hair is a mess,” Stella warned her. “Here, let me take a look.”

“Don’t let my brother be there,” Lily prayed. “And if he is, don’t let him say anything weird!”

I couldn’t endanger the three of them over my personal feelings. The warning from the angel and Frigid Crane did worry me, but that was a separate matter.

Outside the window, I saw Arthur and Minié speak to the guards. They received a salute, and the massive gates started to swing open. The champion noticed me and gave a big wave.

“Rill, we’re here,” I said, jostling the sleeping girl. Her distinctive elven fabric felt slippery under my fingers.

Kifune woke first, bolting upright and snuggling into my coat. Then the girl rose with a gaping yawn, her long silver hair a mess of tangles. “Arrived, have we? What an unpleasant odor.”

I didn’t smell anything worth mentioning. I looked at the noblewomen, but they seemed equally puzzled. Putting my doubts aside, I moved to lift Rill—

“Up and at ’em!” Tina shouted, beating me to the punch by seizing both her hands. “Jeez! Can’t you do anything yourself?”

“Humph. You dare treat me like a child?” Rill growled. “I won’t forget your insolence, Tina Howard.”

“Yes, yes. Look! Your clothes are all rumpled!”

“I’ll comb out your hair,” Stella chimed in, and in the blink of an eye, the Howard sisters had the sleepyhead in hand. It was a new and heartwarming experience, seeing Tina fuss over someone like this.

“Allen,” Lily whispered, tugging on my sleeve. She looked tense. Apparently even free-spirited maids got nervous.

“You’ll be fine,” I whispered back. “Tina and Stella are with you, and so am I. Oh, but please stay in ‘lady’ mode for the talks, okay? We’ll throw you a party when we get back to the royal capital. My treat.”

“You never play fair. Still…” The scarlet-haired young woman pulled away from me and flashed a smile. In her normal voice, she said, “You know just how to motivate me. Lily Leinster won’t let you down!”

✽

“Lord Arthur! Welcome! And you too, Minié, Snider!”

A young sorcerer, so slight I might have taken him for a girl at first glance, greeted us the moment we set foot inside. The way he jumped for joy in front of Arthur reminded me of a puppy. My companions seemed to share the impression.

“Isn’t he adorable, sir?” Tina whispered.

Rill added another “Oh-ho.”

“I can practically see his tail,” murmured Lily.

“M-Mind your manners,” Stella chided under her breath.

“Hello, Artie!” the champion called. “Is it me, or have you gotten a little taller?”

“Your lordship, er, the envoy is watching,” said the sober ship’s captain, who had kept answering our barrage of questions about the church’s inquisitors all throughout the journey long after he got sick of them.

His expressionless second-in-command said nothing.

In the meantime, I inspected our surroundings. Even inside the mansion, I found detection spells and wards of binding everywhere I looked. Chandeliers had been removed, and the beautiful walls, ceilings, and glasswork, reinforced. Its master seemed to have made defense a priority. My own detection revealed a tremendously powerful spellcaster on the roof and more skilled sorcerers hiding in the halls. Another security measure, I supposed.

“Oh, f-forgive me.” The young sorcerer blushed and dropped his gaze. “I was just so excited.”

“Not to worry!” Arthur let out a hearty laugh and clapped the boy on the shoulder a few times, then turned to us. “They wouldn’t take offense over a little thing like that. Am I wrong?”

I nodded to Lily, and the white cat at my feet mewed.

Yes, I know enough to cede the spotlight.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman came forward with an elegant smile. “I am Lily Leinster, and I represent the Wainwright Kingdom on this occasion. You must be Lord Addison’s eldest

son, Artie. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"A Leinster?" The young sorcerer gaped, then dipped a series of hasty bows as he stammered, "Artie Addison! The pleasure is mine!"

The guards seemed equally taken. Lily had successfully completed her vital mission and seized the psychological initiative.

"How did I do?" she whispered, giggling under her breath as she slid back into her spot on my right. I touched my bracelet in lieu of praise, and the noblewoman beamed.

"And, er, who are these people, Lord Arthur?" Artie asked once he had recovered his composure.

Lalannoy's champion struck his scabbard, inviting us to take the floor. The platinum-haired girls stepped forward and introduced themselves with dignity.

"Duke Howard's eldest daughter, Stella."

"Duke Howard's second daughter, Tina."

"And this is Allen." In an instant, Arthur was behind me, pushing me forward. "Ridley and the old master must have told you all about the Brain of the Lady of the Sword."

He did that with footwork, not magic. It reminds me of my teacher.

"Allen of the wolf clan, at your service. I have been charged to accompany Her Highness the envoy," I said, with a humble bow. "And allow me to present Kifune and Rill, a lost girl who has joined our party due to circumstance."

"I did *not* lose my way!" the silver-haired girl snapped. "My companions simply wandered off without me!"

"Rill," I said, "most people call that 'being lost.' Now, let's ask Lord Addison to help us find the people you were traveling with, okay?"

I fished one of the treats we'd bought in Suguri out of my bag to placate the fuming girl. Meanwhile, Artie reeled and Minié sighed. Although Snider continued to betray no emotion, even the guards were shivering.

Before I knew it, the young sorcerer had come right up to me, breathing heavily. A simple-looking, bespectacled maid whose bangs hid her eyes set out a stool, and he sank onto it.

The way she hides her mana reminds me an awful lot of the Walkers.

"Th-Three ladies of the ducal houses," the young lord

murmured, voice shaking. “A-And you’re the great sorcerer who…”

“I am merely a humble aide,” I said, “though Lady Lily is an accomplished sorceress and swordswoman, and Ladies Tina and Stella will become so in the near future.”

“Y-You don’t say?” Artie didn’t quite seem to follow. Still, I had told nothing but the truth, so—

Three hands tugged on my sleeves.

“Excuse me, Allen?” Lily whispered. “I’m not a sorceress or a swordswoman—I’m a maid.”

“You’re the *greatest* sorcerer, sir!” Tina chimed in.

“You’re a real magician to *me*, Mr. Allen,” added Stella.

The sisters’ praise filled me with a tickle of embarrassment. As for Lily, it might be a good idea to explain her situation to the marquess and let her return to her normal attire come morning. I could see her going off the rails otherwise.

Arthur thumped his blue breastplate. “Come! His Lordship awaits!” he said. “Captain, I’ve asked Elna to raise a barrier, but we can never be too careful.”

“Understood. Snider, we have places to be.” The tired-looking Minié made for the door. His executive officer with the scarred left cheek followed with a grudging “Yes, sir.” Snider seemed to glare at me on his way out, and I didn’t think I’d imagined it.

Arthur discussed something with the bespectacled maid, then turned back to us. “I’m sorry to say that Ridley is out. Knowing him, he’s gone to Confectionery Lane for flour and sugar.”

“Lily, a word, if you please!” Tina, Stella, and I said in unison.

The noblewoman responded with a beautiful smile, although her scarlet locks rose up around her. “We’ll have a nice, long talk as soon as I catch him.”

Ridley, you can’t keep taking your life in your hands like this.

“Oh-ho! A pâtissier?” Rill chimed in. “Still, he can hardly hold a candle to Ellyn.”

“Those aren’t all for you, remember,” I said.

“You’ve already eaten too many!” Tina agreed.

The silver-haired girl let out a gasp of surprise, matched by a forlorn mew from her cat. Soon, she was talking with Tina, while I kept an eye on the decidedly dangerous spells that Lily had started preparing for her ‘talk’ with Ridley.

“Mr. Allen,” Stella whispered, drawing close to me, “should we comment on the sorcerers hiding in the corri— D-Do I, um, have

something on my face?”

“No,” I replied softly. “I was merely impressed.”

Nothing gets by Lady Stella Howard when she believes in herself!

Lady Stella Howard herself groaned and gave my left arm a light bop.

“Artie.”

“Y-Yes, Lord Arthur?!” the boy responded. “What can I do for __”

Lalannoy’s champion bent his knees and looked Artie straight in the eye. A trickle of his stray mana gave me goose bumps. Tina, Stella, and Lily ducked behind me, leaving only Rill and Kifune unfazed.

“Don’t you have one more introduction to make?” Arthur said. “No more secrets.”

A long silence followed. Then, “You’re right.”

The young sorcerer rose, trembling. After several deep breaths, he seemed to steady his nerves and called, “Isolde.”

“Yes, Lord Artie?”

Out of an inner corridor stepped a girl whose pale-gray hair fell about her shoulders. Her slender build seemed not so much dainty as sickly. She wore a robe like Artie’s, although hers was palest lavender. The remaining guards eyed her coldly.

This girl with intelligent, violet eyes walked to the boy’s side, then bowed low.

“I beg your pardon. I am Isolde, daughter of Heaven and Earth Party Chairman Miles Talito. His Lordship Marquess Addison has granted me shelter. I count myself fortunate to have the honor of meeting the kingdom’s representatives.”

Silence fell. Apparently, overwhelming shocks really did leave people at a loss for words. Only, I thought I heard Rill mutter, “I knew something reeked of blood.”

❃

“Artie and Isolde were engaged before all this. They still feel fondly for each other, but as things stand…” Arthur’s explanation trailed off, and he tapped one of the barred windows that lined the unadorned hallway down which he led our party, minus Rill and Kifune. The bespectacled maid had agreed to look after them while we were gone, although the sight of the Howard sisters did seem to have given her a bit of a start.

Still, life really was full of surprises. Who could have imagined that while the Bright Wings and the Heaven-and-Earthers stood poised to battle for the capital, their leaders' children lived together?

"I've met Miles," Arthur continued, crossing his arms as he resumed walking. "He's a capable man, and he loved the republic."

"'Loved'?" Tina echoed from beside me.

"You mean he doesn't anymore?" Stella asked from my other side.

Artie grimaced as he followed Arthur. Behind us, a downcast Lily murmured something about "tragic love in real life."

"I don't know." The champion ruffled his own blond hair. "I spend most of my time away on the front lines, and I have almost nothing to do with statecraft. I didn't even find out that a section of the eastern army had joined forces with the church and taken part in your country's rebellion until it was all over. I certainly never dreamed that Miles would announce the facts to the world as a pretext to condemn Lord Addison. He was never a man to destabilize his own country. Here we are."

We came to a silent halt before a heavy, dark-brown door halfway along the corridor, and Arthur knocked without ceremony.

"Who is it?" came an elderly man's voice. He sounded exhausted.

"It's Arthur, and Artie is with me. We've brought the Wainwright envoy."

"Come in."

The champion opened the door and indicated with his eyes that we should enter. The Howard sisters took up posts on either side of me, while Lily brought up the rear.

The room seemed dreary for a head of state. An old writing desk and two chairs stood by a window. Papers formed disordered heaps on the desktop. A small picture—I supposed—lay face down among them. The remaining furnishings consisted of a bookcase and hatstand, both utterly plain, a bed for one, and a carpet.

A gray-haired man turned from the nighttime cityscape he'd been surveying, fatigue heavy on his face. Wrinkles ran across his fine clothes. Only the longsword on his belt stood out for the magnificence of its beautiful, jeweled pommel. Reports placed

the marquess in the same generation as Duke Walter, Duke Liam, and the professor, but he didn't look it.

Grimacing, he sank into a chair and raised his left hand a fraction. "I appreciate all you've done, Arthur."

"If you mean escorting the envoy's party, I doubt they needed my protection," Arthur replied. "The Brain of the Lady of the Sword might have seen more danger than any of us, myself included."

I felt glad to hear Lalannoy's champion praise the girls, although I wished he wouldn't overstate my own abilities.

"Really, now?" the marquess murmured.

"M-More than *you*, Lord Arthur?" gasped Artie.

Sure enough, they had gotten me all wrong. I would need to set them straight somehow. But before I could speak, Tina, Stella, and Lily cut in.

"My tutor is a marvel!"

"Well, this *is* Mr. Allen we're talking about."

"That sounds reasonable to me."

H-How am I supposed to disagree now?

The exchange brought a faint smile to the man's tired face. "I am Oswald, the present Marquess Addison and leader of the Lalannoy Republic," he said. "I cannot thank you enough for making the journey to our capital when, by all rights, we ought to have dispatched a suitable delegation to yours. I've been briefed on your party. Ladies Tina, Stella, and Lily, I believe? I never dreamed that three daughters of ducal houses would honor us with their presence. Your visit may find a place in future history books."

"I'll say!" Arthur beamed, although the marquess's tone suggested that he didn't find this surprise entirely pleasant.

"I-It could prove a momentous occasion!" an excited Artie chimed in.

The seasoned leader's gaze met mine. "I see now how highly the Wainwrights value you, Mr. Brain of the Lady of the Sword," he continued. "When Lord Ridley and your venerable teacher recommended you to me, I only half believed them. Lady Lily, you officially serve as envoy, but I trust you won't object to my discussing practical matters with your companion?"

"W-Well, you see—"

"Not in the least," Lily interrupted my excuses. "I am but a humble maid."

Well, I see someone *plans to revert to her usual self after today.*

The puzzled marquess was about to reply—when several bright streaks lit the night beyond his window. In the sky hung a basket, suspended from a great cloth sack emblazoned with letters. I had read of such contraptions once. If I remembered correctly, they were called "balloons."

The marquess leaned on one elbow and sighed. "The Heaven-and-Earthers have been fanning the flames like this night after night. 'The House of Addison is a power-hungry threat to the republic! Let the Heaven and Earth Party take the reins!'" He snorted. "The Yustinians would have reabsorbed us long ago if they had their way. Don't they realize we have the Platinum Hog and the Castle Breaker to contend with?"

Emperor Yuri Yustin and Grand Marshal Moss Saxe had brought peace to their turbulent empire. Just recently, I'd heard, they had purged the crown prince and his faction of church-aligned supporters. And all this time, they had been giving Arthur's western army nearly as good as it got. I had no trouble grasping what a fearsome pair they must have made.

"Are you certain it's wise to discuss such matters in our presence?" I asked slowly.

"It makes no difference," said the marquess. "We turned to the Walkers and the Angel of Death for aid in our war of independence. Your country's leaders must already know that and more, right down to my family finances."

I struggled to keep my face impassive as I digested his words.

The Walkers, I can understand. But when he says "the Angel of Death," does he really mean Anna?

I glanced at Lily. Her answering look said, "Just try not to think about it," and much as I would have liked to know more about the head maid's time in the empire, she might well have been right.

The marquess slowly drew the curtains. "I have no truck with flowery speeches," he said. "Let me be brief: What I want from the Wainwright Kingdom isn't peace—it's an alliance against the Church of the Holy Spirit, with a major war in view."

The Howard sisters gasped and gripped my sleeves. Lily, who was done hiding her true colors, seized me by the shoulders with a startled "Hm?" Arthur showed no surprise, while Artie stammered, "An *alliance*?"

So, he kept his son in the dark.

“You must realize it yourselves.” Lord Addison tapped his fingers on the desk, exhausted but no less determined to fight on. “Ashamed as I am to admit it, my country is being torn in two. Take the capital: split east and west between my party and the opposition. Miles revealed that part of our eastern army had joined with the church and taken a hand in the Algren rebellion and lambasted me for it, but he twisted the truth! His own party conspires with the church to overthrow the republic. Artie, I trust you’ve introduced our guests to Isolde?”

“Y-Yes, father!” the young lord replied, all nerves. I began to see how things stood between father and son.

The marquess exhaled as though enduring great pain. “Miles and I were friends. Five years ago, clutching at straws, he made a pilgrimage to the pontiff’s inner sanctum to pray for his son Alf. The boy was a memento of his late wife, and he had contracted an incurable disease.”

We all drew in our breath. The pontifical palace was the beating heart of the church, and its inner sanctum was famous for absolute secrecy. As the name implied, the pontiff theoretically wielded supreme authority within its precincts. And yet…

“What happened there, I can only guess,” the marquess groaned, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know what that so-called Saint whispered in Miles’s ear. But when all was said and done, Alf gained another few years of life.”

