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Riku Nanano
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The False God That Deceived the World


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“Work hard, now, Allen. Keep fighting your way to *us*.”



She who reigns over the church

The False Saint

She shows great kindness, and her miracles have saved many people in need. In reality, she belongs to the fox clan, concealing her ears and tail with magic. She sneers at the church’s faithful adherents and despises the world. Her obsession with Allen knows no bounds.

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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.

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.

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'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.

Arthur Lothringen — Heaven's Sword. Champion of Lalannoy.

Ridley Leinster — The Swordmaster. Lily's elder brother.

Rill — Dark Lord of the west.

Prologue

"Apostle Edith, tomorrow's security detail for your approval!"

"The perimeter is thin. Add more detection specialists."

"Lady Apostle, command us to march on Lalannoy!"

"Await orders. The Knights of the Holy Spirit have other important duties."

I answered each knight in turn as I made my way along the unadorned corridors of an old fortress. I was the least of the apostles, yet even in this holy citadel, the beating heart of the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit, the calls on my time never ceased. Still, why was I here if not to ease Her Holiness's burden in any way I could? She had been in residence for several days now, and she had spent them healing multitudes. Under my hood, my beast ears rose proudly of their own accord.

"Come no farther," I said, raising my left hand as I made for the stone passage to the church. "I will hear the rest later. Each do as best you can."

"Yes, ma'am!" the knights chorused. Then they began to depart.

I laid a hand on the windowpane. A flash raced across the sky, presaging the deafening roar of thunder.

I felt some sympathy with the knights' petitions. I could set aside the greater apostles, whose prowess set them in a class apart, but Fifth Apostle Ibush-nur and Sixth Apostle Ifur had joined in the operation in Lalannoy. I could hold my own against either of them in battle. Should I entreat Her Holiness and Prime Apostle Aster once more to let me join them?

"Apostle Edith," a boy called from behind me, snapping me out of my reverie. He couldn't hide the nervous tremor in his voice.

I took my hand off the window and turned to find a rat-clan boy in a hooded gray robe prostrating himself. "Apostle Cadet Ilaios. I was given to understand that the effects of the ritual had left you

bedridden.”

His name had been Kume before his initiation, when he had lived among the beastfolk of the Wainwright Kingdom’s eastern capital. His father, Chieftain Yono, had likewise devoted himself to Her Holiness and performed a number of services for our cause during the Algren rebellion. Ilaios was unremarkable in terms of talent as well as mana, but his value lay elsewhere.

“All is well. It matters little what pain the likes of me feels. You may wish to see this,” he said, holding out a letter without raising his head. The Church of the Holy Spirit’s long-standing disdain for beastfolk probably explained his self-effacing manner.

I took the letter and quickly scanned it. It was from Yono and Nishiki, the ape-clan chieftain, who had gone ahead of us to Tabatha, the workshop city, capital of the Lalannoy Republic. Fourth Apostle Zelbert Régnier had signed the report as well. It gave a detailed account.

Arthur “Heaven’s Sword” Lothringen, Ridley “the Swordmaster” Leinster, and the defective key—the loathsome Allen of the wolf clan—had fought Ibush-nur and Ifur on Tabatha’s great bridge. My fellow apostles had deployed Gerard Wainwright, imbued with not only four great spells—Resurrection, Radiant Shield, Watery Grave, and Falling Star—but also a portion of the monstrous Stinging Sea, only for him to fail. Almost simultaneously, Her Holiness’s servant Viola Kokonoe and Third Apostle Levi Atlas had led a separate force to assault the mansion of Marquess Addison, whose house had ruled Lalannoy for the past century. They had seized the enchanted sword North Star, the key to an impregnable seal...and revived the ice wyrm called the “Slayer of Champions.”

The first phase of our plan had succeeded.

“The prime apostle deserves his reputation as a tactician,” I said, neatly folding the letter and slipping it into my robe. “Not even Oswald Addison could have suspected Isolde Talito’s newfound faith, or he would never have taken her into his protection. He’s fallen back to the old capital his people abandoned a hundred years ago to prepare a counterattack, but that’s all according to plan.”

“Yes,” Ilaios replied, “only Prime Apostle Aster said that the

kingdom's response bears watching."

I grimaced, recalling the pretty face of Stella Howard and our confrontation in the northern region of Rostlay.

Damn her to hell!

I had heard that she numbered among the defective key's students, but I had never imagined a duke's daughter would deign to accompany him to Lalannoy, let alone wield purifying spells to obstruct the taboo Reverie of Restless Revenants. I would have put an end to her meddling if I had been there.

And to make matters worse, the revived ice wyrm had been "frozen by an unidentified ice spell, caster or casters unknown." The creature's invulnerability to ice was legendary, and it was supposed to have devoured the best of both sides in the war of independence a hundred years earlier. What could have frozen it? What had happened in Lalannoy?

"I will deliver the message to Her Holiness," I said, still grappling with my doubts. "Ilaios, accompany me."

A gray-haired and bearded knight stood at attention before the church's imposing entrance. Dale the Dauntless, commander of the Knights of the Holy Spirit, held Her Holiness in reverence. We could trust the devout old man. The other knights with him carried themselves in a way that marked them as handpicked elites. I saw the lady knight whom Her Holiness had so recently healed among them.

The old knight noticed us first. "Apostle Edith," he called, raising his eyebrows.

"We bear an urgent message for Her Holiness," I said. "Has she finished tending to the sick and wounded?"

"Yes, just now. She has devoted herself to silent prayer," he answered softly as the other knights parted to form ranks on either side of the sturdy door.

"Admit no one until we depart," I said while they began to lift the wards.

"Yes, Apostle Edith!" the knights chorused in ardent unison.

None of these people knew I was a half-demon former combat

slave. How would they look when they learned the truth about the apostle they held in such high honor, I wondered idly, though I said only, “I appreciate your order’s devotion.”

I opened the door just enough to pass through, and sudden brightness dazzled my eyes. The sight of a blessed girl kneeling in the light made me stand straighter. I motioned for Ilaios to close the door, then dropped to one knee myself.

“Your Holiness, I beg forgiveness for interrupting your prayers.”

Our savior took notice and turned, the hood of her pristine white robe shading her face. “Edith.” She approached, gracing me with the world’s most beautiful smile.

“Y-Your Holiness?!” I blurted, my cheeks burning as her fair fingers brushed them. I couldn’t suppress a tremble.

“You’re making a scary face again,” she said, chuckling at my disgraceful reaction. “Won’t you smile for me?”

I was no match for her.

“O-Of course,” I mumbled, relieved and lonely as her hand left my cheek. To mask the feelings beyond my station, I dropped my gaze and proffered the letter. “The latest report from Lalannoy for your consideration.”

“Thank you. From your expression, I take it not all the news is good.” Her Holiness sounded ever so slightly troubled. I mentally cursed Stella Howard. Nothing would stop me from killing her when next we met.

I felt a warmth on my left shoulder and jerked my head up to find Her Holiness’s hand resting on it. “I’m certain everything will work out,” she said, “although I do so hate to make you apostles shoulder all the burden.”

“Don’t blame your—”

In my agitation, my hood slipped back to reveal my ears and horns. I hung my head, overcome by shame. What had I been thinking? Who was I to behave so in Her Holiness’s presence?

“I...I beg your pardon,” I said. “But you have no reason to reproach yourself. To serve Your Holiness is our honor—our everything.”

The clouds parted, and warm sunlight filtered into the church. I sensed Her Holiness crouch down.