Vestiges of the great spell Resurrection, most likely. But according to Isolde, the Addisons had taken her in *after* her younger brother and grandmother had passed away.

The marquess shook his head, pulling at his gray hair. “I started to suspect Miles last winter, after Alf passed. I got a posthumous letter from the boy’s grandmother, Mayta Talito, who died suddenly not long after he did. She begged me to protect Isolde, and in a disturbed scrawl, she had written, ‘That Saint is a fake.’ Then chaos broke out in your kingdom, and a portion of our eastern army allied with the church to satisfy their lust for glory. By the time I learned that they had gone rogue, it was too late. They even forged an order to expel your diplomats. That was how Minié naively did the plotters’ dirty work and lost his chance at a promotion.”

Orders were orders, and it sounded as though Minié Jonsson was a soldier to the bone. Snider, though? I recalled the officer’s

cold glare while the marquess heaved another sigh.

"Miles's soul," he continued, "the soul of the friend who should have led the republic to glory with me, has fallen into the hands of the woman who shamelessly calls herself a saint. Thank goodness I got to Isolde in time."

Artie clenched his fists, fighting back tears. The Addisons and the Talitos must have been close indeed.

"But I have not been alone in my folly," the aging man added, self-mocking. "The Yustinian crown prince danced to the tune of those so-called apostles. Thanks to him, the Castle Breaker left the western front, freeing me to recall Arthur and Lady Elna to the capital. That brought things back to a stalemate."

The church's long arm had reached the kingdom, the Yustinian Empire, the League of Principalities, and now the Lalannoy Republic, always with a dagger in hand. Something needed to be done. But first…

"Arthur, I've been wondering for a little while now," I said, caving to unspoken pressure from my companions. "Who is Lady Elna? Is she the spellcaster standing guard on the roof?"

"Hm?" said the blond champion. "Oh, my bride, Elna Lothringen—although she insists we're merely engaged. I really don't see much difference. Do you, Allen?"

"I…I suppose?"

While I fumbled for a response, the girls seemed strangely affected.

"E-Engaged?"

"Yes, I see."

"Hm…"

I have a bad feeling about this.

I could see the wheels turning in Lily's head, and I was in no hurry to duel any more accomplished knights after the engagement kerfuffle in the royal capital. I shot her a warning look as I drew a letter from an inner pocket and placed it on the desk.

"Your Lordship, allow me to present the kingdom's initial offer of peace terms," I said. "They're still a work in progress, of course. Please look them over so that we may negotiate changes at a later—"

"I said I'd accept any terms, and I meant it."

I blinked, dumbfounded in spite of myself.

"We will pay reparations, cede territory, share technical

expertise—anything you name," said Lord Oswald Addison, ruler of the Lalannoy Republic. "If you wish for my head, I'll serve it up gladly. But in exchange, I want an alliance to strike down the 'Saint' and her apostles. We cannot afford to let them roam free any longer. The whole mortal world teeters on the brink."

A freezing draft blew through the room.

The false Saint and her apostles really might go that far. While preaching that a fully restored Resurrection would bring an age of equality, they embedded vestiges of Stone Serpent and the great spells they had collected in their followers' bodies. Worse, they had despoiled Zel's—my best friend's—grave and unleashed his vampiric powers on the battlefield. I couldn't fathom their ultimate goal yet, but I knew we needed to stop them, and at any cost.

For the first time that day, the marquess's gaze softened and he spared a glance for his lost-looking son. "And if we lose," he continued, "I ask you to shelter our women and children. As lord of the House of Addison, I cannot leave this land, but I would feel ashamed to let defenseless innocents die with me."

We kept silent, as did Arthur. We all knew what the request meant: "Look after Artie and Isolde if the worst should happen."

The boy himself, however, murmured a confused, "F-Father."

"I cannot give an immediate answer, but I promise to relay your request to the royal capital." I nodded, conveying acquiescence with my eyes. "But may I ask what prevents Your Lordship from leaving as well?"

The marquess's lips curled in amusement, and he touched the jeweled orb on his sword hilt. Now that I looked closer, I saw it had the shape of a flower.

"Allow me to show you why I summoned you here," he said. "Artie, join us. We won't get a better chance."

"Y-Yes, father!"

Again, I could practically see ears and a wagging tail on the young sorcerer. He clearly revered his father.

Meanwhile, the marquess drew his longsword and brandished it at a bare wall. The orb flashed, and a white blossom with eight perfectly proportioned petals emerged from the masonry.

A ward!

Beyond the wall gaped a pitch-dark abyss. It bore a striking resemblance to the void I'd fallen through with Atra on an islet in

the Four Heroes Sea. This was no ordinary magic, although it did remind me of the design that the enigmatic cult of the Great Moon had chosen for the cover of their *Apocrypha*.

"Sir, is that what I think it is?" asked Tina.

"It looks like what we saw in the Sealed Archive," Stella murmured.

"How pretty!" Lily chimed in, running her dainty fingers through the air.

Artie alone looked tense and pale. "Isolde," he mumbled, pressing a hand to his breast pocket. This seemed to be a crucial rite of passage for the House of Addison.

The marquess resheathed his sword, and the darkness began to fade. "The wandering sorceress Floral Heaven, greatest of the demisprites, worked these spells. They respond only to the flower stone embedded in the hilt of my house's heirloom sword, North Star. The ancient jeweler called the Gemstone cut and polished it herself. No one could breach the wards by force. Now, let us be going."

"Splendid! I'm right with you." Arthur stepped smartly into the darkness and vanished. The marquess followed suit.

Teleportation magic. I'd like to know more about a few things he mentioned, but we'd better—

Three girls latched on to my sleeves.

"S-Sir, um..."

"If you don't mind, Mr. Allen..."

"Eek! I'm *so* scared!"

"Don't worry, Tina, Stella. I'm with you," I said. "Lily, I know you can take care of yourself."

"Thank you!" the Howard sisters chimed, wrapping themselves around my arms.

"Humph! You shouldn't play favorites!" The fuming maid gave me a shove on the back.

The white flower filled my view. I felt weightless. Then our feet touched down on a strange surface, both hot and cold at once. I didn't see the marquess or Arthur, but I smelled the reek of blood.

"Guards up," I said.

"Right!" my companions chorused, and we all braced for combat. Lily and Stella took the vanguard, with me behind them and Tina bringing up the rear. Then we looked around.

Eight colossal stone pillars loomed over us. I saw a massive

rent in the stone roof, but despite dancing scarlet and azure lights, I couldn't make out the far side of the terribly vast subterranean space.

"Where are we?" Tina gasped.

"It reminds me of the altar below the palace," Stella murmured with a shudder.

"Back there," Lily said, voice hard as she conjured fire flowers and pointed deeper inside.

I twirled Silver Bloom and lit the whole cavern. The three dress-clad noblewomen stiffened, fighting back screams.

Frozen in the center of the space, bound with shackles of flame, lay a monstrosity. The warship we'd ridden here had been large, but it couldn't compare to this small mountain of a creature. Four undersized limbs sprouted from its long, serpentine body. The tattered, icy wings on its back looked as though they were made of overlapping swords. Frozen spines clung to its body like armor, although they had come away in places. I counted at least a dozen horns on its head, half or more of them broken, as were the massive saber teeth that lined its jaws. Its wide-open, bloodshot eyes were bottomless wells of hate.

I squinted and spotted a pair of gorgeous swords lodged in the monster's neck, as well as a vast, writhing magic circle on the floor beneath it. The dark flames recalled the great spells I had seen: Radiant Shield, Resurrection, Falling Star, and Watery Grave. Most likely, I was looking at Blaze of Ruin. Had Rill's stories been true?

And the creature before us was…

"A 'blade-winged serpent' frozen in silver-snow?"

"Not quite, Allen!" Arthur landed before us, blond hair and cloak fluttering. The marquess emerged from behind a pillar as well. They must have scouted ahead for danger.

Arthur planted his left hand on his hip and squinted at the creature through the flames. "This is a wyrm," he continued, "a monster from the Age of Silver Peaks, when the gods walked the earth. They lived into the era of the Star Oath, at first, but this one must be the last of its kind. Fourth Apostle Idris Kokonoe was plotting to release it before Ridley, your old teacher, and I pooled our strength to slay him. He wanted access to this living altar. I trust you take my meaning?"

"I do," I said.

Trust a descendant of the old imperial family to have knowledge I don't. So, we're in "the era of the Star Oath." I've been through a lot, but this has to rank with the worst of it. And did he say Idris's house name was Kokonoe? Not even Zel ever found that out.

My companions paled and clung to my back. Tina groaned.

"N-No," Stella gasped.

"N-Not *again*?" Lily grumbled.

"You mean Idris was trying to create an angel?" I pressed. "Using whom?"

"I don't know," the champion admitted. "He was practically a wild animal by the end. He wouldn't stop screaming about 'needing sacrifices' right up until he turned to ash."

"Mr. Allen, I have called you here for one reason," Lord Addison interrupted, glumly eyeing the wyrm. "For generations, we Addisons have kept watch on this wyrm by order of the Imperial House of Lothringen, lest the ice that imprisons it should weaken. Floral Heaven assisted us to patch the seal using the great spell Blaze of Ruin, as you see it now, but it is steadily losing power. Lady Elna estimates that we have mere months before the creature revives."

That explains it! No wonder the Addisons' great spell remained secret if they were using it for this.

"What? F-Father?!" Artie's startled cry rang out as he finally joined us.

The head of state bowed low to me. "I have no intention of losing to traitors," he said, "but I have a duty to my country. I must consider the worst possible outcome. And as I cannot contact Floral Heaven, I must turn to the Wainwright Kingdom's magical prowess. Ridley and your teacher both agree that 'if anyone can control a spell to reseal that thing, it would be Allen.' Please, won't you lend me your aid?"

✽

"Then, the Wainwright emissary has entered Addison's house?" I, Her Holiness's fifth apostle, asked into the communication orb I held, looking out from the red roof of a church of the Holy Spirit on the outskirts of the city's eastern district. The great steel bridge seemed to stand alone amid the morning mist—a breathtaking sight.

"Yes, sir," came the reply. "The emissary is Lily Leinster. Her

entourage consists of Tina Howard, Stella Howard, and the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. The guard on the house gets heavier by the day. Heaven's Sword and the Swordmaster are still in residence."

The hulking man beside me raised his eyebrows. Sixth Apostle Ifur wore a hooded robe like mine, pure white trimmed with crimson. Not long ago, we had lured Heaven's Sword and the Swordmaster into a trap, and we had still gotten the worst of the ensuing battle.

"I see. Most enlightening," I said. "Thank you, Mr. Snider. I promise to put in a good word for you when our plan succeeds."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do whatever I can for the Saint and her holy apostles!"

With that cheery promise, the communication ended.

The fool. To think that he would sell his country to satisfy his own pointless lust for command—or that such a wicked-hearted man would dare speak of Her Holiness. For that, he must pay.

I redirected the orb to our other collaborator. "Miles, how do matters stand with you?"

"All proceeds smoothly. The Saint's will be done," he said softly but with conviction. Despite his position as leader of the Heaven and Earth Party, this man had touched one of Her Holiness's miracles and gained devout faith from the experience.

"Her will be done," I echoed and cut contact.

The mist behind me shifted, and a gray-robed man appeared. Blond hair and lightless eyes showed under his hood.

"What do you think, Ifur?" I asked my comrade in arms, the former Marchese Folonto.

"The stage is already set for the first phase, Ibush-nur," he replied. "We can't afford to move many pieces until the second begins, but our wounds have healed, as have Viola's and Levi's. And we can always call reinforcements. Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage are formidable foes, but we should proceed."

Arthur and Elna Lothringen rivaled the greater apostles, surpassing either of us in skill. But what did that matter?

"As Her Holiness foretold," I said, lowering my hood, "the defective key has come to this land. It was worth keeping that insignificant Ernest Fosse alive to lure him. The kingdom, the empire, and the league are too preoccupied quelling disorder within their own borders to make any moves for the present. That leaves only one obstacle: Floral Heaven's wards. Not even

poor old Idris could find a clue to breaking them. However…”

My orb flashed. An incoming message, and not from either of the two we had just spoken with.

I see. So, we need Addison’s sword to get past.

Ending the call, I touched my fist to my comrade’s armor. “Ifur, we’ve solved our final difficulty. Now, shall we begin? For the Saint and the Holy Spirit.”

Chapter 4

Winters in the Yustinian Empire were long and harsh. Still, not even these northern lands got constant snow, and it pleased us to spend comfortably warm days like this one in the innermost courtyard of our palace in the capital. Lounging on a soft couch, wrapped in blankets, birdsong ushered our old bones into dreamla—

“Your Imperial Majesty! Emperor Yuri Yustin! Where are you?!”

We sighed as our grand marshal, Moss Saxe, strode in bellowing. The enchanted sword Castle Breaker gleamed at his hip. Seventy-two years had done nothing to take the spring from his step.

“Oh, do pipe down, Moss!” we snapped. “We are fatigued, and we have no more patience for fools, Yugene included! We really will pass the throne to Yana and retire this time!”

Former Crown Prince Yugene Yustin, our sole offspring, had let the church and its apostles trick him into a southern campaign. His invasion of the Wainwright Kingdom’s Duchy of Howard had ended in a humiliating defeat at Rostlay, just like its predecessor a century earlier. That alone we could have pardoned, yet he had gone beyond the pale and schemed at armed usurpation. We had finished disciplining the last of his aristocratic allies just the other day. Necessary though it was to ensure a smooth succession for Yana—our granddaughter, according to the official genealogies—the labor had taken its toll.

“My grandson,” Moss said, not meeting our gaze, “reports that Princess Yana has made frequent threats to the tune of ‘You know, I might just stay here and enroll in the Royal University. I hear a sorceress they call the Star Fiend will start taking students.’”

“What?” we stammered.

The Wainwrights’ university was the continent’s highest center of learning. Who knew how many years it would take to graduate? And hadn’t the Star Fiend studied under that twisted professor?

“N-Never! We forbid it!” we roared, tearing off our blankets.

“Let her go to university, and by the time she returns, she’ll have a gaggle of tykes in— But wait. Would it be so bad to torment Yana and Huss by spoiling our great-grandchildren rotten before we die?”

“Sire! Would you have scandal mar even your twilight years?”

“Ha! The world already mocks us as the ‘Old Hog’! Let them call us an overindulgent great-grandfather as well! We welcome the infamy!”

“It will not do!” Moss’s bellow shook our corpulent old frame. What right did he have to be so spry? Perhaps the elixir of longevity we’d hired beastfolk in the Dark Lord’s realm to smuggle across the North Imperial Sea was taking effect.

Live a good, long life. We chuckled to ourselves. *Long enough for Yana and Huss to work you to the bone!*

We were still locked in a staring contest with our trusted vassal when an unwelcome voice broke the silence. “His Imperial Majesty and the grand marshal always look so lively,” it said, with a laugh. “Don’t you think so, Graham?”

“Professor,” came the reply, “I realize that this is an informal occasion, but I would thank you not to stir up trouble.”

We turned to a clock on the side table. Noon precisely. They were punctual, at least.

Into the courtyard, normally off-limits to all but the most exclusive company, stepped a bespectacled man in a hat and coat and an old fellow in well-tailored formal wear—the professor, known as the Wainwright Kingdom’s most dangerous and devious sorcerer, and Duke Howard’s head butler, Graham “the Abyss” Walker.

“What have all you freaks come to disturb us for?” we demanded, with a snort and a dismissive wave of our right hand. “If you haven’t noticed, sentencing our witless son to perpetual confinement, packing our foolish relatives off to the northern front, stripping imbecilic nobles of their wealth, and establishing railways has left us nursing a broken heart. Any trifling proposal you make will only add to the load on Moss’s already overburdened shoulders.”