"Thank you, Edith."

I looked up, and she took my hand. The long, lovely ashen hair spilling out the sides of her hood glistened in the light.

"I can't do much," she said, "but your words give me the courage to keep doing all I can."

"You're too kind," I stammered as the beginnings of tears blurred my vision.

What I wouldn't do to hear those words!

Her Holiness stood and turned to the rat-clan boy still prostrating himself before the entrance. "You must be the cadet in Aster's care. Ilaios, I believe?"

"Y-Your Holiness deigns to remember the likes of me by name?" came the stunned reply.

"I try not to forget anyone I meet—a lesson from my childhood. Thank you for delivering this report." She raised her left hand, and a gentle glow enveloped Ilaios.

"The pain is...gone?" the cadet murmured, eyes open as wide as they would go beneath his hood. The pontiff's people must have explained ad nauseam that nothing could cure the pain from a great spell's brand.

The miracle accomplished, Her Holiness clutched her pendant and said, "Housing a great spell within oneself is a grueling task, and you will eventually take in five: Resurrection, Radiant Shield, Watery Grave, Falling Star, and Blaze of Ruin, obtained in Lalannoy. Let me do what little I can to ease your way."

I had to admire our last "repository," Gerard Wainwright. I doubted that we could have branded the apostle cadets and some of the knights with vestiges of Resurrection and Radiant Shield so efficiently without him. Ilaios possessed an affinity even greater than Gerard's.

"I will not forget your devotion," Her Holiness continued. "You forsook your home in the eastern capital to join the faithful. Please, continue to lend us your aid. And please convey my gratitude to Yono and Nishiki as well."

The dumbfounded cadet gave no answer.

"Ilaios," I said icily. If the ever-loyal Viola or Levi had been present, his head would already have left his shoulders.

"O-Of course!" Ilaios snapped out of his daze and pressed his head to the floor, trembling. "F-For Your Holiness the Saint!"

For the briefest instant, I thought I glimpsed terror in his eyes. Puzzling, but Her Holiness turned to me before I could think more of it.

"Edith, would you join me in prayer? Every little good helps. Ilaios, please deliver a package and a present to the city of craft for me. See that Viola, Levi...and Régnier, as well as our other new cadet, receive them."

*

"Mm-hmm. I see. And?" I murmured cheerily to myself, cocking my head to one side as I read the letter in the moonlit church. The demon-wolf girl was nowhere in sight—she had just left after a tearful litany of "Please, Your Holiness, I hope you'll take your rest."

"Edith is cute as a button and stubborn as a mule, but that only makes her more adora*ble*," I sang, making up the words, as I tossed the report onto a chair. A large mirror showed my long ashen beast ears and tail. My pendant bounced as I spun, looking myself over.

"No surprises thus far," I said. "Would you agree, Aster?"

A black flower bloomed in midair.

"Naturally," an emotionless man's voice replied.

Out of the teleportation circle emerged three people. My azure-eyed accomplice, Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield, the Sage, kept his face unreadable. The vampiress Alicia "Crescent Moon" Coalfield, marked by her long tarnished-silver hair and brighter silver eyes, wore a happy grin. Second Apostle Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield, a slightly built demisprite, white-haired and golden-eyed, looked annoyed that he had been recalled from Lalannoy to perform the long-distance teleport. Their varied expressions kept me entertained just looking at them.

Aster wore his white robe with azure trim and carried his wooden

staff. He struck the floor with its butt and said, "I anticipated that Addison would make overtures to the kingdom, and that Heaven's Sword and the Swordmaster would stand in our way. I have also made progress toward retrieving Blaze of Ruin using beastfolk versed in botanical wards."

"And did you anticipate *his* interference?" I cut in. What did I care about the trivialities? The rat and ape's report had contained only one detail that mattered: An unknown sorcerer had frozen the ice-proof wyrm. No one in the world could do that. No one but Allen.

"My plan has no flaws," Aster said after a brief silence. "Mobilizing all our beastfolk will keep the delay within acceptable limits. Io."

"Heaven's Sword and the Swordmaster both surpassed expectations," the diminutive sorcerer said, touching the brim of his white witch hat adorned with an eight-petaled black flower and sweeping aside a cloak of the same pale hue. His metal staff floated, twirling occasionally as he continued, "I can't gauge Heaven's Sage, since I didn't fight her, but no lesser apostle would stand a chance. As for the defective key, in terms of simple spell control, he ranks with the best on the continent. We didn't plan for the Howard sisters or the Leinster girl, but we shouldn't take them lightly either."

Io didn't let his ego cloud his analysis, for all that he looked down his nose at everyone. The blood of the coolheaded sprites who had once dominated the world must have run unusually strong in him.

"Hm... You make it sound quite entertaining. Perhaps little Viola and company could use some help?" Alicia chimed in, twirling her dark parasol. Her jet-black hat and dress looked ravishing. I had a soft spot for the *artificial* vampiress, owing in no small part to her high opinion of Allen. She must have been a dear while she was alive. Of course, her good heart was just what had led her into Aster's clutches after she'd lost her older sister at Blood River.

"I've had word from my agents. The Hero shows signs of activity in the imperial capital," said the ambitious prime apostle, azure eyes narrowing. "She's learned of the ice wyrm as planned. The foremost of the eight endlessly vexing grand dukes will leave the city before much longer."

Aster still held a grudge over his fourteen-year-old blunder. He

had been this way for as long as I'd known him—confident to a fault. That unshakable faith in himself made him ever so easy to hoodwink. Even my teacher had said so.

"But what if the ice wyrm is slain before it fully revives?" I asked, although I was worried about no such thing. My voice gave no hint of the scorn in my heart.

"I've left Régnier to oversee matters," Aster countered. "Even if, by some miracle, your fear comes to pass, the substitute sacrifice will ensure the creation of a champion as I planned. Fortunately, we have more mediating agents than we'll ever need."

How predictable could he be? I chuckled to myself. *As if any old* man-made *wyrm could be a match for my Allen. Still, it's a shame about the rat and the ape. I was hoping to finish them off myself one of these days.*

Io harrumphed and shrugged.

"Dear me," Alicia murmured. "What a shame."

The prime apostle started to pace the church—his habit while sorting out his thoughts. "The troublesome Hero will fixate on the wyrm, as will the flower and water dragons, still extant in the west of the continent. When they take the bait, they'll collide with our champion...while we raid the unsuspecting Yustinian capital and claim the forbidden Alvern tomes I failed to seize more than a decade ago. I do hate to abandon the imperial capital's altar. That said..."

The Hero, Sage, Knight, and Saint were supposed to have led the creation of seven ritual altars scattered all over the world in the distant past. Most, however, were now dead—unusable.

Aster struck his staff on the floor again, as if to dispel his doubts. "Tradition has it that malefic magics from the age of gods were worked there to create the ice wyrm, and that the black gate in its depths has remained inaccessible ever since. The then Lord Addison died of the curse following his war of independence. We should content ourselves with Blaze of Ruin, the Gemstone's floral orb, and our new 'repository.'" Aster underscored the point with a theatrical sweep of his arm. He might have seemed his usual self at first glance, but I could spot the elation in his azure eyes. "Once we

control the Shikis' legacy, the final altar, we will have all we need. The Alvern tome will give us the key!"

My accomplice was clever, vicious, and willing to use any means to achieve his ends.

"Freeing the ice wyrm already gives us the upper hand in the grand scheme of things," Io said, grasping his staff and swishing it to one side as he hovered. "What do we have to fear, barring the black dragon? It could upset the whole board, but it hasn't shown itself since its attack on the royal capital."

"Why, Aster, how positively wicked! Though it sounds like such fun for me." Alicia snickered, batting her silver eyelashes. The previous Hero, Aurelia Alvern, and her family dwelled in the imperial capital. The old Yustinian grand marshal, the "Castle Breaker," might join the fray as well. All formidable opponents.

"I leave matters here in your hands. Bring good tidings," Aster ordered me, not even bothering to look over his shoulder as he strode toward the black flower of the teleportation circle. "Let no one touch the black gate at the heart of the altar. It could well doom the planet."

"Of course!" I lilted. "Have a safe trip!"

The trio vanished, leaving me alone in the church.

"Don't touch the black gate"? Aster, you may be clever, but you're no judge of people. Not as long as I've known you, anyway. I'd let Allen use me all he liked, but I wouldn't be caught dead as your *cat's-paw.*

While I sneered, the shadow at my feet swelled and howled. Four massive limbs, razor-sharp claws and fangs, three bat-like wings... My little friend seemed as well as ever.

"Listen," I said, taking a chair and kicking my feet, "I need a favor. Would you lend me a hand?"

Spears of darkness immediately launched toward me, but the whole barrage turned to crumbling rock. Stone Serpent had intercepted the missiles. Its mark appeared on my hands as I clapped, giggled, and sang, "That wasn't very nice. *We're* in a rotten mood, you know? Didn't you hear how he treated us like fools?"

We'll be quick to kill right now. Even you.

Black brambles overran the undulating shadow. Soon, it lay still. Despite a rambunctious temperament, my little friend could see reason.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" I swayed, hands on my cheeks. "Oh, how I long to see Allen! I wish I could see him this instant! I can't wait for him to get my 'present'!" I giggled. "I just know he'll love it."

Aster had lived a long time. He had brains, and brawn as well. But he was still only mortal. He could never know everything.

What—and who—is each altar for? Dragons in the center. The World Tree in the city of water. Angels and devils in the royal capital. So, what about the city of craft? A poor, pitiful wyrm? Hardly!

"Work hard, now, Allen," I murmured, clutching my pendant as I gazed up through the skylight at the moon and stars. "Keep fighting your way to *us*. If you let *her* get the better of you... Well, I guess the world will end then and there."

My ecstatic whisper faded into the silent darkness.

Chapter 1

I, Lynne Leinster, second daughter of Duke and Duchess Leinster, sprinted up the interminable slope to my hilltop destination, letting the raw force of the magic fortifying my limbs carry me onward. A pleasant breeze ruffled my red hair and the hem of my skirt. My one-handed sword and dagger clattered at my side, but I couldn't afford to let them bother me. My dear brother—Allen, "the Brain of the Lady of the Sword"—had asked me to investigate the ruined chapels of the Great Moon on his behalf. But above all, this was a contest.

Breathtaking views of the southern capital leapt at me from the gaps between buildings. I felt the urge to pause, but all the sights could wait. I wanted good news to lay before Teto's group when they returned from the city of water escorting Carlotta Carnien. The marchesa had been investigating the cult of the Great Moon in the League of Principalities.

I kicked the paving stones, invoking wind spells for greater speed. Generations of Leinster dukes had invested princely sums of money and time to give the city streets their distinctive white-stone surfaces, so comfortably conducive to running. I wore the garb from a land far to the east that Lily, our maid corps's number three, insisted on calling her uniform, but the jacket patterned with interlocking arrows in shades of red, long skirt, and leather boots didn't hamper me in the least. My dear brother had also complimented the ensemble in the city of water, so between one thing and another, it might actually gain traction as an alternative maid uniform.

"L-Lady Lynne, wait for me!" a girl's voice wailed from behind me as I reached the final ascent. Sunlight gleamed on the brown pigtails of Sida Stinton, a diminutive maid in training, as she struggled to catch up to me, looking and sounding ready to burst into tears.

"We four made a pact," I reminded her. "The last two to arrive must do whatever the winner asks, within reason. Show us what you're made of."

"M-Must I really? O Great Moon, w-watch over me," Sida groaned, clutching the insignia hanging from her neck. She herself belonged to the cult of the Great Moon, one of the least numerous faiths on the continent.

A moment later, we passed through a small stone gate, and our view opened wide. We both paused in spite of ourselves, exclaiming over the vista. Roofs of many colors capped avenues of dazzling white stone and side streets lined with verdant trees. The sight of buildings climbing like terraced fields up the many hillsides never failed to fascinate me.

Perhaps I should share the view with my dear brother, Tina, and Ellie during the next long vacation.

Just then, at the very instant the thought crossed my mind, the trees behind us rustled. Sida and I started, clasping each other's hands on instinct, as a maid with long milk-white hair landed lightly on the road ahead of us.

"I just *knew* you'd stop here," gloated the Leinster Maid Corps's number six. "I grew up on the streets of this city! No one raised in a mansion will get the better of *me*, my lady!"

"C-Cindy?!" I gasped. I had been wondering why she hadn't tried anything yet.

"I...I still have a lot to learn," Sida admitted, "but...but you haven't won yet!"

The maid plucked a leaf from her milky hair and bobbed an elegant curtsy. A flurry of magical enhancements, a great leap, and she was off, running along the walls of the buildings that lined our route.

"If you'll excuse me," she called in a singsong, "I'll see you up ahead!"

Sida and I raced after her, fuming, but her lead narrowed not at all. Our final adversary had yet to show herself. Still, our future looked bleak.

"Sh-She leaves me no choice!" I balled up my right fist, and fiery

sparks began to whirl. This road toward the city's outskirts was practically deserted and devoid of flammable wooden structures. I would give Cindy a fright and turn the tables. It was the only way.

Then she smirked over her shoulder, speeding nimbly over a stone-roofed walkway. "Oh? Goodness gracious, what have we here? Are you *sure* you want to do that, Lady Lynne?"

"Wh-Why shouldn't I?" I demanded.

"Have a listen!" The milky-haired maid did a midair flip, landed on her feet, and tapped a communication orb disguised as a hair clip. "'For safety reasons, I say we ban offensive spells. Anyone who casts one automatically comes in last place.'"

The sound of my own voice from the start of the race shook me so badly that I let my fire spell dissipate. Behind me, Sida let out an adorable squeak, but I had more serious concerns.

"Wh-When did you record that?!"

"A maid always comes prepared!" Cindy brought a finger to her chin, no hint of fatigue in her cheery demeanor. The hill rose just ahead. "Now, wouldn't Mr. Allen be sad to learn you'd broken your own rule, my lady? I can practically hear him now. 'I've failed her as a tutor. How could Her Highness, a duke's daughter, do such a thing? Oh, Cindy, thank you for telling me! I'll cut your workload at the company in half.'"

"H-Half of that is just your wishful thinking!"

Dear brother, what possessed you to appoint her my bodyguard?! I can't— No. I like her just fine. All our maids are family. She's just a bit, well, tricky to deal with.

"B-But ma'am," Sida piped up, breathing heavily, "that sounds an awful lot like"—more panting—"a complaint about your duties at Allen & Co."

"Pardon?!" Cindy froze, her composure dashed. "N-No! Perish the thought! I wouldn't change them for the world! The tea and pastries Mr. Allen always brings us are to die for, and Miss Fosse is such a darling that my stress just melts away. It's just that the paperwork could be a little less—"

"Well done, Sida!" I shouted as we slipped past the discomfited maid, making a mental note to ask some hard questions about the

tea and treats my dear brother apparently served at the company when I got back to the royal capital.