Though our empire numbered among the three great western powers, it lacked capable leaders. Between our own troublesome northern nobles and the Howards to our south, each one we did have strained under weighty responsibilities. We could ill afford to neglect the demonfolk across the North

Imperial Sea either. And those northeastern rebels—the Lalannoy Republic—constantly harried our borders.

Moss really must live another few decades. Yes indeed!

While we made up our mind, the grand marshal—our junior—made a poor show of coughing. “Sire, I am growing old myself,” he whined. “I beg Your Imperial Majesty’s leave to retire and live out my remaining years in—”

“Out of the question. Not even death will get you out of your duty,” we scoffed. As if we would ever allow such a thing. Didn’t he know that retirement was for us to spend time with our great-grandchildren?

Moss looked up, the shadow of intrigue on his face. “To tell the truth, sire, I have been lacing your tea with an elixir of longevity for several months no—”

“D-Damn you, Moss! Have you taken leave of your senses?! How could you arrive at our own idea?!”

“Sire?! N-No wonder my tea has tasted strange! You’ve played me for a fool!”

We glared daggers at each other. How dare he trick us into performing our imperial duties any longer than we already had? Did he secretly despise us? But why? We could think of too many justifications to choose one.

“Still the best of friends, I see,” the professor remarked while pride alone kept our eyes locked with Moss’s.

“It’s such a relief that time hasn’t changed them,” Graham agreed.

Our fun spoiled, we reached for a water jug. Moss poured a glass of ice water and passed it to us.

“So, what brings you here?” we demanded. “We already gave you Shiki.”

The pair smiled. Like devils and dragons, they would devour us the moment we let our guard down.

“Good news.”

“If Your Imperial Majesty would please look here.”

Moss took a letter from Graham and opened it before handing it to us.

Well now...

“A triple alliance?” we murmured. In short, the letter proposed the Yustinian Empire, the Wainwright Kingdom, and the League of Principalities join forces.

“Yes.” The professor’s spectacles caught an unsettling gleam.

“We would have liked to add ‘against the false Saint,’ but it won’t do to be too open.”

“For fear of the eastern response,” we agreed. Unlike us, the east of the continent had little idea of what the Knights of the Holy Spirit had done during the War of the Dark Lord, and most of its people belonged to their church. Should we denounce the false Saint, we risked a repeat of the Continental War from five centuries past. And if that came to pass, the Dark Lord might take action as well.

“The league has given its approval,” the professor continued, looking villainous. “The church did make a mess of their capital, and after witnessing the water dragon’s advent, I doubt they find belief in the Holy Spirit terribly appealing.”

He made it sound simple, but the reality would have floored any scholar or sorcerer with even a modicum of knowledge. As guardians of planetary order, the seven dragons had no regard for us mortals, demonfolk included. Only the Hero and the Dark Lord could claim to be their equals. Perhaps the Lalannoyan Heaven’s Sword as well—if he weren’t using the sacred blades of the Lothringens on the wyrm.

We shoved the letter at Moss and sniffed. “You do realize that we can hardly contribute troops?” we said with all the vitriol we could muster. “Your ‘Wolf of the North’ saw to that.”

“We cannot take our eyes off the Lalannoyan rebels on the northeastern border,” our levelheaded grand marshal supplied. “Especially not while Heaven’s Sword commands them.”

“Fate is a funny thing,” we lamented. “We’ve made an enemy of the old imperial family that our own house once served. And its current head bears the name of its founder.”

The original Arthur Lothringen, one of the most pivotal figures in human history, had emerged from the chaos attendant on the dawn of our godless age. All records of his life had become scattered and lost, leaving only scant oral traditions, yet we could easily perceive his greatness. And the current Heaven’s Sword lived up to his name. Moss, of all people, had called him “the finest individual in the east.”

“We may be able to solve that problem as well,” the professor said, with a swindler’s smile. “As it happens, a student of mine—Allen by name—is accompanying an envoy to Lalannoy as we speak. Lord Oswald Addison claims to seek both peace with the kingdom and an alliance against the church. Surely such an

agreement would contribute to subduing your own nation's troubles?"

We exchanged a sour look with Moss. Ending the fruitless feud with Lalannoy would be a boon to Yana and Huss when their time came. And yet…

"Professor," we said, "we trust you as far as we can throw you."

"What?! B-But sire," he protested, "think how long we've known each other. I know! Would you care to hear how Mina *Yustin* and Cordelia *Lothringen* are faring?"

"Enough! That's the very side of you we don't trust!" we roared. He had some nerve, springing the names of children we had once flouted the law to save like that. "Wait a few days. You'll get your answer then."

"I sincerely appreciate it. Mina and Cordelia have never been better."

"Humph." We drained the ice water in our glass, then had Moss pour us another and drank that too. Wiping our lips, we said, "In any case, you work the new Shooting Star too hard. We've all been dancing to the false Saint's tune since the Algren rebellion. Her moves may seem small, but they add up. Can you be certain she didn't orchestrate this mission to Lalannoy?"

"It is the way of legends to fall without fanfare," Moss added.

Naturally, we braced for a retort, but none came. While we and Moss looked at each other, an uncanny scene played out before us.

"It's a sorry state of affairs, I must admit," said the kingdom's most dangerous sorcerer.

"The thought pains us greatly," murmured the Abyss.

For a moment, neither we nor our grand marshal spoke. They clearly owed this Shooting Star a great deal.

We folded our arms and struck a chair. "Sit and tell us more. And next time you come, bring your young Shooting Star with you. We would have words with him—about the faith in 'Saint Wolf' spreading through our realm, in particular!"

✽

"I appreciate your patience! I present: my own hand-baked fruit tart!"

Gentle sunshine bathed the Lalannoyan capital. Spires and a great clock tower rose above the lovely red and orange roofs of

the workshop city. The marble-white independence memorial had the solemnity of a mausoleum. The great metal bridge stood out for its massive arch, while clusters of balloons hovered over the centers of craft.

The Lothringen mansion nestled in the hills of the western district. Its sprawling gardens commanded a view of the whole cityscape. And at the moment, they resounded with a man's confident voice and smug laughter. Tall and red-haired, his well-trained muscles showed even through his clothes—although an apron decorated with little red birdies spoiled the effect and then some. His name: Lord Ridley Leinster, the Swordmaster. Since fleeing the royal capital, he had apparently begun walking the path of the pâtissier. What was wrong with the Leinsters?

Lily stood behind the chairs where Tina and Rill sat in their everyday clothes, scowling at her brother. So much for the good mood that finally returning to her usual outfit had put her in.

"Have a taste, Tina! And you, Rill!" Ridley declared. "Of course, I baked enough for you too, Lily and Allen! And for Stella, when she gets back with fresh tea!"

"*Must* you shout?" Lily groaned, giving her brother a withering stare.

"Oh, it looks good," said Tina.

"Hm... I suppose its looks pass muster," Rill murmured before she and Tina commenced the taste test. They would be comparing the tart to my mom's baking, which they had both praised to high heaven.

Three days had passed since our interview with Lord Addison. An invitation from Arthur Lothringen had brought us into the hills. "Allen! Come visit us while you await an answer from the royal capital," he had said. "Oh, how I would have loved to show you around the city! The thousand-odd workshops that give the 'city of craft' its nickname! The memorial to the great men and women who fought for our independence! And across the bridge to the east, historic districts practically unchanged since the Old Empire ruled, and a great museum housing relics of the world's greatest jeweler and pastry chef, the Gemstone and the Sweetsmaster, who lived at the end of the age of gods! Of course, I can't vouch for their authenticity."

His regret had sounded genuine.

"The lord in an apron certainly made an impact," I muttered to myself on my bench a short distance away. Lily's face had been a

sight to behold.

Ridley had never joined us at the marquess's mansion. True to Arthur's prediction, he had run off to stock up on ingredients and tinker with recipes at the first news of his sister's arrival. He hadn't gotten any less impulsive since I'd last seen him.

While I petted the white cat on my lap, Ridley swelled with pride. "What do you think?" he asked. "It's been four years and a few months since I left the royal capital, and I've spent the time roaming foreign lands, eating all manner of desserts, and learning how to make them. My artistry has steadily improved, until—"

"I've made up my mind!" Tina interrupted.

"As have I," said Rill.

Both girls laid down their forks and nodded to each other. Then they took a deep breath and pronounced their verdict.

"Mother's baking..."

"...is far superior!"

The baker's sister chuckled as she nibbled her own slice of tart, using her fingers in a flagrant disregard for table manners. The look on her face was downright sinister.

Ridley himself staggered back one step, then another, wearing a look of despair that not even his duel with Lydia or our battle with the black dragon had drawn from him. "I-Impossible!" he wailed. "I poured my heart and soul into that tart—I, Ridley Leinster, the man destined to surpass the legendary Sweetsmaster! How could it lose?"

"Yes, yes. Now, if the sore loser will please make way."

"Lily," Ridley groaned as the noblewoman pushed him aside, her scarlet hair flashing.

"Lady Tina, Rill," she said, presenting fresh dessert plates, "I'd like you to compare my baking to Lord Loser's over there instead of to Mrs. Ellyn's."

"Okay!" Tina agreed.

"Oh-ho," Rill murmured. "This reminds me of Ellyn's handiwork."

The pair shoveled Lily's baking into their mouths. Then their eyes widened and blinked in surprise.

"Oh, I like this."

"Indeed."

The scarlet-haired lady's smile broadened. The red-haired lord reeled. Tina and Rill wiped their mouths with their handkerchiefs

and delivered their arguably cruel verdict.

"Lily..."

"...is victorious!"

Ridley's knees buckled, and he fell forward onto his hands.

Oh dear. Richard and the knights of the guard would have a fit if they saw this.

"I-It can't be," he groaned. "H-How? How did you do it, Lily?! Sister of mine, when I left the royal capital, you couldn't cook yourself a snack, let alone bake!"

"Ha. What a silly question." Lily filled Tina's and Rill's teacups, sparing only a glance for her brother, although she puffed out her ample chest with victorious pride. "Doesn't this uniform tell you everything? While you were off wandering, I became a full-fledged maid! I learned baking along with—"

"But that's no maid uniform," Ridley objected, nonplussed.

I felt a glacial chill.

Oh, this won't end well.

I gestured to Tina, signaling her to take Rill and evacuate.

Lily's low, hollow laughter filled the air—joined by a profusion of fire flowers. I prepared to suppress her mana and prevent injury. But before I could act, a superb barrier enclosed the Leinster siblings, and the table and chairs teleported to safety.

Arthur's partner and fiancée, the lilac-haired sorceress Lady Elna Lothringen, must have worked the spells from indoors. Artie had told me that although she held no formal peerage, her line's antiquity had made her a "lady" by custom. "Feel free to spar if you feel so inclined," she had told us on our arrival. "Our irrepressible champion has made certain I'm used to it." I appreciated her understanding, but it had its downsides.

True to form, Lily no sooner realized that collateral damage was no concern than she leapt high into the air.

"That does it. You'll regret those words, 'brother of mine'! This ends now!" she shouted, drawing a greatsword from thin air and bringing it crashing down without mercy.

An ear-piercing metallic clang shook the air. Ridley had parried the massive blade with a tiny cake knife.

"Honestly!" Lily raged, hopping back. "You haven't changed! How many times do I have to tell you to learn some delicacy before it sinks in?! Well, get ready, because today's the day I finally teach you a lesson!"

A legion of fire flowers appeared, surrounding the apron-clad

Swordmaster before striking in unison. Ridley dodged every blow while the vast garden burned around him. Then the scarlet-haired lady caught up to him with a horizontal greatsword swing.

Tina let out a startled cry from her shelter, while Rill murmured, “Oh-ho. Nicely done.”

“Yes, that was a magnificent stroke,” said its recipient. “I see I needn’t worry how the Under-ducal House of Leinster will do without me.”

Lord Ridley Leinster stood perched on the sword blade.

“Come home and inherit already! Do you have any idea what I put up with?!” Lily grimaced and pelted her brother with more fire flowers, forcing a retreat. Switching from pinpoint strikes to dominating the field, she multi-cast Divine Fire Wave at breathtaking speed…only for the Swordmaster’s invisible slashes to extinguish every flame in their arena.

“I don’t know what troubles you, but I can guess.” Ridley chuckled, playfully passing his cake knife from hand to hand. “Ten to one you have a sweetheart. But the world is a big place, sister of mine! If obligations are holding you back, remember you can always abduct him and flee the country.”

“Excuse me, Ridley!” Tina stopped eating tart to shout from behind a wall of ice she’d conjured for her own protection. “That’s exactly how Lydia thinks!”

Rill met my gaze from her own vantage point nearby. “How you must suffer,” her eyes seemed to say.

“I wouldn’t say so,” I looked back. People could get used to anything. Rill herself had already learned to hold simple conversations using only her eyes.

“Wh-What?” the red-haired lord gasped, visibly shaken. “That…that can’t be! How could I think anything like my cousin? Do I look like the sort of genius who has an awakening out of nowhere and goes, ‘I’ve learned all your sword tricks. Show me something, or stop wasting my time and lose’? There’s no—”

“Got you!” Lily shouted, lunging forward and swinging her sword low to the ground. The Swordmaster, already defeated in spirit, panicked and went on the defensive.

Tina should learn a lot from this.

“Thank you for waiting, Mr. Allen.”

A voice interrupted my satisfied reflections. Stella had returned from the house dressed in a white sweater and skirt

and carrying a teapot and small cloth bag on a tray.

"Thank you," I said as she eagerly took a seat beside me. She seemed to have already grasped the situation.

"Don't mention it. My days in the royal capital were so busy that I'm happy to take things slow like this." She flashed a smile that helped me understand why people hailed her as a saint everywhere she went, then set the tray on a table and started pouring tea.

A distinctive aroma wafted over me. Leaves from some eastern nation, perhaps? A breeze fluttered Stella's sky-blue ribbon.

"Do you think we'll find Rill's companions?" Saint Wolf murmured, staring at the silver-haired girl with her eyes on the sibling spat. We had heard nothing new from the royal capital.

"I've explained the situation to Lord Addison," I said, watching Rill chat with Tina. "If he can't locate them, we'll have to bring her home with us. Would you mind, Kifune?"

The white cat's tail slapped my knee. I took that as a "no."

"I asked a maid with spectacles to let me make these at the Addison house," the platinum-haired noblewoman said, untying the cloth bag and removing a small plate of cookies.

"I'd love one," I replied and ate one of the leaf-shaped desserts. It had a gentle flavor.

"Wh-What do you think?" Stella asked, fidgeting with her hands clasped. "Your mother taught me the recipe, but I don't know if I did it justice."

"They taste wonderful. Caren and I used to fight over these when we were little."

The noblewoman hid her mouth with a hand, looking relieved. If any Howard or Leinster maids had been present, they would have reached for their video orbs. "I'll make them again when we get back to the royal capital," she said. "Would you try them again then?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I'll just go share these with Tina and Rill." Tray in hand, Stella waved to her sister and our lovely little glutton, then started making her way around the battle to them, giggling and mumbling something under her breath. ("The angel wins today!")

In the garden, Ridley had turned the tide, wielding his cake knife and a fork in a fierce counterattack. Why did they call him

the *Sword*master, again?

"Oh, Allen! Quite a show you have here!"

The champion had returned, vaulting over the front gate in his white-and-azure armor. He had been attending a meeting about troop deployments as "marshal of the west"—his official title.

"Arthur," I said. "You must need a rest."

"Yes, that I do! But first, about the people you want found." Arthur collapsed onto the bench and frowned. After our talk with the marquess three days ago, I had asked him to look for several people who had been spotted in the city of craft.

- Felicia's father, Ernest Fosse
- Gregory Algren
- His servant Ito
- The eastern-capital beastfolk who had defected to the church
- Gerard Wainwright

"Long story short, they're nowhere in the western district," the champion said glumly. "If they've been abducted by the church or chosen to aid it, you'll have to go east to find them!"