"H-Hey!" Cindy yelled after me. "I'd hardly call that fair!"

"Blame your own complacency!"

The milky-haired maid groaned and muttered, "You sounded like Mr. Allen and Lady Lydia just now."

Like my dear brother and sister? I like the sound of that!

I entered hailing distance of the hill, a stone's throw from victory.

"I'll take that as a compliment! This race is—"

"But that reminds me. I chat with Mr. Allen while we work, and he usually brings up his tutoring. You know, 'Tina and Ellie really surprised me today' or 'I'm happy to see Stella and Caren making such good progress.'"

"Cindy..."

No, Lynne! Anyone can see it's a trap! Ignore her and keep running, and victory is— H-Huh?

Before I knew it, my body had turned of its own accord, standing to bar the maid's path. "Confess!" I demanded. "What did my dear brother say about m—"

"Another opening!" she crowed, breezing past without even bothering to answer. That left Sida in the lead, with Cindy hot on her heels...and me bringing up the rear.

"Cindy!" I roared, feet pounding the ground so hard I left potholes as I took off after her.

"I can't wait to give you orders, my lady!"

O-Oh no. This looks bad. I need to think fast.

But I had no distance left in which to overtake them. I could already see our destination: the ruined, moss-covered chapel of the Great Moon where my dear sister used to pray. We tore up the slope. Then exclamations of surprise escaped all three of us. Black birds had flitted into view ahead.

Aren't those...

"You must be tired, Lady Lynne. And you fought hard too, Sida. I'm impressed."

A woman's kind, gentle voice took Sida and me aback. Then I found myself being handed a dry towel and a bottle of water. Before

the chapel stood a dignified bird-clan maid, gray feathers poking through the black hair that just covered her ears: Cindy's partner Saki, the corps's other number six. I'd heard that they'd grown up in the same orphanage.

She beat us all *to the finish line?!*

"That wasn't very nice!" Cindy pouted while Sida and I stood stunned. "You call that fair play?"

"No one made a rule against magical creatures," Saki replied. "Honestly, you're such a child. Have you forgotten that we're maids in service to the Ducal House of Leinster and not..."

I wiped my sweat on the towel, remembering something that our head maid, Anna, had once told me as I watched the dressing down. As a child, Saki had been a little terror, racing through the city's back alleys. Everyone had a past, most full of surprises.

The maid in question soon noticed my stare and cleared her throat, embarrassed. "Please pardon the delay, my lady. Now, shall we be going? I'll consider my orders for you and Cindy while we walk."

The ruined chapel seemed less eerie than it had on my previous visit. It had been shortly after my dear brother had gone missing, swept up in the Algren rebellion. My own unease might have done a lot to shape my impressions. And it had been after dark.

"So you see," I griped to my three companions, striding briskly onward, "my dear sister has been acting so much more mature lately! She didn't even force her way into the delegation to the Lalannoy Republic. Meanwhile, Lady Stella and Felicia have been making aggressive moves, Caren has been growing her hair out, and Tina and Ellie know just how to wheedle their way into my dear brother's good graces. Lily actually got her house involved and herself made an envoy. I feel like I'm the only one falling behind."

My dear brother had set out with my best friend Tina, Lady Stella, and my cousin Lily on the latter's diplomatic mission. They had crossed northeastward over the Four Heroes Sea, the continent's largest saltwater lake, and into Lalannoy, supposedly to negotiate the terms of a peace left uncertain since the rebellion. Actually,

however, they had gone to build an alliance against the Church of the Holy Spirit, which had so recently sown discord throughout the west of the continent. My dear brother had already made a name for himself as the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, the president of Allen & Co., Shooting Star, the Water Dragon's Emissary, and Her Royal Highness's personal investigator. What new title would he add to the list if he succeeded?

"O Great Moon, um, well, what should I say at a time like this?" Sida murmured, frowning.

"Mr. Allen would never neglect you, Lady Lynne," Saki said, shading me with a parasol. "He even wrote to me here charging me with your care."

I gave a start. "Did he really?"

"Yes, my lady." Saki nodded.

"Oh." Sida timidly raised her left hand. "I g-got a letter too."

My dear brother was nothing if not busy. He tutored Tina, Ellie, Lady Stella, and me. He oversaw the operations of Allen & Co. He undertook numerous favors and abstruse investigations for the professor, the headmaster, and other persons of renown. And yet he had still made time to write to Saki and Sida on my account.

"He's such a worrywart," I said with a giggle, my spirits rising.

Cindy, whose own spirits were usually too high for comfort, wandered away from us and hunkered down near a stone pillar. "He didn't ask *me* anything," she sighed, doodling with her finger in the dust.

Sida and I scrambled to console her.

"C-Cindy, I'm sure..."

"Oh, well, I mean..."

"A letter addressed to you arrived at the Leinster residence here," Saki cut in, exasperated. "I left it on the table in your room."

"Cindy?" I said slowly, turning back to the milky-haired maid.

"Oh, I hardly slept last night!" she chirped, instantly abandoning her dust art. "I had to catch up with all the old faces from the city of water who didn't get posted to the royal capital! You know, I think I'd better scout ahead!"

She took off like a shot, her gloom forgotten.

The nerve of that woman!

Still, she shared some of her quirks with Tina and Lily. I couldn't bring myself to dislike her. Neither could Saki or Sida, to judge by the looks on their faces.

We continued on our way and found Cindy waiting for us before a set of large stone doors, one of which had fallen out of place. She beckoned me to her, so I advanced with Saki and Sida.

"It looks like we'll have to wait our turn, Lady Lynne," she said.

Eight pillars must once have supported the chapel. In its center was a woman at prayer, tall, hooded, and cloaked. A simple bunch of flowers rested at her feet. Behind her stood a white-haired youth, similarly cloaked and carrying an old spear, who seemed to be keeping a wary eye on their surroundings. I took him for the woman's bodyguard. Still, what would bring anyone to a place like this?

"Do you know them, Sida?" I asked.

"N-No, my lady," the maid in training said. "Followers of the Great Moon worship at night."

While I watched, the woman spoke to the boy and turned around. Jet-black hair and white feathers peeked out the sides of her hood. I glimpsed some intense feeling in her eyes, like black pearls. She reminded me a little of my dear brother.

The bird-clan woman noticed us but seemed unfazed. She gave a quick, curt bow and swept past us.

"Wasn't she gorgeous?" I murmured in all honesty.

"Y-Yes, my lady. But I've never seen her at a gathering of the faithful." Sida squeezed her emblem.

The tension finally left the air.

Saki turned to her best friend and childhood companion. "Cindy, wasn't that...?"

"Yes, I recognize her from papers at Allen & Co."

"Do the two of you have some idea who that was?" I asked. As a member of the Ducal House of Leinster, I fancied that I had met most people of note in the southern capital, but I was drawing a blank.

"Lady Lynne," Saki said gravely, "that woman was the president of

the Skyhawk Company."

"The Skyhawk Company?" My eyes widened. "You mean *she's* that famous recluse?!"

"The famous overseer of all griffin mail," Cindy agreed, looking serious for once. "I think I know the cat-clan boy with her from somewhere too, or at least his mana. I never can tell if it's a big world or a small one."

"You don't say," I murmured slowly.