"I sent magical creatures to scout the eastern district this morning," I replied. "The Heaven and Earth Party has fortified their end of the bridge. We could try to sneak past, but if we're caught, we'd risk setting off a civil war."

A cold breeze ruffled Arthur's blond locks. For the moment, we could savor peace and quiet.

"B-Be serious! And don't skewer advanced spells on a fork!"

"Don't worry, Lily! You can do it! I believe in you!"

My idea of peace and quiet, anyway.

"I like fighting," Arthur murmured. "But I'm not eager to cut down my countrymen, and Lord Addison has asked me to 'restrain myself.' We most likely have traitors in our midst as well. I'm sorry."

"Arthur." I stopped Lalannoy's guardian angel as he made to bow his head. I could see an excited Artie and an exhausted Minié coming through the front gate. "'A champion is an idol.' Not my favorite saying, but I don't see why you should go out of your way to shatter the illusion. You're still Heaven's Sword of Lalannoy."

Arthur exhaled and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Well said, Allen! Now, let’s get some exercise of our own! A bout with Heaven’s Sword will make a fine story to bring home with you!”

✽

“That should do it, I think,” I murmured in my room at the Lothringen mansion that evening. I had just finished writing notes on my midday sparring with Arthur by the light of a small lamp. A spellstone of fire powered the heater.

Looking out the window, I felt almost overawed by the nighttime cityscape. There would be no moon tonight, and mana lamps lit the clock tower and spires along with the clusters of redbrick buildings that marked the city of craft. People seemed scarce, perhaps owing to the mounting political tensions. I didn’t even see the Heaven and Earth Party’s balloons.

I had been taken aback when, after our sparring, a jovial Arthur had cried, “Stay with us tonight! What, your luggage? We’ll have it brought over!” Still, Tina had seemed interested in a conversation with Lady Elna, so things might have worked out for the best.

I rose from my chair and pulled a blanket over Rill, who was sleeping on a couch with Kifune. I had tried to move her to another room when the other girls had left earlier, but she refused to budge.

“I’d better ask Lydia for melee combat lessons when I get back to the royal capital,” I murmured, turning down the heater. The day’s sparring had left me with nothing to brag about. Arthur had fought bare-handed and used no magic except to augment his own body. I, meanwhile, had been free to use anything I wished, leaving me no excuse when I had still lost miserably.

The knight’s hands had torn through Divine Ice Chains and chopped through Divine Darkness Chains—infamously difficult to defend against. I had bombarded him from all angles with volleys of Divine Light Shots, among the fastest spells known, and he had repulsed them all with a battle cry. I doubted that even the new spells I was formulating would have done much to change the outcome. And while I understood that backtracing mana detection was possible in theory, I hadn’t relished having it done to me in practice. In my mind, a certain princess who just

might replicate the feat was shouting, “Allen! This sounds like my time to shine!” I supposed I ought to try it with her when I got a chance.

I heard a knock.

“Come in,” I said.

The door swung open without a sound. There stood Tina. She had untied her hair ribbon and changed into her nightgown, and she looked less than pleased.

“Sir,” she said after a moment, drawing out the syllable.

“Tina? Is something the matter?”

In lieu of an answer, my student closed the door and cast a spell of silence. The magic lacked polish, but it warmed my heart to see her practice paying off. Come to think of it, we had known each other for almost a year now.

The young noblewoman strode up and stopped in front of me, arms crossed. “Don’t you ‘Is something the matter?’ me! You told us to turn in early! I had a feeling something was wrong when I saw light under your door, and I was right! You’re the one who needs rest, sir! Did you forget all that incredible sparring you did today?!”

Tina’s expression shifted constantly as she fumed. She had seen through my habit of getting writing done and devising new spells after dark.

“I was just about to turn in,” I said. “Honest.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it! A liar like you needs someone to keep an eye on him.” Tina seated herself on the sofa where Rill lay sleeping. “I still can’t believe how strong Arthur and Ridley are,” she murmured, brushing her hand through the other girl’s silver hair.

“They’re Heaven’s Sword and the Swordmaster for a reason,” I said. “Lily managed something of a comeback as the fight wore on, but as I am now, I don’t stand a chance.”

“I…I didn’t mean to belittle you, sir! You even surprised Lady Elna. She told me she’s never seen a sorcerer give Arthur so much trouble at close quarters. I was just thinking, the world is bigger than I knew.” Seeing champions fight seemed to have left her uneasy, wondering if she could ever measure up.

“Those thoughts show how far you’ve come,” I said, putting away my pen. “In my case, any truly formidable opponent will overwhelm me if I fight alone. You saw Arthur today.”

The champion had piled offense upon offense, unfazed by my

elementary spells and interference. Why should he stop when, with vast reserves of mana to sustain him, he could simply replace his dozens of barriers the moment I dispelled them? Facing him had given me a little taste of terror.

The young noblewoman cocked her head first to one side, then to the other, working toward a solution. “You mean,” she said at last, “because they can keep hitting you with their strongest attacks at any given moment?”

“Exactly.”

I had spent my life endlessly refining my control of magic to make up for my substandard mana reserves. I now secretly prided myself on achieving a fair level of skill. But at the same time, I felt the limits of what I could do as an individual fighter.

“Let me see,” I said. “In terms of people you know…I suppose Lydia makes the clearest example. She can cast every fire spell I know, but she only actually uses a select few, even in mock combat. There’s a simple reason for that.”

Tina gave a start, then clenched and unclenched her hands a few times. She was thinking of the power that the kingdom reserved for just four houses and now Caren: supreme magic and its accompanying secret arts.

“She can solve almost any problem by hitting it with enough Firebirds and Scarlet Swords,” I continued. “She doesn’t need tricks, especially when her mana capacity keeps growing.”

The platinum-haired noblewoman looked down in silence. Wind rattled the windowpanes.

I squinted out into the night as I closed my notebook. “I’d love to fight like she does, if I could. But I have my hands full refining what little I can.”

“Sir.” The girl cast a crude enhancement spell on herself and darted toward me. Silencing spells masked her footfalls until she dropped into a crouch before my chair and gazed up at me, her cheeks flushed. “If you keep linking mana with me, all your problems will—”

“Absolutely not,” I interrupted. Like Lydia, she seemed disturbingly willing to offer up all the mana she possessed.

Tina flapped her lips a few times, then smacked my leg. “Y-You didn’t even let me finish my sentence!”

“And the answer is no. Now, let’s get you back to your room. Stella and Lily will worry.”

I took the girl’s hand, helped her up, and steered her toward

the door. Saint Wolf was a caring sister, and the maid had been indoctrinated in the ways of protecting her “ladies” at all costs. They would notice Tina’s absence soon, if they hadn’t already.

“Oh, why do you have to be so mean, sir?! Humph!” Despite her grumbling, the young noblewoman obediently made to leave.

“Tina,” I called to her little back. She turned. “I don’t mind not being the strongest. After all…”

Right. I’m not anyone’s champion, and I’m not unbeatable. I’m just a humble sorcerer and these girls’ private tutor.

I winked. “If worse comes to worst, you’ll rescue me, won’t you?”

Ice flakes danced around the room. Tina puffed up her cheeks and groaned.

“Honestly, sir,” she sulked. “Of course the answer is yes, but…but… Jeez! Jeez, I say! Jeez! Don’t blame me if it comes back to bite you someday!”

The door closed silently, and my ears caught the sound of light footfalls in the corridor.

And here I was speaking from the heart.

“Truly, I’ve rarely seen a man so cruel,” came a voice torn between disgust and admiration.

“Rill, if you’re awake, I suggest you go to your own room,” I told the silver-haired girl, who had sat up on the couch. “And change clothes before bed!”

“How tiresome. Why— Oh! Don’t tell me my beauty has roused your baser—”

“Nothing of the kind,” I interrupted, collecting her blanket. Kifune…could stay right here. It seemed a shame to wake the cat.

Rill hopped off the couch and thrust a dainty finger at me in indignation. “Surely you should count that attitude among your flaws? You could at least make an effort to understand women!”

“That’s the most challenging field of study I know. Analyzing the great spells sounds simpler,” I replied. I had seen more than my fair share of great magic, and I thought Tina and Lydia might have the mana to apply its principles.

“I wouldn’t dream of prying into your circumstances,” I continued matter-of-factly as I folded the blanket. “But I suspect your *lies* are putting some people in a difficult position. I’ll see you back to the royal capital, so don’t forget to apologize.”

“I understand,” the girl said reluctantly, turning away and twirling her bangs around her finger. “Ages have passed since I last got a scolding. You’re not what I’d call mighty, but you have something to boast of.”

“I’ve never once considered myself ‘mighty,’” I replied. Even as a child, I had never been strong, but I’d wished that I could at least keep the people I cared about safe. My current self was the result.

“Well, I suppose you pass.” Rill’s lips curled sardonically. “The heir of the Lothringens would retort, ‘Then, I’ll get stronger!’”

The Lalannoyan champion had the same bothersome nature I knew from Twin Heavens. He could turn the tide of battle single-handed.

Rill walked to the bed, hopped in, and hugged a pillow. “How unfortunate that he can’t unleash his full power,” she opined, rolling around. “Substitute swords won’t hold against a truly formidable foe. War demands victory, but they should have considered the cost.”

“What?”

Ridley had called Arthur’s twin swords “enchanted heirlooms of the Imperial House of Lothringen.” And what “cost” did she mean?

“I’m not sure I follow— Rill!”

A section of wall and ceiling exploded without warning, burst by a shower of dark chains. I hastily multi-cast wind spells, forcing myself to gain speed. After retrieving Kifune and Rill, I threw myself outside, dodging for all I was worth.

Lady Elna’s wards surrounded the mansion. How had the attackers neutralized them?

Setting down the girl and cat behind me, I materialized Silver Bloom with the violet ribbon still tied to it. At least a dozen men in hooded gray robes landed silently before us, single-edged daggers clasped in their hands. I had fought their fellows many times before.

“Church inquisitors,” I murmured.

“A night raid against your enemy’s greatest strength during the dark of the moon. And you’ve used some manner of vampire, to judge by your mana. Not a bad plan,” Rill said, dusting off her clothes and smoothing back her hair. “But you should have sent enough force to buy time. You fellows are dead already.”

A flash of light shot past. The shocked inquisitors perished

before they could regenerate or invoke any other magic, cleaved in two by Arthur's twin swords.

I looked at the girl cradling Kifune. "Rill, who on earth—"

"Mr. Allen!"

"Allen!"

I looked up to see Stella and Lily calling me from the rooftop. They seemed safe. Fire flickered on Ridley's drawn sword as he surveyed the area, ready for anything.

"Sir, the city!" Tina shouted, clinging to Lady Elna as she pointed down the hill.

The city of craft, capital of the Lalannoy Republic, was in flames. Massive skeletal birds flew above it. I recognized this ominous mana: Reverie of Restless Revenants, a tactical taboo spell for calling up armies of the dead.

It's coming from...the great east-west bridge!

"Allen, with me!" Arthur turned to me and shouted, having fetched his armor from the house. "You, Ridley, and I will secure the bridge. Tina, Stella, Lily—I'd like you to join Elna in clearing the dead from the western district."

"I don't object, but what about Lord Addison?" I asked. Inquisitors served apostles. I had no doubt they would target the marquess—and the wyrm.

"His Lordship is a seasoned warrior, and don't forget Floral Heaven's barrier!" Arthur declared, buckling on his cape and armor. "If we don't stem the tide soon, both east and west will suffer grievous harm. The people need our protection!"

"Yes, sir."

Now that's what I call a champion. He'll never lose sight of what he should be fighting for.

I exchanged nods with the nightgown-clad girls who had climbed down from the roof. "Tina, Stella, Lily, you heard the man. I'd rather not interfere in another country's problems, but we can't ignore taboo magic. Rill, stay here with Kifune and—Rill?"

The silver-haired girl didn't answer. A stunned "What?" hung on every tongue. She and her white cat had vanished as suddenly as a fleeting vision.

✽

I bounded down the hill, propelled by my own strength

enhancement and Lady Elna's wind magic.

"There!" Arthur shouted as he ran in the lead, pointing to the unofficial symbol of the western district: the great clock tower in its southern quarter.

I kicked off the roof of the building I'd been using as a foothold and landed. Ridley soon caught up, along with Stella and Lily, who was carrying Tina. Rill and Kifune weren't with us; we had never managed to find them.

"This is Black Blossom's," I muttered, taking a pinch of the fine, dark ash wafting on the air.

I felt a sinking feeling as I surveyed the state of the battle. Beams of light from balloons and towers illuminated ranks of spear- and sword-wielding skeletons and the great birds of bone that flew above their formations. Knights and spell-gunners were locked in combat everywhere I looked.

The Howard sisters wove their way through the fighting to my side. Both murmured my name with a nervous shudder.

Arthur looked up from the communication orb that he wore as a brooch and clicked his tongue. "No use. It's being jammed. I can't even raise the Addison house. Elna?"

"This black ash is spreading a jamming spell I've never seen before over the entire city. It will take time to break," the great sorceress said bitterly, tightening her grip on her dark metal staff and squinting through her spectacles. She had donned robes of white and lilac—the same color as her short hair.

The blond champion folded his arms. "Allen, think of something! We'll be out of options otherwise!"

"Allen, skeletons keep pouring from the bridge," Lily reported. Her fire flowers had formed a makeshift surveillance network. "They're swarming the eastern district as well. We could be in real trouble if we don't restore the chain of command soon."

I crushed the ash in my hand. It was do or die, then.

"I think I can clear it, but only over a limited area," I said slowly. "But one of the apostles can teleport large groups. Arthur, this could be bait to draw you out. We can assume they're after the wyrm." The church had used mass teleportation to great effect in Atlas, in the city of water, and in the royal capital.

"What do you take us for?!" the champion barked, radiating mana. "We foresaw this possibility and anchored a teleportation-obstructing circle on Lord Addison's estate. It covers the entire city. They won't take us by surprise!"

So he's a strategist as well as a powerhouse. I envy Arthur's subordinates. Or should I pity them for getting dragged into his fights?

"Understood," I said. "Go on ahead!"

"We're counting on you! Ridley! The two of us will clear a path to the bridge!"

"Right!"

The champion and the Swordmaster kicked off the roof, drawing their blades in midair. Skeletons disintegrated in light and flames as their sword strokes carved through the swarm.

They really were birds of a feather. Lady Elna and Lily raised their hands to their foreheads and sighed.

I released a flock of magical scouting birds and turned to the noblewoman with the sky-blue hair ribbon. "Stella—"

"Be my guest! I'll start purifying around the marquess's house!"

"Don't overexert yourself," I said, taking her hand and forging a shallow link. I felt a surge of joy, and a burst of light cleansed our immediate surroundings. Stella's dainty figure floated gently upward as two pure-white wings appeared on her back.

"I'll take care of this!" The noblewoman crossed her staff and rapier and raised them high. Pale-azure snowflakes fluttered across the moonless night sky, cleansing the dark ash and disintegrating the skeletal birds.



Lady Elna stiffened. “Feathers? And her spell control just skyrocketed,” she murmured, eyeing me with confusion and a tinge of fear. “Allen, what on earth...?”

“We happen to know a genuine angel, but please don’t mention it to anyone,” I said. “Now, Stella!”

“I’m ready, Mr. Allen!” Stella shouted, working magic as she soared through the night sky, expanding the range of her purification. She was a saint if I’d ever seen one.

“She looks gorgeous,” Tina gasped, gazing up at her sister.

“A perfect saintly angel,” Lily agreed.

“Oh! Communications restored!” Arthur’s voice burst from the orb on my collar, accompanied by a mighty crash. “His Lordship is safe. Minié and Artie have taken charge of his elite guard. We’ll strike the bridge as planned!”

An explosion of white and scarlet slashes carved an advance down the avenue.

“Understood. I’ll catch up to you soon,” I replied. “Elna, please watch Stella’s back.”

“I’m so sorry about my Arthur. You may depend on me.” The great sorceress made a truly apologetic bow, then bounded lightly onto a nearby building. A midair sweep of her metal staff sent out pillars of light and lightning to blast any skeletal warriors and birds poised to attack Stella. Arthur’s partner was a great woman in her own right.

Now...

“Sir, link with me!” Tina cried.

“It’s an emergency,” said Lily.

I turned to find them both looking terribly impatient. The rod in my hand met Tina’s.

“I hate to disappoint you,” I said, “but I still can’t maintain multiple links and fight for very long. And we need Stella to keep purifying.”

“I know, but...” The brilliant girl faltered, then pressed her left hand to her heart. “I’m going with you! You never know when Régnier might show up!”

I appreciated her concern.

“You’re our secret weapon—the best we have,” I said, reaching out my right hand to brush her snow-white ribbon. “We’ll need you if the apostles who cast these taboos stand and fight. I’m counting on you, Little Lady of Ice.”

The platinum-haired young noblewoman squeezed her rod in

both hands. “‘The best we have,’” she repeated. “All right. I’ll help clear away skeletons until you need me!”

With an eruption of mana, Tina leapt to Elna’s building, drawing on a combination of self-enhancement and ice magic. The mark on her right hand pulsed with light. Just like that, mana lamps, buildings, streets, and milling skeletons all froze solid. With Frigid Crane to help her, Tina might reduce even the wyrm to an ice sculpture.

“Allen, um…” Lily clutched my right wrist, looking uncharacteristically distraught.

A little bird alighted on my shoulder, bearing information.

“Lily, I’d like you to hold the line here,” I said. “And don’t worry. I won’t ask you to ‘retreat if the worst should happen,’ or anything equally ominous. I have a duty to perform and a friend to stop. So, let’s sort out this mess and all go home to the royal capital together.”

The maid withdrew her hand and dried her eyes. “If things get dangerous, just call my name.” She flashed me her usual grin. “I’ll come running.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Now, if you’ll excuse me!” We touched hands, palm to palm, and I jumped down to the street below.

Next stop: the bridge. There’s an apostle waiting!

✽

I had no trouble catching up. Why should I, when there wasn’t a single skeletal bird or warrior left in my way? I passed only townspeople fleeing for their lives from the monstrosities.

“Arthur! Ridley!” I called, slowing down as I approached the pair who had cut a swath through hundreds—maybe thousands—of skeletons and cleared a path to the bridge in next to no time.

The Swordmaster flicked his fiery blade, and a wall of hellfire raced along the ground.

“Splendid work, Allen!” the champion replied, resting one sword on his left shoulder. The other remained in its scabbard. “They don’t call you the Brain of the Lady of the Sword for nothing. I cut down every foe I could see, but it looks as though they’ll keep coming until we stop the spell.”

The red-haired lord furrowed his brow, evidently trying to recall something. “When I was little, I read that a witch created a

taboo spell to wake the dead," he murmured while his flames turned onrushing skeletons to ash. "I expected more of a challenge."

I laughed nervously. Even in the brutal War of the Dark Lord, both humans and demons had forbidden taboo magic by mutual agreement. The spell might not have its full effect in this age of magical decline, but no one should be able to cut through it like these two did.

Arthur eased his second sword out of its scabbard. Spell formulae shone along the blade.

"Still, I don't understand it!" he said. "This spell will frighten soldiers and civilians alike. Surely they aim to seize control of the city, and through it, the republic?"

"Why don't we ask them?" Ridley swung his flaming sword just as his wall of fire broke. A bright-scarlet slash tore through hundreds of bony warriors. "I see them now."

Near the center of the great metal bridge spanning the River Giselle, which roared its way through the capital, two hooded, white-robed figures stood beneath the mana lamps. A guard of spell-soldiers surrounded them, armored with heavy helms and plate and armed with pikes and greatshields. Skeletons clawed their way up out of the ominous circle inscribed on the ground before the pair: the tactical taboo Reverie of Restless Revenants.

"We fought these fellows just the other day," Arthur said, raising his swords. "Fifth Apostle Ibush-nur and Sixth Apostle Ifur—but perhaps you know them better as Earl Raymond Despenser and Marchese Fossi Folonto."

Ridley crushed a flake of drifting ash in his fist. "Only the lesser apostles. Where are their bosses? And I don't see the sorcerer controlling this black ash or the inquisitors either."

"Be careful. It could be a trap," I said, giving Silver Bloom a whirl. Who knew what the apostles might do?

Arthur responded with a fearless grin. His second sword slid free, and the weapons resonated, designs on their blades blazing with light. A sudden gust set his blond hair and cape fluttering as he roared, "Trap or not, I'll cleave through it! Today, we put an end to these apostles! Follow me!"

Mana flooded into the champion's swords. A wave of light burst forth with a mighty battle cry, mowing down skeletons until it struck the spell-soldiers' shield wall. Thick steel rent asunder, and at least a dozen fell to their knees.

Arthur licked his lips. “They can take a blow. This should be fun!” he shouted, and launched himself forward, crunching bones underfoot as he charged the grotesque horde.

“Has he never heard of caution?” I sighed, rubbing my forehead.

“Let me remind you: neither has my cousin,” Ridley quipped. “Now, what are we waiting for?!”

We took off after Arthur. Devoted Blossom’s blazing edge transformed the bridge into a crematorium. My Divine Light Chains restrained any monstrosity that tried to regenerate while my Divine Light Shots returned them to ash. The enemy ranks started to thin, and the larger apostle barked orders. Half of the greatshield-carrying spell-soldiers that had weathered Arthur’s first shining slash advanced. They looked quite imposing, coming toward us with their pikes lowered to the clink and scrape of armor.

“How nice of them to come to us!” Arthur shouted. “What do you say we thank them with steel?!”

“The battlefield is no place for jokes,” Ridley said. “Let’s make this quick.”

Heaven’s Sword and the Swordmaster cheerfully picked up speed, sliding under the line of pikes. Three white and scarlet flashes later, shields and armor collapsed, spewing black ash. The traces of the great spell Resurrection imbued in the spell-soldiers writhed, struggling to restore their bodies, but I conjured a mist of silver-snow to stall the formulae within them. The things fell apart—to Arthur and Ridley’s apparent surprise.

Don’t look at me. You just did things far more impressive than—

The bridge shook. I felt a chill from head to toe.

“Above you!” I shouted.

“What?!” Ridley cried, matched by a grunt from Arthur, as a gray-robed man leapt and flung himself at us without so much as drawing a weapon. My companions swung their swords, making a split-second decision to intercept him. The blades of light and fire found their mark. Dark-gray shields materialized to block some of the damage, but the man still lost his right arm.

Suddenly, to our shock, dark, soupy water stretched from the man’s body and reattached the severed limb. A greatsword of black ice appeared in his right hand as he aimed an overhead swing at the two swordsmen. I launched a barrage of Divine Light Shots to cover their retreat, but more shadowy water

gushed from the man's elongated right arm to swallow my elementary spells.

Arthur and Ridley backed away, shaking off their swords in disgust.

"What a repulsive form of defense."

"He uses water to extend his arm and ice to conjure weapons?"

The flaming sword's hellfire reached the man, burning away his gray robe. Far ahead, the skeletons replenished their numbers and started reforming ranks.

"Radiant Shield and Resurrection," I said, with a bitter grimace. "Also Watery Grave, which they stole from the city of water, and Falling Star, courtesy of Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield. He's been implanted with four great spells and the essence of the monster Stinging Sea."

Lightless, hate-filled eyes focused on me. A voice bellowed so loud I felt the vibrations in my skin.

"Allen! I'll KILL you! I'LL kill YOUUU!"

The man ceased to even look human as dark water and ice covered him. He fell forward onto his hands like a four-legged animal, his body bristling with icy swords and watery arms. I recalled Caren's account of the berserk Black Knight whom she and the girls had battled in the eastern capital.

I had no fond memories of this man. He had crushed my dream of becoming a court sorcerer and tried to harm my young students. Even so, no one deserved an end like this.

"Gerard Wainwright," I said through gritted teeth. "You've lost yourself completely."

"Why?!" Ridley yelled, voice shaking. "They called you one of the best the guard ever had! What brought you to this?!"

"They must have found him a convenient test subject," Arthur said, charging his swords with a staggering amount of mana. "The least we can do is put him out of his misery in one— Ridley?"

The red-haired lord took a step forward and raised his flaming sword straight out to his side. "You two go on ahead. This poor fool of a former prince..."

A fiery breeze brushed my cheek, and Ridley vanished. Gerard floated off the ground, consumed by flame, before crashing into the far-right side of the bridge. Skeletons caught in his path shattered and crumbled.

“Shall fall at Ridley Leinster’s hand!” the Swordmaster declared. “Go on, Heaven’s Sword! Shooting Star!”

“As you wish!” I shouted back.

“Don’t die on us!” Arthur added, and we both resumed our sprint, cutting, binding, and blasting skeletons as we pressed ever forward.

“Ibush-nur is the primary spellcaster!” I said, splitting the enemy line with the elementary spell Divine Earth Mire. “Ifur is only providing sup—”

“Allen!” Arthur cried.

I sprang back at the same moment. An instant later, space distorted, and a weighty longsword left cracks in the metal bridge. The hulking apostle had emerged to defend Ibush-nur.

“A short-range teleportation talisman to avoid interference!” I groaned. “Just what we needed.”

“Unlike a spell, they need to brandish talismans,” Arthur said, chopping a fresh wave of monstrosities into bony bits. “We can counter them as long as we know what they’re for.”

No normal frontline fighter could pull that off. Is this how Lady Elna feels every time they fight together?

While I sympathized with the lilac-haired sorceress, Ifur raised his sword high. “For Her Holiness the Saint,” he roared, “I will see this plan succeed!”

A swarm of unsettling dark-crimson snakes burst forth, coiling around the surviving spell-soldiers and skeletons, then merging like Gerard had done. Reverie of Restless Revenants supplied fresh substance to the massive composite creatures of armor and bone taking shape.

“Wh-What on earth…?” I faltered.

“Nothing sane, that’s for certain,” Arthur spat.

Ahead of us, Ibush-nur began a new spell. Behind us, Ridley’s battle raged on. Our prospects looked bleak.

“Arthur, I know it’s hard to believe, but Ibush-nur is weaving a new taboo spell without dropping Reverie of Restless Revenants,” I said. “At the same time, I don’t like Ridley’s chances if we leave these monsters loose.”

“Simple.” Arthur winked at me over his shoulder. I had a terrible, awful feeling. “Launch me into the air on my signal. I’m counting on you!”

“I…I beg your pardon?!”

For an instant, I saw unshakable confidence and a deep trust

in me in his silver-gold eyes. At the same time, Lalannoy's champion charged forward. I cast a silent spell.

"Fool! Have you taken leave of your senses?!" Ifur crowed as the composite colossi closed in on Arthur. If he could only buy time, he seemed to think, their second taboo would finish us off. As much as I hated to give the apostles any credit, I had to admire his pragmatism.

Arthur's swords pulsed with light. The time had come.

"Now, Allen!"

"Whatever happens, don't blame me!" I struck my rod on the bridge and cast the strongest botanical spell I could manage. Branches I'd hidden under the bridge shot out, launching Arthur high overhead.

Both apostles' mouths widened in astonishment. Nevertheless, Ibush-nur brandished the dagger in his left hand. Inky-black water swirled along its edge.

"Today," he screamed, "you *will* feel the Wail of Wasting Waters!"

Liquid blades formed a tornado, speeding toward Arthur. Ifur and the composite creatures launched spells of their own.

A dazzling light flashed overhead.

"I hate to disappoint, but victory is ours!"

Lalannoy's guardian angel swung his outspread swords in a symmetrical arc. The bridge groaned under a tremendous shock wave. The shining blades parted Wail of Wasting Waters, engulfing Ibush-nur and the monsters as well. Ifur, farthest from the action, tried to hide behind the remaining skeletons and a many-layered barrier, but he vanished as well.

Blinded by light and dust, I conjured plants to reinforce the bridge around the new gaping hole in its center. Cold sweat ran down my face.

So, this *is Heaven's Sword.*

Arthur landed lightly in front of me. "A grand success!" he declared, standing tall and flipping his golden hair without a hint of fatigue. "Sometimes, I even scare myself!"

I couldn't bring myself to dislike him, but he was a handful.

"Ridley," I said as the red-haired lord touched down behind us, "is Gerard…?"

"I sliced him to ribbons and burned him for good measure," he replied. "He's out of this fight, at least."

The wind restored visibility, revealing the apostles on the far

side of the hole with a bloodied, human-shaped Gerard lying still beside them.

"Lord Raymond Despenser—no, Apostle Ibush-nur," I called to the thin apostle, his left arm missing from the shoulder down, "I have a question for you."

"Ernest Fosse lives, softhearted key, as do the beastfolk you view as traitors. Although of course, life and death have no meaning before Her Holiness," he answered smoothly.

So, the false Saint anticipated my visit to Lalannoy.

"And what does the wicked false Saint you follow concern herself with?" Arthur cut in, exasperated. "She's caused chaos in the kingdom, the empire, the league, and now Lalannoy. Where does it end?"

Silence fell. Only the apostles' ragged breathing reached my ears. They leaned on each other for support, Ibush-nur missing his left arm, and Ifur, his right. Then both broke into laughter.

"You are mighty, Heaven's Sword."

"Mighty, but nothing more."

"You could never save the world."

"But Her Holiness? Not so."

"She *will* bring this repulsive world salvation! We haven't lost yet!"

Ibush-nur's lips curled as he waved his right hand aloft. Crackling filled the air above the bridge as a massive black flower bloomed, forcing its way through the interference.

"Elna worked with the republic's finest sorcerers to craft those wards!" Arthur cried, shaken.

I, meanwhile, pieced together an explanation. The kindhearted last principe, deceived by the "Black Saint," had accepted all blame and sacrificed himself to seal away the World Tree's rampage. And his testament, the stone slab inscribed with the spell that had maddened the tree, had fallen into the false Saint's hands. Binding and breaking were two sides of the same coin. The church had weaponized the great sorcerer's magic against us.

"Here they come," Ridley said, voice strained, holding his sword in a white-knuckle grip.

A new apostle emerged from the fully open flower. Dazzling white hair shaded golden eyes. Pristine white robes swathed a slight body crowned with a white witch hat adorned with an eight-petaled flower. A metal staff rested in his hands. Dark and

clouded fairy wings fluttered behind him as he glared down at the wounded apostles.

“Io,” Ibush-nur muttered as he and Ifur hung their heads and bit their lips.

“Humph. No one would think you belong to our order in that sorry state,” scoffed Second Apostle Io Lockfield, one of the false Saint’s wild cards and the culprit behind the black ash. “Still, for incompetents, you have made yourselves somewhat useful. Heaven’s Sword, the Swordmaster, and the defective key, just as the Saint foretold. Interesting.”

A blizzard of black petals caught us off guard as unfathomable mana concentrated in the apostle above us.

“I might as well crush you myself!” Io shouted, canines showing as he began deploying spells. “Try to contain your gratitude as you die!”

His mana was demolishing the great bridge by mere proximity. Chunks plummeted into the dark waters below. Even if we managed to defeat Black Blossom, we couldn’t avoid a drawn-out fight, and the second apostle had chosen this moment to teleport in. That could only mean one thing.

“L-Lord Arthur!” Artie’s panicked scream burst from the orb on my collar. “Apostles over the house! We can’t hold them off al—”

The message ended in an earsplitting crash.

Things couldn’t be worse. Our enemies had exploited our assumption—the impossibility of mass teleportation—to take us by surprise. A traitor must have leaked information to them before the assault.

“You were right, Allen. It was a trap,” Arthur said through gritted teeth, gripping his swords so tight I could hear their hilts creak. “But we’re in it now. We’ll just have to defeat Black Blossom and—”

“Don’t panic,” the red-haired lord scolded the champion, stepping forward and glaring up at the haughty apostle as he issued his orders. “I’ll fight him. Allen, take Arthur and race to the Addison estate. Lose your cool on the battlefield, and you lose the battle—like I lost to the Lady of the Sword when I had the edge in skill and experience. But don’t worry about me. The man destined to surpass the legendary Sweetsmaster won’t die just yet!”