Who should I run into on my first day home but the mysterious leader of a commercial empire. Should I chalk it up to a trick of fate, or connect it to my dear brother's business? Something told me that I would see the woman again soon.

I recollected myself and clapped my hands. "We'll search here for now. Even if we don't understand what we find, Niccolò Nitti may see something in it when he gets here. Sida, don't hesitate to speak up if anything strikes you. No one disturb those flowers."

*

"What happened to those supply shipments?!"

"No, no! Another unit's camping there!"

"Lord Arthur! Where is Lord Arthur?!"

"Someone please calm Lady Elna!"

"Oh, Lady Stella! Our saint looks stunning as ever."

"I think you mean our angel."

"You'll have to agree to disagree."

"Get a move on tearing down any ruins we don't need!"

Lalannoyan troops, civil officials with armfuls of paper, and ordinary people who had narrowly escaped the republic's capital with their lives all bustled to and fro on streets that had been desolate mere days earlier and still lay under a patchy blanket of grass. To my embarrassment, some I'd come to know stopped to ask advice or salute us in passing.

"Mr. Allen, may I have your opinion on this outlying encampment?"

"Your Highness, allow me to express my sincere gratitude for

healing my subordinates!”

This former capital, just west of its successor, Tabatha, the “workshop city,” had been a ghost town since the battle that ended the republic’s war of independence had been fought here a century before. The army was clearing away inconvenient ruins and rearing makeshift housing on some with repurposed siege magic under a clear blue sky.

“Can you believe it, sir?! It feels like we’re witnessing the birth of a brand-new city,” exclaimed the short girl to my left. My student Lady Tina Howard, second daughter of one of the Wainwright Kingdom’s Four Great Dukes, wore a clip in her blue-tinged platinum hair. The breadbasket in her left hand bounced as she skipped in excitement, as did the sleeves of her white blouse and the hem of her azure skirt. She looked like any girl her age in such moments, although her house’s role in the kingdom’s founding entitled her to the style “Highness” and made her practically royalty abroad.

We had accompanied our envoy to negotiate peace with Marquess Oswald Addison, heir to a champion of independence whose house had long governed the republic. Six days had passed since we had been forced to evacuate the capital with his Bright Wings Party. At present, we were preparing a counterattack on the Heaven and Earth Party and its leader, Miles Talito, who had joined forces with the church and its dreaded apostles to occupy the city of craft. Mental fatigue had left Lord Addison bedridden, but Lalannoy’s champion, Arthur “Heaven’s Sword” Lothringen, and Lady Elna “Heaven’s Sage” Lothringen had proven themselves exceptional commanders.

Even so, our success was far from assured. After all, our foes had a legendary monster on their side: the ice wyrm called the “Slayer of Champions.” Even with the aid of the great elemental Frigid Crane, Tina and I had just barely managed to freeze it temporarily. We couldn’t afford optimism.

“You have two weeks till the silver-snow melts and the wyrm fully revives.” I had learned that three days ago from the Dark Lord, Rill. A twist of fate had made us travel companions with the silver-haired girl and her white cat, Kifune, and her warning weighed heavily on

my heart. I'd had no word from her since she'd announced her intention to return to the city of craft, nor had any word come from the royal capital. I needed to act.

"Lady Elna told me that she's been preparing for a worst-case scenario," I answered Tina, shaking off the beginnings of gloom. "I also hear that we can count on more than the troops who escaped the city. The army Arthur led out west is rallying to join us."

"The republic's main force?" Tina gasped, grasping the implications without further explanation.

In the century or so since Lalannoy had broken away from the Yustinian Empire, the greatest power in the north, the republic had always concentrated its military might on the two nations' shared border. Shifting those forces presaged an even fiercer battle to come.

I sighed as we walked. "With Lord Addison bedridden, Arthur is our commander in chief. I don't know if we'll be able to see him today either, although I've been hoping to talk to him about Ridley and Artie."

Lord Ridley Leinster, the Swordmaster, and Lord Addison's son, Artie, had vanished from this former capital without explanation three days earlier and remained missing. So had our second traitor, Artie's fiancée and Miles's daughter, Isolde. I recalled Ridley's sister's reaction to the news.

"He wouldn't die in a place like this. He *is* a Leinster, even if he doesn't act like one," Lily, our duly appointed envoy to Lalannoy as well as the Leinster Maid Corps's number three, had said matter-of-factly. I hoped Ridley was all right, given all that had passed between us, but I felt less sanguine.

"I'm here for you, sir!" Tina squeezed my hand, snapping me out of my reflections. The force of her feelings made her platinum hair, clip, and snow-white ribbon shine with the light of mana.

It's been almost a year since we met, and I'm still no match for her.

"I'm counting on it," I said, giving her head a pat. "Now, let's pick up the pace. Stella and Lily must be hungry too."

"Right!"

We passed a group of knights in a square near the infirmary. Their scuffed and damaged gear proclaimed them casualties of the fighting in the capital.

"Thank goodness. Oh, thank goodness," murmured one.

"Who knows how many more soldiers we would have lost if that holy woman hadn't been here," said another.

"I can't thank her enough," a third chimed in.

"Praise be to Lady Stella Howard!" cried a fourth.

It sounded like our resident saint was still hard at work.

"That's my sister!" Tina said as an unruly lock of her hair stood up and swayed with pride.

"She's certainly something," I agreed. "And she'll need a break soon. We'd better hurry."

"Yes, sir." The platinum-haired young noblewoman skipped along toward the infirmary.

I watched her go, pausing to glance at my pocket watch. "You pushed yourself hard enough to break your father's amulet?" I could practically hear Lydia say. "I think you have some explaining to do."

I'd better brace myself for her wrath.

I walked on, mulling over excuses in my mind, and the infirmary came into view. I had reinforced the building with earth and botanical magic and used wind spells to fashion the wooden entryways that stood open on either side. With a few exceptions, both Howard maids and Lalannoyan army healers had gathered here after the battle, and we exchanged greetings with them as we made our way inside.

"Welcome back, Lady Tina, Mr. Allen."

"Fetching food is really our job, you know."

"Lady Stella is taking a break too!"

"Why, Mr. Allen, Lady Tina."

I reflected uncomfortably that an awful lot of people seemed to know me by sight.

My highborn companion gave a wicked chuckle. "All according to plan. Talking you up while I helped out here paid off even sooner than I'd hoped!"

"Tina—"

"You can give me that look all you want, but it won't stop me." The noblewoman stuck out her little tongue and skipped cheerfully up to a door on which hung a wooden sign carved with the words "examination room."

"Come in." A calm girl's voice answered her polite knock, so I opened the door.

A young woman with a sky-blue ribbon in her platinum hair smiled gently at us from her chair. "Mr. Allen, Tina. It's good to see you again," said Lady Stella Howard, Tina's sister and another of my students. "You got here just in time for my break."

The future duchess in her white military uniform had been treating wounds too severe for any common healing spell to cure since our retreat to the old capital. She really was a saint if I'd ever seen one.

"You must be exhausted," I said, setting my basket on a table.

"We brought bread and lots of fruit!" Tina added, gleefully depositing her own burden and showing off the fresh produce. Without her maid Ellie or her best friend Lynne around, she made frequent plays for her older sister's attention.

I was brewing tea in the kitchenette, watching them out of the corner of my eye, when Lily poked her head in the door, her long scarlet hair tied with a black ribbon. She wore her usual ensemble: a foreign jacket patterned with interlocking arrows, a long skirt, and leather boots.