Ridley instantly cast Scorching Sphere. The advanced spells burst in the air around Io.

“Luck be with you!” I shouted, making a prompt decision.

“Keep it for yourself. I wouldn’t put it past my cousin to tear the world down if I let you die.”

Io emerged from the flames looking unscathed but intrigued. Ridley must have piqued his curiosity.

“What are you waiting for, Allen?!” The champion clapped me on the shoulder, frustration in his voice. “We’re in a race against time!”

✽

Arthur and I hurtled toward the Addison estate, clearing out lingering skeletons and assisting civilian stragglers as we went. Communications had deteriorated significantly since Io, the source of the jamming, had appeared on the front lines with more potent mana, and the messenger birds I conjured never returned.

The once beautiful foreign scenery was in shambles. Holes gaped in the soaring clock tower. Brick buildings with red and orange roofs lay in ruins, their ornate windows shattered.

I hope everyone is safe.

“Allen!” Arthur’s shout snapped me out of my worries as he pointed with his sword, which had made short work of every skeleton we passed.

The lights from a spire near the marquess’s mansion shone on a girl with long platinum hair, flapping white wings as she swung a sword and staff. Stella was flying through a flurry of snowflakes, cleansing monstrosities. She looked like a delivering angel straight out of myth. Skeletons sniped at her with javelins and bony bows and arrows, but fire flowers intercepted their every shot. Lily’s whirling greatswords tore through a formation like a storm. A force of sailors under the command of the young naval officer called Jäger followed up her strike with a spell-rifle barrage from the entrance of the tower. Excellent teamwork.

Inside a makeshift earth-magic fortification, the little, plain-looking, bespectacled maid I’d seen at the mansion was treating wounded soldiers and civilians with jaw-dropping speed. She achieved maximum results with the minimum possible effort.

A Howard maid? No, it couldn’t be.

“Elna!” Arthur shouted. He had spotted the lilac-haired sorceress blasting a flock of skeletal birds with a pillar of

lightning from a nearby roof, and he bounded to join her.

“Arthur!” The Lothringian noblewoman acknowledged her partner with a faint smile.

The soldiers holding the line and the civilians under their care raised a cheer. The champion and his lady made a perfect picture.

“Sir! Are you all right?!” Tina hurtled down onto the street in a burst of wind magic. Her cloak had picked up some stains, but… Thank goodness. She seemed unhurt.

“I made it through somehow,” I said. “I’m so glad you’re all safe too. I hate to be abrupt, but can you tell us what’s—”

“Allen! Let Elna handle things here! We’re needed at the independence memorial!” Arthur shouted, and immediately, he was back on the move. It sounded like his “we” included Tina.

“Here!” The platinum-haired young noblewoman handed me a water bottle. “I got it from that maid in spectacles. She reminds me a lot of our number three, Olly Walker. I’ll explain things on the way!”

“The Howard Maid Corps’s number three? Th-Thank you.” Despite my renewed doubts, I cast a botanical spell, launching us on top of a nearby building. As I sprinted along the rooftops with Tina in my arms, I glanced down, silently requesting an explanation.

“After you left, sir, we supported Stella and cleared out the skeletons on West Avenue,” she said. “We secured a safe route to the Addison estate, helping townspeople on the way. Elna led us so well that once the chaos subsided, the skeletons couldn’t get near us. But then…”

“The teleportation caught you off guard.”

A skeletal bird tried to swoop down on us and plummeted, smashed by a Divine Ice Shot. The little noblewoman who had made the masterful strike shivered. “They attacked the house from above, and we couldn’t respond in time. The apostles didn’t come to fight! They wanted Lord Addison’s sword, North Star! They took it after a brief fight and escaped beyond Floral Heaven’s seal. Before we could stop him, the marquess took charge of Minié’s unit…”

“And raced off to the memorial,” I finished for her. I had a dreadful sinking feeling.

“The enemy has three commanders,” Tina continued. “Viola Kokonoe, the swordswoman who calls herself a servant of the

Saint; Third Apostle Levi Atlas, a spearwoman; and—”

“Miles Talito, leader of the Heaven and Earth Party!” Arthur roared, landing ahead of us on the bent smokestack of a spell-gun workshop, his face awash in bitter distress. “Artie suffered an injury shielding Isolde from Miles’s magic. The ice wyrm sleeps beneath the memorial! They’re planning to revive that monster, and unless we stop them, not only Lalannoy but every nation in the region will pay the devastating price!”

“But the wyrm is bound with Blaze of Ruin. They can’t undo a great spell so—”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. Even in profile, the champion’s face betrayed too much sorrow.

The din of fierce fighting rang out near the memorial. Lord Addison’s force had already begun its assault. Arthur leapt off the roof and landed before the shattered windows of a jeweler’s shop. Turning his swords to the massive spell-soldiers newly emerged from a black flower, he confessed Lalannoy’s secret.

“A hundred years ago, during the war for independence, the houses of Addison and Lothringen committed a mistake in their desperation for victory—a mistake we can never set right.”

No sooner did they spot the champion than the seven colossi leveled their pikes and charged. Paving stones cracked and mana lamps flickered. Tina and I dropped to street level, but she didn’t move. She couldn’t.

“We had declared independence, but the Yustinian army was strong,” Arthur continued. “Despite initial victories, we found ourselves giving ground on all fronts. Though the then Lord Addison fought hard, defeat seemed certain. His house had already lost its secret art, Shining Sword.”

The spell-soldiers pelted Arthur with great balls of water from their spearheads. The blasts seemed on a level with advanced magic, but the champion’s barrier was orders of magnitude stronger. They vanished before they got anywhere near him.

“In the end, the Addisons and Lothringens of the day couldn’t bear the specter of defeat, and of the censure that future history books would level at them. They…they unleashed the ice wyrm on the battlefield, using my house’s sacred heirloom blades to bend it to their will!”

The spell-soldiers’ advance slowed, then stopped. I doubted they had been given any orders except to join in the fighting. Terror filled the eyes I glimpsed deep in their helmets as Arthur’s

swords strained under the immensity of his mana.

"Of course, the plan was doomed to disaster. The decisive battle didn't reduce the old capital to a ghost town—the wyrm did. Not content with the enemy army, it devoured the better part of our own brave defenders, officer and soldier alike. Lalannoy only survived, and the other eastern nations with it, because the wyrm had expended enough of its strength for Floral Heaven and the Lady of Ice to imprison it once more. Since then, we have called the ice wyrm…the Slayer of Champions."

Arthur's voice dropped to a sad murmur as his blades traced an almost casual arc. A flash so bright it turned night to day enveloped the bloodstained capital. Soundless screams tore from the enormous spell-soldiers as it consumed them. Then they were no more, and concealing darkness covered all.

"H-He got all of them in one strike?" Tina gasped, clinging to my right arm. "I couldn't even see the cuts."

"Neither could I," I admitted, staring at the champion's lonesome back. His faux sacred swords still radiated light, unable to bear the full might of his mana.

"I am truly sorry for getting you involved in this, Allen, Tina." Arthur looked over his shoulder at us. "This is all that 'Heaven's Sword' amounts to. Laugh. And hold me to account when the fighting is over. I'm going on ahead."

"Arthur!" I shouted, but the knight with the weight of the republic on his shoulders vanished before I could stop him.

The wyrm can be used as a weapon. And it lies atop a "living" altar. The false Saint used ten-day fever to murder people and gather their mana for a ritual before. Don't tell me the church plans to—

"Sir." While I reached a terrifying conclusion, the platinum-haired young noblewoman moved to face me and thumped her chest.

"Yes, Tina?"

"Your 'secret weapon' is ready!" she declared, more self-assured than ever before.

A strong gust sprang up, as if the wind were urging me to make up my mind. Fair enough.

"Stella, Lily, can you hear me?" I called into my orb.

To my surprise, I got an immediate response.

"Mr. Allen?!"

"Allen, are you all right?!"

Had the wind spread the effects of the snowflakes?

“Time is short, so I’ll be brief. Let me explain what I think is about to happen,” I said, smoothing Tina’s ruffled hair. We had precious little hope of winning this battle, but I felt certain we could still save everyone.

“That’s all,” I concluded when I had finished filling them in. “Stella, you’re the key. I want you and Lily to secure the western streets for our retreat. Tina, Arthur, and I will stop them from fully reviving the wyrm!”

I heard both young women gasp. They knew how little I liked sending Tina to the front lines, but they didn’t question my judgment.

“Please look after my sister,” Stella said. “And please—*please*—be safe.”

“Yes, sir!” Lily chimed in. “Just leave it to a maid!”

I closed my eyes, then opened them and smiled at the eager girl. “Well then, what are we waiting for? I hope you can keep pace with me, Lady Tina Howard.”

“Of course I can,” she replied. “I’ve been waiting for this day for ages and ages. Today, I’m at your side, and I won’t give that up for anyone!”

✽

When Tina and I reached the independence memorial—a chalk-white structure that reposed like a mausoleum in the heart of the city’s western district—fierce fighting had already broken out on its steps. On our side, Arthur’s handpicked knights from the western front and Minié’s naval force. Against them, church inquisitors and spell-soldiers, alongside a troop of spell-gunners under Snider’s command. So, the executive officer was our traitor.

But wait. He wouldn’t know that North Star releases the seal. In which case—

“Allen, Tina! Look there!” Arthur shouted, spotting us as he struck down spell-soldiers single-handed. My train of thought flew off the rails as he pointed to the head of the stairs.

In the memorial’s doorway, a gray-haired elder confronted a man with dirty-blond hair who looked to be in his twenties. Oswald Addison and, I presumed, Miles Talito. The marquess had pressed too far ahead and ended up isolated between enemy lines. Head of state and rebel politician locked longswords, both

clad in knightly armor. I caught their conversation with a wind spell just as the marquess deflected a javelin of light.

"Why?" he demanded through clenched teeth. "Why would you ally with the Church of the Holy Spirit?! Miles! We may not share blood, but you're still my only brother! Do you resent the House of Addison for fostering you with the Talitos so soon after we plucked you from the orphanage?! Do you resent me for inheriting the family name?!"

"A foolish question, my lord—no, my brother. I've never once despised you."

They're brothers?! And the reports I read made them roughly the same age.

"How strange. He looks younger than before," Arthur murmured and broke into a sprint. Tina and I followed.

"But the history of the republic ends today," Miles continued, hatred creeping into his voice. "Lalannoy failed to save my son—my late wife's legacy and the *sole* child of my blood. I told you that the treatment he received would only prolong his life. Time and again, I begged you to join forces with the church—with Her Holiness—to restore Resurrection, the only cure. You spurned my pleas." His mana erupted. Chilling formulae writhed on his cheeks. "*You* killed my Alf, Oswald!"

"Miles! What on earth happened to you?! What happened to the man who held Isolde so dear, blood or no?! The man who saw himself in her plight?!" the marquess cried, features wrenching in anguish, and the battle resumed.

We needed to hurry. Miles had already abandoned sense and decency. We charged toward the memorial, Arthur cutting down the last of the spell-soldiers attacking us while I bound the inquisitors with Divine Darkness Threads and Tina froze them with the advanced spell Imperial Ice Blizzard. Mounting the last steps, we found the marquess down on one knee at the foot of stone statues holding swords, spears, and staves. His breath came in gasps, and blood trickled from his mouth.

"How I pity you, brother." Miles prepared to deliver the finishing blow. "Not even a shadow of your former prowess."

"Curse you!" Arthur lunged, but gray shields blocked his swords. "This again?!"

Miles grinned in triumph, propelling himself off the stone floor and retreating farther into the building. Knights poured through the hole we'd torn in the enemy ranks. The color drained

from their faces as they set about treating the marquess's wounds.

"Take His Lordship and retreat," Arthur commanded before plunging ahead between the rows of statues.

"Tina, we should get going," I said.

"Yes, sir!" the girl responded, and we gave chase.

Ashen shields flew at us from all directions, but the champion's swords made short work of every one. His speed beggared belief.

Miles barred our path, poised to do battle with his longsword and a single-edged dagger. "You'll go no farther. Be good children and stay still until the apostles' work is done."

Tina flinched, but then squeezed her rod and stood her ground.

In terms of ability, the man before us stood no chance, even with vestiges of Radiant Shield and Resurrection embedded in his flesh. Miles felt no fear of death.

"Miles!" Arthur yelled. "Do you honestly plan to split the republic in two?!"

"I won't split it, Heaven's Sword. I'll merely dispose of the Addisons…" Feeling faded from the man's eyes as they took on a crimson hue. Mana began to gather in his blades. "And offer Lalannoy to Her Holiness. For that, she will revive my late wife and son on the promised day."

"Damn you! Have you gone mad?!" Arthur roared, closing distance in the blink of an eye. At the same time, a jet-black deer launched toward him.

The whole memorial shook. Statues of the warriors and sorcerers who'd fought for independence toppled and shattered. I sheltered Tina behind me and glared at Miles. He had weathered Arthur's assault, albeit with both sword and dagger broken and his robe in tatters.

"The lost supreme spell Shining Stag, I take it? Only converted from light to darkness," I said. "I knew it. You're like Zel—or rather, you used power gleaned from him and Idris!"

"S-Sir!" Tina cried. "Something's coming!"

Arthur and I sensed it soon after. A horror was clawing its way up from below ground.

"'The Slayer of Champions,' free?" I gasped.

"It appears our time is up. Good night to you all," Miles said as he produced a talisman and vanished—a teleportation spell.

“Tina!”

The platinum-haired girl let out a little shriek as I scooped her up and raced for the entrance.

What about the knights? Good! They’ve fallen back.

“Evacuate!” I yelled, invoking wind to amplify my voice.

“Evacuate!” Arthur bellowed with me as we leapt outside. “Defend for all you’re worth!”

I turned to look back in midair just as massive icicles blasted the memorial’s solemn edifice—roof, pillars, statues, and all—high into the air before plummeting onto the workshop city. The debris not only further scarred the beautiful scenery but froze it as well. A pillar impaled the stairs, and two young women in hooded gray robes landed atop it.

“So, you’ve come, defective key. As Her Holiness foretold,” said one, who carried a long, curved sword with a single edge, its blade stained crimson. She was the Saint’s servant, Viola Kokonoe, whom Lydia and I had faced in the city of water.

“The great elemental of disaster,” murmured the other, who held Lord Addison’s stolen sword and a long spear—Third Apostle Levi Atlas, unless I missed my guess.

A swordswoman skilled enough to work with the vampiress Alicia Coalfield and a high-ranking apostle would have constituted a grave threat on their own. Unfortunately for us, a heart-stopping roar rose from the gaping pit in the remains of the memorial. Icicles shattered, fractures ran through the square, and mana lamps cracked.

Everyone except the apostle and Viola froze, friend and foe alike. I could hear ice and stone splitting clear as day. We needed to run, but where to?

Bits of roof sailed through the air, sent flying by a colossal serpent with bladed wings of ice. The ice wyrm had finally arrived. Its body gleamed a deep, dark azure. Two swords protruded from its neck, and black flames wreathed its limbs. Lightning flashed and crackled between the broken-horned creature’s wings, shattering debris with each movement it took.

Tina clung to me, quivering.

We can’t beat this.

“Ow!” I yelped as a stab of pain shot through my right wrist and ring finger. My ring and bracelet dug angrily into my skin, and while Tina was squeezing her eyes shut, the mark on her own right hand stood out boldly.

Of course. How could I forget? I've overcome certain death before! What makes this time any different?!

I set down Tina, gave her a pat on the head, and grinned at the rigid champion. "Well, Arthur? What now? The wyrm seems a whole lot more monstrous than I bargained for, and Io will cast Hermitage of Verdant Billows eventually. I can't see Ridley losing that fight, but a wave of plants will catch us in a pincer here before much longer. And don't forget Lord Addison's wounds look serious. We can expect to find our retreat cut off unless we act fast."

Silence. Then:

"You need to ask?" Lalannoy's guardian angel pointed his blades at the creature still looming over the memorial. "My name is Arthur, inherited from the founder of the Lothringian Empire, and I owe the House of Addison a debt! They saved my life when we drove our own nation to destruction! The time to do or die is here, and there's not a monster born that my Lunar Fox and Lunar Cresset can't cut down to size!"

I clapped my blond companion on the back, and we exchanged nods. The wyrm didn't seem to have shaken off the restraining force of Blaze of Ruin yet. Levi and Viola stood perfectly composed between us and it, while we were all worn out from constant fighting and I from maintaining a mana link with Stella. Breaching their defense would be a challenge, but we had no other choice. If we left this monster loose, it would wreak disaster all across the continent.

I steeled myself and stepped forward. Then a wind sprang up.

"Think better of it," a voice said. "It's beyond you, weary as you are and armed with the Shikis' imitation of the sacred swords, and neither the angel nor the Lady of Ice are fully fit. Decadent it may be, but the creature still descends from the Wyrm Divine. But worry not—a short time remains."

Was that…Rill? The "angel" must be Stella. That makes the "Lady of Ice" Tina, I suppose. Carina and Frigid Crane warned both of them when I set out for Lalannoy. In which case, what should I do tonight?

"Sir!" Tina moved in front of me and held up the back of her right hand for me to see. I had never seen the mark so distinct.

I exhaled. "Arthur," I said to the champion's back, "that plan is off the table."

"Allen? What do you mean?"

The gray-robed pair dropped into the square and started

walking toward us.

Without looking, I held out my left hand. “Tina.”

“Yes, sir!”

I linked our mana—a terribly deep connection. I felt fear. Nerves. Unease. Weakness. Then an eruption of seemingly boundless joy overpowered them all.

Come to think of it, we haven’t linked at this depth since Frigid Crane lost control in the northern capital.

Tina’s hair grew down to her waist, and snow gusted on crisp, clean air.

“Well then,” I said as we crossed our rods, “what are we waiting for?”

“Nothing!” Tina shouted, and we cast a nameless ice spell I’d been working on over the ruined memorial and the whole square around it. Ice imprisoned the wyrm before it could shake free of its fiery shackles. Frigid Crane must have resented Atra and Lia hogging the spotlight lately.

Our enemies leaned forward, bristling with animosity.

“So, they’ve linked mana,” Viola said.

“So much silver-snow,” muttered Levi.

If Lydia were here, we could take them head-on and—

“Excuse me, sir?”

Whoops. I forgot Tina can read my mind when we link at this depth.

“Arthur, Tina and I will freeze the memorial with the wyrm still in it!” I called to the blond champion. “Just buy us time!”

A stir rose from the allied lines. I knew I was asking the unreasonable, but Frigid Crane’s unexpected enthusiasm left me no thought to spare for anything but spell control.

Arthur exhaled, reversed his grip on his swords, then let out a peal of laughter. “You want me, Arthur Lothringen, to be your distraction?!” he roared. “I like it! In that case…” Paving stones shattered as he darted up to the apostle and swordswoman.

He moves like my master!

“I’ll carry out my mission with aplomb!”

Our enemies’ eyes widened as twin swords crashed against their own swords and spear, scattering sparks and smashing rubble. Now Tina and I only needed to reach the wyrm’s head, and we could avoid catching our allies in the spell. The only problem was, I couldn’t cast anything else while weaving magic so intricate.

“Sir!” Tina shouted, tying her snow-white hair ribbon to her rod. “I’ll fly us to—”

Her words cut off in a yelp as a sudden blast of wind—“the world’s gentlest tornado” might be more accurate—lifted us high above the wyrm in the blink of an eye.

Could this be Dividing Wind? What’s another great spell doing he—

“For Ellyn’s baking,” a silver-haired girl’s voice joked in my ear.

I think I owe her change.

The wyrm must have noticed us. It raised its head, jaws wide. Earth and sky trembled as a dark ice storm gathered in its gaping maw.

“Tina,” I said, “where’s our secret weapon?”

“Right here!” the girl shouted, and two icy wings unfurled behind her. Her sheer elation threatened to overwhelm me. She was every bit as direct as she’d been the day we met.

I put no stock in gods, but I believe in people and their passions. Duchess Rosa Howard! Please, please *give your daughter—give Tina—strength!*

I held out my own rod beside Tina’s and cast the new great spell of ice: Astral Frost.

The wyrm unleashed its spiraling ice storm almost simultaneously. Two magics easily capable of redrawing the map collided, shaking the city with their clash. Tina groaned through gritted teeth. I called her name, struggling to prop her up through the pain tearing me apart. We couldn’t take much more.

Then, just as all hope seemed lost, the orb atop Tina’s rod blazed with light, and the formula for Astral Frost abruptly transformed. Our gleaming azure ice gained new vigor, cleaving through the dark spiral that had been pushing it back. The great spell fueled by Frigid Crane’s mana and drawing on formulae from Twin Heavens, Carina, and the last principe struck the roaring ice wyrm full in the face, freezing the whole memorial area solid. I couldn’t even sense the creature’s mana through the ice.

I recognize that last formula from the northern capital and the Sealed Archive. Of course! Tina’s rod belonged to Duchess Rosa before—

“Sir?!” Tina cried.

I didn’t scream, but the searing pain was loosening my grip on consciousness. If I severed the link now, Tina would fall. No

matter what, I had to make it to the ground. My hazy vision faded to white—and warm arms caught me.

“Mr. Allen! Tina! Are you all right?!”

“St-Stella!” Tina exclaimed.

“Perfect timing. I truly appreciate it,” I mumbled to our angelic savior—a teary-eyed Lady Stella Howard.

We landed on the snowy plain that our great spell had made of the square without further incident. I severed our links and surveyed the battlefield while the sisters positioned themselves in front of me.

Arthur faced Viola and Levi at the center of the square. All three bore significant injuries. The friendly troops seemed to have lost all will to fight. We would be at a disadvantage if the battle continued.

In the midst of the strange standoff, a little black bird alighted on Viola’s shoulder. “Her Holiness’s prophecy still holds,” she said once it had delivered its message.

“We’ve confirmed the existence of Blaze of Ruin,” Levi added grudgingly. “Withdraw.”

The fearsome young women lowered their weapons and vanished into the petals of a black flower.

Is it…over?

The Howard sisters caught me, calling my name as the strength left my body.

This settles it: Nothing good comes of using magic beyond my ability. And we still need to—

“Arthur,” a voice burst from the champion’s communication orb, “military forces that sided with Talito have started advancing, crossing west over the river under cover of grand-scale botanical magic. Lalannoyan troops will be fighting each other soon if we stay here. Ridley has already joined us.”

“Understood,” Arthur said. “Elna, lead your whole force in retreat. I’ll bring up the rear.”

After a moment of silence, the reply came: “Yes, sir. If you die, I’ll never let you hear the end of it.”

“And there you have it, Allen.” Arthur sheathed one sword and gave us a quick, left-handed wave. “Hurry and join the retreat.”

“Arthur, after all you’ve been through, not even you can—”

Before I could finish objecting, two maids dropped onto the snowfield.

“Wait juuust a minute!” lilted Lily, who had no business

sounding so chipper after all the running around she'd just done.

"Oh, how could I blow my cover like that?" groaned her companion.

"Olly! I knew it!" Tina cried, matched by a startled "Olly?" from Stella.

"No one's supposed to recognize me. I disguised myself and everything," grumbled the maid tucked securely under Lily's arm. She had removed her spectacles, her voice sounded higher, her bangs no longer hid her eyes, and her chest had grown.

Lily set Olly down, walked over to me, laid a gentle hand on my cheek, and whispered, "I'll carry you off if you ever try anything that reckless again."

To my alarm, she sounded in deadly earnest.

Warning delivered, Lily stood tall and declared, "Leave your rearguard needs to us! Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps's number three, at your service! And with me...?"

"The Howard Maid Corps's number three, Olly Walker," came the dispirited response.

Arthur looked to me for confirmation. I closed my eyes. There was nothing I could do to stop Lily once her mind was made up.

The blond champion glanced at the troops beginning to congregate, then honored us with a deep bow. "Allen, Tina, you have my thanks for forestalling the ice wyrm's return! Now, escape the city ahead of me! We'll talk again later!"

Epilogue

“Really, Ms. Caren? Y-You got a letter from Mr. Allen?”

“Yes, Lydia delivered it this morning. It’s dated last Earthday, so he must have written it the day after he arrived in the eastern capital,” I replied. “Knowing my brother, he probably wrote to you too. Check for mail when you get back to the Howard mansion.”

Early afternoon in the royal capital found me enjoying tea in the café with the sky-blue roof, sitting across the table from Ellie Walker, my underclassman, friend, and about one-third student. I’d invited her to join me once in a while, and here we were.

I could see my white shirt and pink cardigan reflected in the window. The warm, cozy café made a welcome contrast to the blustery winter day outside, and the quality of the tea and tarts didn’t hurt either.

“I can’t wait.” Ellie bashfully pressed her hands to her cheeks, and her blonde hair, loosely tied with a white ribbon, caught the light. Her cute pale-green sweater and striped skirt suited her perfectly, although she’d acted embarrassed when I’d told her so. Ellie was nothing if not precious.

The Royal Academy had canceled classes following the apostles’ attack on the city, but I couldn’t spend the time with my brother Allen—he had gone to Lalannoy. Ellie’s mistress, Lady Tina Howard, and her sister, my best friend Stella, had gone with him. Lady Lily Leinster had actually been appointed our envoy to the republic.

Should I have gone with them as far as the eastern capital?

“Still, can you believe Lydia?” I said. “I know school is on break, but really. ‘Allen left Atra with you, didn’t he? And with Stella gone too, you’re rooming alone. Come stay at our house until they get back.’”

Lady Lydia Leinster had breathtaking good looks and a mind Allen called “brilliant.” From my perspective, that made her my greatest rival for his affections, although that didn’t stop us from going to look at clothes and doing each other’s hair on our days off.

I scooped a bite of cheese tart into my mouth, savoring the

perfect balance of sweetness. “I feel bad for all the Leinster maids who look after us. I mean, who am I to be waited on like that? I’m glad they give Atra so much love, though.”

Atra was too adorable for words. I would have brought her with me today if she hadn’t been sleeping so soundly that I’d opted to leave her with the Leinster maids instead. I would need to buy them something on my way back.

“E-Excuse me, Ms. Caren.”

“Yes?” I said languidly.

Ellie fidgeted. “W-Would you mind if I stayed at the Leinster house with you tonight?”

My hand stopped in surprise. As a guest myself, I felt hard-pressed to answer.

“You see,” my younger friend continued, twiddling her fingers, “L-Lady Tina and Lady Lynne are both out of the city, and so is Lady Stella, and I don’t get many chances to see you or Lady Lydia, so I’ve been feeling l-lonely.”

I can see why she’s developed a secret following at school.

I sipped my tea and glanced out the window. Real winter was near, to judge by the growing number of coats among the passersby.

“Lynne’s in the southern capital with Teto and her team, isn’t she?” I said.

“Yes, she left a week ago. She phoned me yesterday evening. It sounds like people are rushing to the southern capital after that triple alliance with the empire and the league went through so suddenly the other day.”

Allen sure had a lot on his plate between tutoring the girls, working at Allen & Co., and most recently, serving as Her Royal Highness’s personal investigator. No wonder Lydia was taking steps to reduce his workload. I fully approved. Sending the younger Leinster daughter, Lynne, and Allen’s old university friend, Teto Tijerina, to investigate the obscure cult of the Great Moon was one aspect of her plan.

“Maybe you should have gone with them,” I suggested. “Lynne would have loved to have you.”

“I need to open the Sealed Archive. I promised Mr. Allen,” Ellie said seriously, her face composed. She would be a beauty someday.

Is this more of Allen’s influence?

“I’m glad you stayed,” I admitted, raising my teacup. “I’d have

a hard time finding anyone to come here with if it was only me and Felicia the workaholic."

"Th-Thank you for saying so. That makes me happy," Ellie said. "So, um, Ms. Caren…"

I pressed a finger to her forehead, just like Allen used to do to me when we were kids and I wanted a favor. "Let's make time for more chats like this. Feel free to air any complaints you have against Allen. I bet I can curb some of his bad habits."

"Y-Yes'm! I'd love to!" Ellie hesitated. "B-But what complaints could I have against Mr. Allen?"

"You tell me. I'll pass them on next time I see him."

"Oh, j-jeez! I've had it with you, Ms. Caren." Ellie turned her head aside, blushing furiously. She sounded—and acted—exactly like Tina.

It's nice to spend some quiet time like this once in a whi—

The bell over the entrance chimed as the door swung open. In stepped a petite maid with chestnut-brown hair. A little girl with long light-gray hair, armored against the cold in a heavy cloak, Allen's scarf, and a wool hat, followed, alongside a black-haired maid in spectacles.

"Anna?" I said.

"Romy and Atra?" added Ellie.

What could bring the Leinsters' head maid and her second-in-command here?

While I wondered, Atra spotted us and trotted over. The owner standing behind the counter and a familiar waitress both smiled as the little girl clambered onto my lap, wagging her tail. She felt chilly.

Anna and Romy joined us while I removed Atra's hat and scarf. I didn't know if I had ever seen them so tense.

"Miss Caren, Miss Walker, we beg your pardon for interrupting your pleasant conversation," the head maid began. "We have an emergency. Please, lend me your ears."

"An emergency?" Ellie and I echoed, looking at each other. Then we leaned closer—and got a shock.

"The Lalannoyan capital is in chaos. We believe that Mr. Allen and his companions have fled to its outskirts." Having delivered her whispered message, Anna stroked Atra's head and added, "I relayed the same report to Lady Lydia earlier. She replied that 'if Atra and Lia don't seem worried, we shouldn't be either. But get ready for anything.'"

What on earth is happening in Lalannoy?!

Ellie and I pressed our hands to our hearts, thinking of my brother and our friends in the distant republic. A strong gust rattled the café and set the bell above the entrance ringing.

✽

"What's wrong? Is that the best a Leinster maid can do?" gloated Olly Walker, the Howards' pale-blonde undercover agent.

"Y-You haven't won yet! I can still turn this a— Ah!" Lily's piteous wail filled the makeshift kitchen in the courtyard as vegetables from our food stores fell under the knife at a furious pace.

Did I only imagine you two guarding our retreat three days ago?

Despite my disbelief, I rose to join in the work…

"Not you, sir."

"Stay in your seat, Mr. Allen."

…only to be reprimanded by the girls who had just returned from a conference with Lord Addison and Arthur.

"Really, Tina?" I sighed. "And you too, Stella?"

We had made our temporary home in the abandoned old capital just west of the city of craft. Troops loyal to the Bright Wings Party were massing for a counterattack in this place where the ice wyrm had devoured the best of Lalannoyans and Yustinians alike. Perhaps the intensity of its mana had blighted the land. That would explain why plants had done so little to reclaim the ruins.

Tina sat beside me and immediately jabbed her finger in my direction. "What you need right now is rest! Did you forget that the amulet in your watch broke from what you did?!"

"But you see—"

"No excuses!"

I couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"Mr. Allen, I'll be quite cross if you collapse again," added Stella, "our angel" and "our saint," as her growing following among the troops had taken to calling her.

Three days earlier, with Frigid Crane's help, Tina and I had succeeded in casting a new great spell to freeze the ice wyrm before it could fully revive. But I had been absolutely useless in the harried retreat that followed, powerless to stop either the church inquisitors who hounded us or Io's sweeping botanical

magic. Meanwhile, Tina and Stella seemed right as rain despite being on the other end of our mana link. I wished they would at least let me help cook now that the pain had finally faded.