"Mmm! Is that black tea I smell? Oh, Lady Tina. Olly was looking for you. I think she wants a weather forecast."

Tina and Stella broke off their chat and looked up, nonplussed.

"Olly does?"

"I wonder why."

We could rely on Olly Walker, the Howard Maid Corps's number three. She and her squad had infiltrated the republic and covertly gathered intelligence ahead of our arrival. Olly and Lily seemed to have developed something of a rivalry, owing perhaps to their shared rank, but I had still often spied them talking together since the retreat.

Tina smoothed her skirt with her hands and imitated a salute. "Sir, Stella, excuse me for a moment! Lily, please lead the way."

"Take care," I said.

"We'll drink our tea while we wait," added Stella.

"Wait, why do I need to go too?" Lily groaned.

"No whining! Come on! On the double!" Tina hauled the scarlet-haired maid off the sofa she was just sinking onto and pushed her out of the room. The pair of them were great friends in their own right.

The leaves had just finished steeping, so I poured two cups of tea.

"Here you are."

"Thank you," Stella said, accepting hers.

I took the seat across from her and sipped from my own cup. A rich aroma filled my nostrils—hardly what one would expect in a war zone. The army of the republic clearly kept its supply lines in order, even if the kingdom still had them beat on that front.

"Thank goodness for Tina," Stella said, returning her cup to its saucer. "I don't know what I'd do without her here to brighten the mood."

"I know just what you mean."

As originally planned, our party was to consist of one envoy, Lily, and one attendant, myself. Two of my old university schoolmates, Uri from the southern capital and Soi Solnhofen from the western one, were to have come along as guards. Tina and Stella had forced their way onto the mission after the great elemental Frigid Crane and Princess Carina Wainwright had warned them of danger. Still, their decision seemed justified.

"Are you certain you're feeling well, Stella?" I asked, staring into her lovely eyes. "If this is getting to be too much for you—"

"I'm fine, honestly. Carina's hair ornament has made things easier," she said, no hint of a lie on her dignified face. Despite linking mana with me to manifest a pair of snowy white wings and purify a horde of well over ten thousand skeletal warriors in the city of craft, she suffered no ill effects.

Like a butterfly emerging from her chrysalis, I suppose.

It felt like ages since I had raised her flagging spirits at the cathedral in the royal capital's western outskirts.

"But, well..." Stella faltered, cool dignity scattered to the winds. She added sugar to her cup, stirring it with a teaspoon as she cast a spell of silence before murmuring, "I have so little choice in what to wear at times like this. Caren, Tina, and Lynne all have outfits like Lily's, so I've been thinking of ordering one of my own when we get back to the royal capital, but I'd l-like to hear your opinion."

"Hmm. Let me think," I said. My sister had worn her purple version of Lily's attire more than once since she'd first shown it to me in the city of water. In her own words, the clothes "wore like a dream!" Picturing the Howard sisters in matching outfits, I decided to be frank.

"I'm certain you'll look lovely in it."

Lily's trademark ensemble looked nothing like a maid uniform, but it was no less eye-catching for that. Felicia, an amateur seamstress, could probably have given a more detailed appraisal.

"I just decided," Stella declared, drawing the sea-green griffin feather I'd once given her from her breast pocket. "I'll make one! Nothing can stop me!"

Pristine snowflakes danced. A vision of little angel wings fluttered behind her.

"And when I do..." Our resident saint reached out and closed her slender fingers around my sleeve, pulling me out of my warm and fuzzy reverie. "Would you be good enough to go out on the town with me?"

"What would you say to another leisurely stroll around the city?" I asked. "Although you mustn't skip school for it."

"I...I would never! So, um..."

"Stella?"

After that flash of indignation, the noblewoman looked up at me and hooked her little finger around mine. "It's a promise!" She giggled softly, and her voice sank to a mumble. ("A date! Just me and Mr. Allen.") The girl smiled with shy, childlike glee, neither great lady nor saint as a lock of her hair swayed.

A man most deliberately cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Allen, sir,

but have you got a moment?”

“Minié?” I said as a startled gasp escaped Stella.

Leaning against the door was a young officer in a tricorn hat and battered blue uniform, a spell-pistol on his hip. Who better than Minié Jonsson, deep in Arthur’s and Lord Addison’s trust, to bring an answer to my request?

I urged him to continue with a look, casting a wind spell to fan the furiously blushing Stella.

“I know you wanted a meeting with Lord Arthur, but he can’t make time today. Same goes for Lady Elna.”

Ever since the retreat to this old capital, Lalannoy’s champion, who was also the marshal of the republic, and his right-hand woman —a great sorceress as well as a princess of the Old Empire—had been scrambling day and night to restore order to the army, gather intelligence, and secure matériel. While I would have loved to help, I couldn’t force the issue. We remained agents of an “enemy power.”

“Oh well,” I said. “Please make sure Arthur knows I’d like to speak with him.”

“You got it. I’ll let you know as soon as anything changes.” The glum Minié gave an apologetic nod and left the room. His second-in-command, Snider, had turned out to be the first traitor in our ranks, and Minié still seemed to hold himself responsible.

Stella let her unease show. “Mr. Allen—”

Maids cheered out in the corridor. Tina must have performed one of her meteorologic feats. I felt a weight lift from my shoulders.

It will be all right. I’m not alone.

“Would you mind if I helped out here this afternoon?” I asked the noblewoman across from me, adding more sugar than usual to my teacup.

“Wh-What?! Well, no. I mean...” Stella’s whole body swayed bashfully along with her hair.

“I’ll have you know Lady Tina owns an outfit just like mine!” came a smug declaration from the corridor. This time, a shocked commotion followed, then Lily and Olly launched into a bout of friendly verbal sparring.

I raised my index finger to my lips and winked. “Thank you. I

can’t wait to see our resident saint at work.”

*

“We just don’t have the forces to breach their defenses,” I muttered to myself in my room that night, leaning back in my chair. “And we can’t put Arthur on the front lines. No one else stands a chance of slaying the wyrm. So, where does that leave us?”

A mana lamp on a stone wall illuminated a simple cot and an old wooden desk with a coat hung on the back of a chair. Beyond the window, darkness had fallen, unbroken by moon or stars. Spell formulae drifted through the air as I reviewed them. Shifting my gaze to the desktop, I reread the note from Arthur that Minié had just delivered.

“Enemy forces have occupied the southern port city of Suguri. We’ve lost access to the Four Heroes Sea, and we think their spell-gunners have been shooting down Wainwright reconnaissance griffins. Magical communications are jammed in and around the capital. We haven’t heard a peep out of it, and we don’t know the situation on the ground. I hate to ask, Allen, but would you think up a plan to get us inside?”

The military situation looked desperate, and I doubted that my reports had reached the royal capital. I could hardly plan without information, so I had consulted Olly.

“You’ve come to the right woman, sir. Infiltration and reconnaissance are what we Walkers do best,” she had said. Reassuring, but concrete stratagems still eluded me.

Only Heaven’s Sword, Arthur Lothringen, could put an end to the wyrm, yet the church’s apostles would bar his path to it. Lady Elna, Lalannoy’s finest sorceress, couldn’t fight on the front lines. We would need her to command the army. If only we at least still had Ridley.

I turned back and checked my pocket watch, decorated with the violet hair ribbon that Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the great elementals, had left in my care. The girls would worry the next morning if I didn’t sleep soon.