"No!" they repeated in unison.

"Don't even think about it, Allen," Lily chimed in.

"Fine," I sighed. They were all against me. "What did Arthur and Ridley have to say?" I asked, propping my elbows on the table.

"Arthur said, 'Rest!'" Tina replied. "And Elna agreed it would be the best thing for you."

"Artie, Isolde, and Ridley had other business and didn't attend," Stella added. "I healed Lord Addison's wounds, for what it's worth."

"But you couldn't cure his spirit," I finished for her. A brother's betrayal must have hurt, even if they didn't share blood, and we still had no idea who had told the apostles the secret of Floral Heaven's seal and the sword North Star. I could imagine the stress the marquess was under.

I produced an envelope and handed it to the sisters.

"Sir?"

"What's this, Mr. Allen?"

"I put together a detailed report on what's happened here," I explained. "I'd like you to send it back to the royal capital postha — U-Um, Tina, Stella? Wh-What do you look so fierce for?"

The Howard sisters reached out and pinched my cheeks in silence.

"Really, sir?" Tina said slowly, the unruly lock of hair rising in wrath. "Do you even know what the word 'rest' *means*?"

"If you're going to work yourself until you collapse," Stella grumbled, "you might as well link with me as deeply as you did with—"

"Stella?! You pick *now* to stab me in the back?!"

"Not in the least, Tina. I'm merely insisting on my rights."

It's always nice to see sisters get along so well. They are *getting along, aren't they?*

A breeze blew past, carrying a white cat's faint mew.

They're here, then.

I stood up, earning instant reproofs from three noblewomen.

"Sir!"

"Sit down, Mr. Allen."

"Really, Allen?"

“I’m just taking a walk to clear my head. I’ll be right back,” I told them.

All the while, Olly’s knife never slackened its pace. The Leinsters had already lost the battle of the head maids, and I didn’t like their chances in the clash of the number threes.

I walked the ancient streets, exchanging a few words with Lalannoyan knights and soldiers whose acquaintance I’d made over the past three days as well as with a dour-faced Minié. They were all friendly enough, although I’d had more than my fill of being hailed as a savior. I strolled through the abandoned city until a white cat crossed an alleyway ahead of me. I followed it.

I found the person I’d expected sitting on a broken wall. She wore a midnight-purple kimono with a single-edged dagger in her sash and carried a paper parasol.

“Hello, Rill,” I said. “Thank you for your help back there. I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

“Don’t mention it. I told you it was payment for baking.”

The silver-haired girl waved. A wind blew, cutting off all outside sound. I couldn’t sense anything, not even mana. Having communed with Frigid Crane on a profound level and woven a great spell myself, I felt certain: She wielded Dividing Wind, and with a potency beyond anything we’d encountered.

Kifune mounted my right shoulder.

“So, what can I do for you?” I asked, petting the white cat. “If I’m gone too long—”

“The angel and the Lady of Ice will give you a scolding? How onerous for you. You have two weeks.” Rill crossed her legs and flapped her hand. I didn’t need to ask her meaning—we had two weeks until the ice melted and the ice wyrm regained its full strength.

Even less time than I thought.

“I did the best I could,” I said. “If you know a way to slay that creature, I’d love to hear it.”

“Very well. For a price.” Rill grinned.

Kifune’s weight vanished from my shoulder. Before I knew it, the cat had joined her on the wall.

“Well, you see how it is.” The girl stood, swishing her silver hair aside. “Surely you’ve caught on by now, but I serve as Dark Lord out west.”

I didn’t flinch. I couldn’t. A person can only take so much.

“Fear not. I take no interest in mortal squabbles,” said an icy voice from behind me. I couldn’t begin to tell how Rill had moved, but I felt keenly aware that if she wanted me dead, I already would be. “That said…”

Silver hair fluttered before my eyes. The beautiful Dark Lord clapped her hands. “What lies beyond that pitiable wyrm is another matter,” she continued. “I cannot overlook it.”

“*Beyond* it?” I repeated slowly. The wyrm had ended a war, and with it rested Blaze of Ruin, along with an altar supposedly built by the founder of the Wainwright dynasty and the sacred swords of the Lothringens. What more could there be?

“People never change,” the girl murmured sadly, “no matter how many centuries or millennia pass. Their greed merely takes different forms.”

I couldn’t answer. I had nothing to say.

The wind ruffled Rill’s long silver hair and her black and azure ribbons as she scooped up the cat in her arms and, with a straight face, made her most shocking declaration yet.

“Allen, if you manage to put paid to this trouble, would you care to take my place as Dark Lord? Twin Heavens rebuffed me five hundred years ago. Two hundred years ago, Shooting Star followed suit, and the Silver Wolf a century later. I’m at my wits’ end. If I had my own way, I would have gone to join the man I loved long ago.”

✽

When did I first think there was something strange about her? Five years ago, when her foster mother Ashera gave birth to a Talito child and passed away? Or later, after Alf contracted an incurable illness? I wasn’t sure. Small and talentless despite my Addison blood, I couldn’t make sense of anything. But…

“I…I need to get to the bottom of this, if nothing else,” I muttered, squeezing my metal staff to stifle my terror in the dark night.

My fiancée, Isolde Talito, walked the old capital’s underground passageways ahead of me. She had slipped out of our tent without so much as a cloak. Her white nightgown made her easy to spot. But what was she doing here? I already had my suspicions.

The House of Addison had watched over the ice wyrm in the

buried mausoleum for generations. Only North Star could open the way to it, and only a select few knew the secret of the sword. And yet, those freaks who called themselves apostles had gone after it from the start. So, who knew the secret? No one but my father, Lord Arthur, Mr. Allen, the three ducal daughters, myself...and Isolde Talito, whom I'd told that night.

I'd wanted to become a legend. I'd idolized those who had. But the more I'd learned and the more I'd trained, the less substantial my dream had seemed. I couldn't become Heaven's Sword or that young man from the royal capital who had imprisoned the ice wyrm. But that didn't mean I'd forgotten my Addison duty to keep Lalannoy safe. I would bring the traitor to justice, even if they turned out to be my dear Isolde.

I shadowed her along the passage, careful to avoid detection. Then the girl vanished down a side tunnel. I hurried to catch up—and stumbled into better visibility. An eerie red moon shone down on a circular hall where black flowers bloomed. A ring of half-crumbled stone pillars gave off a faint light. The ceiling seemed to have fallen completely away.

A chapel?

"Oh, my darling Artie. I knew you would come for me."

My spine turned to ice as I looked up in fear. A girl in her nightgown—Isolde Talito—stared down at me from her seat on a broken pillar. Her eyes had turned crimson, and I knew what they meant. I recognized them from the elder apostle our champions had slain.

"Isolde?" I stammered. "How? Why would you become a vampire?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" The girl stood—and vanished. Her voice whispered in my ear, "I joined Her Holiness to live forever with you. You loved me when even my father cast me aside. I'd do anything for an eternity together. Even"—a pale, sickly hand slid toward my throat—"betray my country and my father."

"Artie, jump back!"

My body obeyed the dispassionate order as my daily training took over. I glimpsed fire, then a girl's severed hand turning to ash as it arced through the air. A red-haired nobleman stood before me, a cloak around his shoulders and the sword Devoted Blossom blazing in his hand.

"Lord Ridley!" I cried.

"You little fool. There are right ways to take responsibility, and

this isn't one of them," he snapped. He must have followed me out of the encampment.

"Really, my lord Swordmaster," Isolde sneered, looking at her missing hand, "how could you turn your blade on a poor, defenseless girl?"

"Are those your last words? Now die!"

"Lord Ridley, wai—"

The child of dukes ignored my pleas and darted forward, low to the ground. A lightning-quick slash shot toward Isolde's fair, slender neck before she could begin to react…and a clear note rang out as a crimson arc split Devoted Blossom clean in two.

Lord Ridley and I fell speechless. Half of the flaming blade landed point-first in the ground, and its fire died.

Meanwhile, Isolde leapt lightly back onto the broken pillar and flicked her right arm. Her severed hand regrew in the blink of an eye as a flippant voice came from above us.

"Give me a break. I thought we were only here to collect the Addison kid."

From a black flower emerged a tall, bespectacled man in the white robes of a church apostle. He looked young, with white hair and crimson eyes. I saw a single-edged dagger in his hand as he landed on a pillar.

A distinctive-looking man with mana I can't begin to fathom. And he's an apostle.

"Plans have changed," Isolde said. "Infiltration isn't easy."

"I can understand that," the man replied, "but I have some questions about a *cadet* bossing around a full apostle."

Their conversation turned my suspicions to terror. This wasn't the girl I knew.

"Zelbert Régnier, how low you've fallen!" Ridley swished his broken sword through the air, igniting a burst of hellfire.

"Ridley Leinster, the Swordmaster." The apostle sadly adjusted his glasses with his left hand. "Fancy meeting you here. Sorry. I don't have anything against you, but I need you to die."

"Oh, Artie! Artie, my darling!"

The vampires unfurled hideous wings of blood as the crimson blades they conjured filled the air. A tragedy began beneath the bloodred moon.



Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been four months. That's right: four months. I got the new volume out on time. It wasn't easy.

Still, I never dreamed I'd make it to volume fifteen. I couldn't have done it if all of you hadn't kept reading. Thank you. I'll never stop giving my all, so I hope you'll stick with me to the end.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although I've made revisions.

Now, on to the story. First of all, I had no choice but to abandon my original outline back in volume thirteen. Who forced my hand? Who but Saint Wolf? I'd originally envisioned Tina and Ellie going to Lalannoy as a mistress-and-maid tag team. But Saint Wolf had other ideas, and after Carina and a certain someone else stole her thunder in volume fourteen, she wasn't going to take no for an answer! I offered compromises, but she rejected them until, in the end, I gave my unconditional surrender and rewrote the plot. (As for the under-duke's daughter... Well, she's always been that way.) I dread to see what she'll get up to in volume sixteen.

Shifting gears, it's announcement time! The first three volumes of *Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars* are now on sale. I hope you'll also check out the manga adaptation starting in *Monthly Dragon Age* this fall (2023).

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

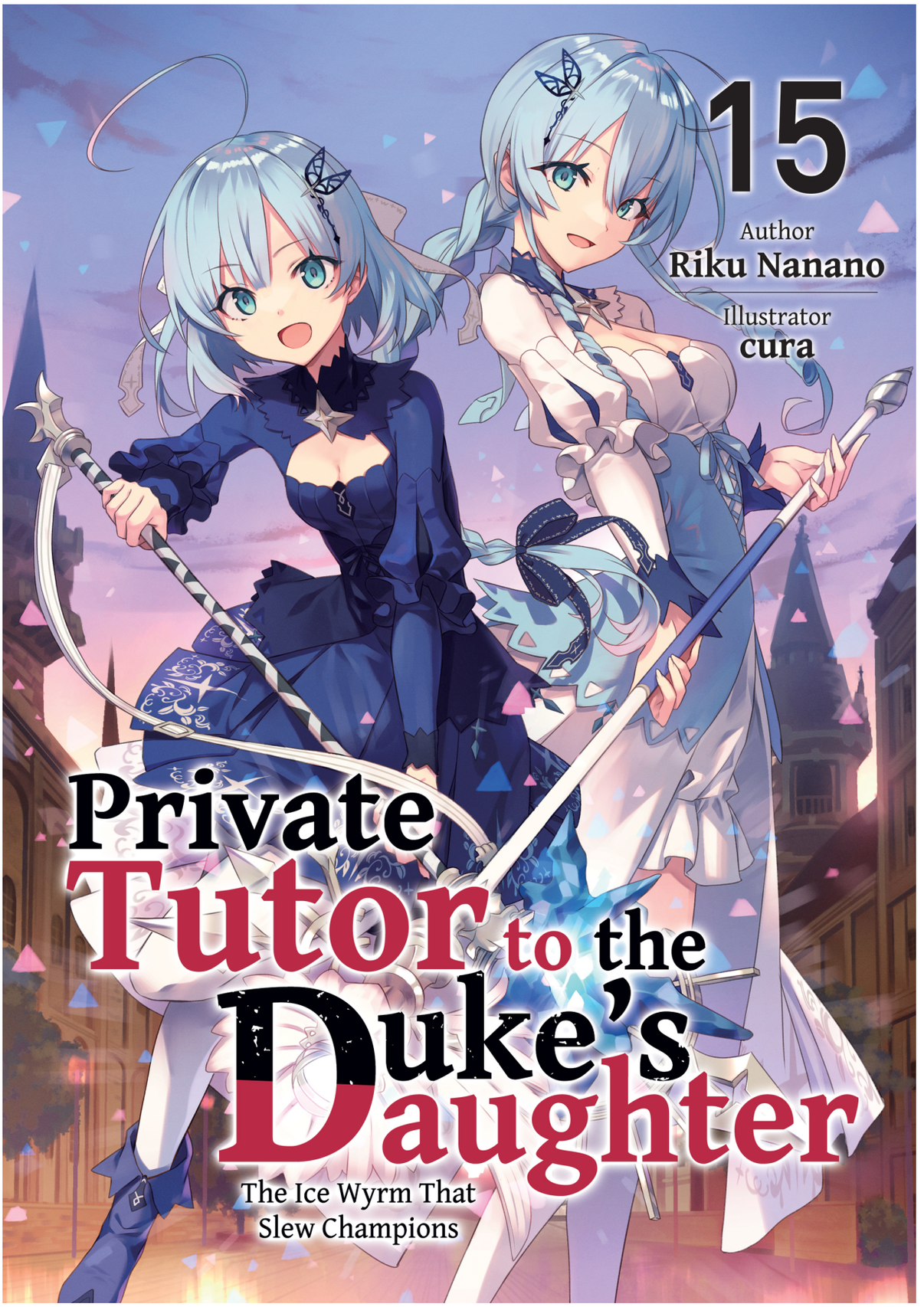
My current editor. I'm truly, truly grateful.

My new editor. I'm sure I'll cause a lot of trouble for you, but I hope we'll make a good team.

The illustrator, cura. I'm so sorry for making so many demands every volume. You hit it out of the park again!

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—what's scarier than a wyrm?

Riku Nanano


15
Author
Riku Nanano
Illustrator
cura
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The Ice Wyrm That Slew Champions


"I have been appointed envoy to Lalannoy. I hope we'll enjoy a fruitful partnership!"
Fashion-forward maid
Lily
The Leinster Maid Corps's number three is extremely quick-witted despite her usual carefree attitude, but it's in her guise as a noblewoman that she's been named diplomatic envoy to Lalannoy!
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
15


Duke Leinster'seldest daughter
Lydia
"B-But you still didn't have to come to stay at Allen's place on—"
"Oh? I didn't think you'd make it back this early."
Allen's younger sister
Caren
"Caren no want together with Lydia and Lia?"
The great elemental Blazing Qilin
Lia
"♪"
The great elemental Thunder Fox
Atra


“Mr. Allen!”
“Sir!”
“Catch us!”
White Saint
Stella
Tina's elder sister is the president of the Royal Academy student council and the future Duchess Howard. She resolves to accompany Allen to Lalannoy, determined to aid him with her newfound angelic power.
Duke Howard's second daughter
Tina
Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen's tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.


Tina was every bit as direct as she'd been the day we met. I held out my own rod beside hers and cast the new great spell of ice: Astral Frost.
Private tutor to the dukes' daughters
Allen
A young man who fails to appreciate his own unrivaled control of magic. Dispatched to Lalannoy, he finds himself caught up in yet another disaster.
"Tina, where's our secret weapon?"
"Right here!"

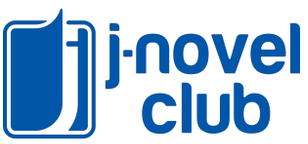


"Today, I'm at your side, and I won't give that up for anyone!"

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Epilogue
Afterword

CONTENTS

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter



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by Riku Nanano

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