I dismissed my formulae—Shining Stag, the lost supreme spell of light, which Miles Talito had wielded in the battle for the capital, and the secret Shining Sword, which I'd been reconstructing from it. I supposed I had done enough for one—

There came a tentative knock at my door.

"Come in," I said. "It's not locked."

The wooden door swung open and Lily's face peeped in. Like Tina and Stella, she'd already let her hair down and changed for bed. I found myself hesitant to look straight at her—a difficulty I attributed to the voluptuous slopes of her chest. Her braceleted left arm supported a tray laden with a teapot and cookies.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

The maid shut the door, careful not to make a sound, then crossed the room to me, giggling merrily. She set her tray on the round desk and took the seat opposite mine. "Ladies Tina and Stella are sound asleep, but I can't seem to get to bed. Maybe I got too worked up trying to outdo Olly today. Would you care for tea?"

"I'd love some."

"Coming right up!" Lily started pouring with practiced skill and evident relief. She hadn't even known how to serve herself when we'd first met in the southern capital.

I was still studying the beautiful face of the noblewoman who had only aspired to maidhood in those days when she placed a white porcelain teacup before me.

"There you are."

"Thank you," I said and took a sip. Delicious—a fresh reminder that this under-duke's daughter had earned her rank. The strict meritocracy of the Leinster Maid Corps took no account of birth.

Still, must *she rifle through my luggage and slip into one of my shirts so gleefully?*

Mildly exasperated, I bit into a cookie.

Wait. I recognize this flavor.

"Did Ridley make these?"

The maid froze. "I guess he was serious about baking," she said, pursing her lips. "He went around handing them out to people."

"He always does wear his heart on his sleeve," I said slowly.

Five years ago, that same candor had led the nobleman to declare, "Only one thing can cure my doubts: a duel with Lydia Leinster, here and now! Forgive me, cousin, but I insist you accept!"

Unsure of his path despite the storied title of Swordmaster, he had challenged Lydia head-on...and lost. I seemed to recall him laughing about it in the Royal Academy's training ground.

"Allen." Lily hesitated. "Um... About my brother..."

I stopped brooding and turned to find her uncharacteristically downcast, running her hand over her bracelet. I'd suspected that she had been forcing herself to put on a brave face. Now I felt certain. She hadn't seen her older brother in years, and now he had gone missing in these dire straits. No matter how well she feigned unconcern in front of the others, I knew she must be worried. The would-be maid with whom I'd explored the southern capital that summer had a kind heart.

"Lily," I said, "give me your left hand."

"All right." She looked puzzled, but she proffered her hand without argument.

I touched the silver bracelet my dad had improved and ran a spell through it. The formula seemed to take.

"What...?" Lily began.

"Something I worked out to help control some of your favorite spells," I explained. "Being able to use the same formulae really comes in handy at times like this, don't you think? It saves so much time adjusting them."

The maid lowered her gaze and hugged her left hand to her chest. She had mastered my spell formulae without alterations, a feat that even Lydia and Caren had yet to manage.

"The ancient title of Swordmaster lay dormant for a good two centuries before Lord Ridley Leinster came along and took up the mantle. He was full of doubt when he lost to Lydia, and it took some of the edge off his blade," I continued firmly. Lily looked up, and I held her gaze. "He has no doubts now. So he's safe. I know he is!"

Tears trickled down Lily's cheeks. She wiped them repeatedly on her stolen shirt. Then she vanished, and I heard a slight bump from my cot.

"Thank you," the scarlet-haired maid murmured, embarrassed. She had shifted her seat with the short-range teleportation spell Black Cat Promenade. With the new formula augmenting her bracelet, the maneuver no longer left her open.

I might be in hot water if Lydia and Caren find out.

While I scratched my cheek, Lily hid her mouth with a shirtsleeve. "You saw me cry again," she said. "But don't go telling anyone, now. It's our little secret."

"Yes, yes."

"One 'yes' is enough!" She pouted and gave my pillow a few indignant wallops.

Good. I wouldn't want Lily any other way.

Nibbling a cookie, I projected the map of the city of craft that I'd been pondering earlier onto the desktop. Lily moved her teacup with a levitation spell before squinting down at it.

"Now that I take a good look," she said, "it's a long way to the independence memorial no matter where we attack from." The ice wyrm lay frozen in the memorial's remains, at just about the dead center of the city.

I tossed the remainder of the half-eaten cookie into my mouth and brushed off my hands. "Miles Talito and the apostles must know we're in the old capital, but they haven't done anything to harass us here. We should assume they've left no approach unguarded."

I couldn't be certain who had the upper hand until I heard Olly's full report. Still, I doubted that the Bright Wings and the Heaven-and-Earthers differed greatly in military might. If anything did set them apart, it would have to be...

"Arthur can at least hold his own against multiple greater apostles," I said. "The problem is..."

"No matter how well we do, the ice wyrm can still turn the tables on us when it revives," Lily finished for me, cradling her teacup in both hands.

"Exactly."

According to Arthur, the then Lords Addison and Lothringen had used a pair of mysterious swords to command the creature and annihilate a Yustinian army bearing down on the old capital, along

with any allied forces in the way. Even calling on the great elemental sleeping within Tina, we had been hard-pressed just to buy time against this genuine monster. If it fully revived, our odds of victory would become exceedingly slim.

I swapped in a larger map and pointed to the republic's southern edge. "We're cut off from Suguri and the Four Heroes Sea, so I doubt any of my reports have reached the royal capital. Even if Lydia and the others notice the disturbance in the city of craft, their response will be delayed."

I trusted my partner and Cheryl more than I trusted myself. Even so, the time constraints seemed insurmountable. The church's false Saint, who had no doubt painted us into this corner, made a fearsome enemy.

I dismissed the map and made up my mind. "Lily, I have a reque__"

"I refuse," the maid cheerily interrupted.

"I haven't told you what it is yet."

Lily stood on the cot and leveled her left index finger at me. Her smile couldn't hide the keen glint in the depths of her eyes. "'If the worst should happen, please take Tina and Stella and make your escape through Yustinian territory. I still have a score to settle with Zel,'" she recited. "Did I miss anything?"

"Well..."

How could I forget? Lily's no fool. She might easily inherit the whole under-dukedom of Leinster someday.

"I'll say it again!" Lily clenched her fists while I fumbled for a response. "I refuse! And that's final!"

Not bothering with teleportation spells, she magically fortified herself and leapt. I yelped and scrambled to my feet, hastily casting a levitation spell to catch her.

"Oh, of all the...! Really, Allen?! Really?!"

The maid prodded my cheek. Apparently she had never considered that I might get out of the way, but I couldn't risk the soft touch of her bosoms. Lydia shouldn't be able to sense it through our magical pact at this distance, but better safe than sorry. The ghost of a slow "Oh, really?" sent a shiver down my spine.

"That hurts," I protested, lowering Lily to the floor.

I got a stifled laugh in answer. Lily's scarlet tresses floated around her as she did a twirl on the spot, stopping with her index finger on her chin.

"Did you forget I'm a maid?" she asked. "I could never abandon my master."

"But I'm not your mas—"

"Yes, Allen?"

I...I don't like that look in her eyes. But I guess she wouldn't be a Leinster woman if she couldn't inspire fear.

"You win," I sighed, raising my hands. "As I told you before, I really am counting on you."

"I know!" Lily beamed. "Lean on me all you want. After all, I *am* older than you!"

"Really? Sometimes I wonder."

"What?! What makes you—"

"Mr. Allen," called a girl who shouldn't have been there.

We spun around.

"St-Stella?!"

"Oh?"

The platinum-haired noblewoman peering in at us, her hand on the door, must have been eavesdropping under cover of a silencing spell. The hem and sleeves of her nightgown swayed as she came up beside me.

"Lily isn't the only one," she said, fixing me with a heartfelt gaze, hands on her chest. "I...I'm here for you too."

"Stella," I murmured. Delight in my student's growth and reluctance to take her into battle clashed within me. Not so long ago, I would have chosen to scold her. But now?

"I see our resident saint is quite a handful," I said, combing out her slightly disheveled hair with my fingers.

"There's no rule I wouldn't break to help you," she answered without missing a beat.

"I surrender." I raised my hands again, giving up on persuading her. "But I do hope you and Ellie will stay on the straight and narrow. I don't know what I'd do if you went wrong."

"Of course!" Stella nodded, smiling, then turned her back and mumbled something I couldn't catch. ("But I'm already a bad girl.")

What brought this on?

The next moment, a clap rang out.

"You're a veeery bad girl, aren't you, Lady Stella?" Lily laughed. "Just like me! And bad girls get...this!"

The holy maiden squealed as the maid gleefully slipped a coat onto her from behind. My coat, naturally—the one I'd left hanging on a chair.

"L-Lily?!" Stella cried, looking over her shoulder in confusion. "I-Isn't this Mr. Allen's, um...?"

"You looked cold," Lily replied. "Now, what do you think?"

Stella groaned and fidgeted, but she made no attempt to remove the coat. On the contrary, she hid her mouth with its sleeves. I could have sworn I saw little black and white wings on her back.

At last, she said, "It feels warm."

Lily greeted the appraisal with repeated, emphatic nods. Then she produced a small video orb—who knew where she had hidden it—and became a laughing devil whispering in Stella's ear.

"Doesn't it just? So, wouldn't you like to record yourself in it? Who knows when you'll get another chance."

"Huh? Um, w-well..." Stella's voice dwindled, her face turning bright apple red as the maid's grin widened. "I'd love to, but... Oh..."

Honestly, what am *I going to do with them?*

"Lady Lily Leinster, Lady Stella Howard," I called, casting a temperature-control spell on the teapot. "Would Your Highnesses please be seated? I'd like the benefit of your opinions."

"Sure thing!"

"Of course, Mr. Allen."

I caught the fragrances of both northern and southern flowers as two dainty fingers stopped just short of my nose. Two girls, one older than me, the other younger, and both looking equally mischievous, chorused:

"But no more 'Highness'!"

*

At least a hundred icy missiles swarmed toward me, shattering the early-morning chill.

She's refined her technique so much, you'd hardly know these came from the same person as her old spells. It's good to see a student improve so—

"Whoa!"

No sooner did I start dismantling the spell formula behind the barrage than a portion of the missiles put on a burst of speed. My wind spells steered them off target, and they slammed into the square before our lodgings, covering it in a small patch of glacier. Scattered ice shards nearly grazed my shirt and pants. No elementary spell should contain so much mana.

A short distance away, Tina narrowed her lovely eyes and clicked her tongue. "I missed? I see you have some tricks up your sleeve, Mr. Allen of the wolf clan."

I heard a chill in her voice. Her hair expressed her displeasure as she stood there in her white blouse, rod at the ready. She hadn't even donned her cloak—a drawback, I supposed, of coming to drag me outside for a sparring session when I had barely gotten out of bed.

"D-Did I do something to upset you, Tina?" I asked hesitantly. "I can't imagine what."

"Sir." A surge of mana lifted her platinum hair as snowflakes began to whirl. Was I imagining things, or had her bangs and hair clip turned a shade darker?

"More ice-resistant barriers!" Minié barked. His troops, who had come with him to spectate despite the early hour, started unfurling military scrolls with practiced efficiency.

"We'll freeze along with the camp if we're not careful."

"I'm quaking in my boots."

Think how I feel, why don't you.

Tina gave her rod a wave, calling a snowy gust to ruffle her white sleeves and azure skirt. "Really?" she demanded. "Are you *sure* you can't think of something? Put your hand on your heart and think carefully!"

"W-Well, I mean..." I faltered, cowed by my pupil's fury.

If only Ellie and Lynne were here to mediate!

"You had a tea party with Stella and Lily last night, didn't you?" asked Interrogator Tina Howard with flat, lightless eyes. "After I went to bed?"

I gave a start. I had made certain that Tina was sound asleep when I'd escorted the pair back to their rooms after our discussion. I'd even levitated her blankets to tuck her in more snugly. I'd sworn the maids on night watch to secrecy as well, so how could she have found me out?

I sensed a presence behind me and turned to look, never losing track of the more than a thousand new ice missiles taking shape all around me.

"Stella?! Lily?!" I exclaimed. "A-And what possessed you to dress like that?"

The two noblewomen had just exited the lodging house. And for some reason, they wore my coat and one of my shirts over their nightgowns.

"You see, um..." An embarrassed Stella hid her mouth behind my coat sleeves.

"We felt chilly!" Lily chirped, beaming.

I told them to take those off before bed! I told them so many times!

Tina's smile broadened, and emotionless laughter passed her lips.

Oh dear.

I suddenly remembered one of Zel's warnings from our Royal Academy days. "You'll have troubles with women like you wouldn't believe," he'd said with feeling. "I can see it in your face. So watch out, partner."

Come to think of it, I seemed to recall the witch I'd met beneath the Four Heroes Sea telling me much the same thing. I glanced down at the ring on my right hand. It flashed as if to say, "Took you long enough, genius."

"I got such a shock when I woke up, sir," Tina said, cocking her head and raising an index finger to her chin in mock puzzlement. "I mean, there were Stella and Lily, sound asleep in your coat and shirt."

"Y-You both promised!" I wailed.

"I...I just felt so sleepy," Stella replied, trailing off into an almost inaudible mumble. ("And so happy.")

"Same here!" Lily added, giggling beside her on a couch that the maids had expertly placed for them.

Their excuses barely qualified as a defense, but I had bigger problems to worry about. A snowy gust ruffled my hair.

Oh no. Oh no.

"T-Tina—"

"I pronounce you guilty, sir. And *she* isn't happy with you either!"

The mark of Frigid Crane stood out vividly on the back of the young noblewoman's right hand. Her ice shots stopped spiraling and fell on me in a sudden downpour. I made to pick out those that would hit me and dismantle them, as before—and flung myself far to one side. Frustrated roars rose from the ice lions that had just risen, pouncing, from the micro-glacier.

"Th-That was Ellie's—"

"I'm not the same girl you met at the station in the northern capital!" Tina yelled.

Our eyes met as her onslaught continued. I glimpsed her indomitable will. Of "Duke Howard's magically impaired daughter," no trace remained. I still hadn't found a way to free Frigid Crane, but it appeared my time had not been wasted.

I mentally patted myself on the back as I dispelled only the ice shots I knew would have hit me. Sheathing my limbs in a partial manifestation of the improved Lightning Apotheosis I'd been devising for Caren, I shattered the attacking ice lions one after another.

"Fine! If that's how you want it...!" Tina raised her rod and multi-cast Ice Mirror Shower.

Sparkling little sheets of ice floated all over the square. Designed to disturb and distract, they swiftly worsened not only visibility but my ability to sense mana, delaying my reactions. I enhanced my reflexes to compensate as I prepared to meddle with the spells. Then I hesitated. The formulae were encrypted and rapidly changing.

“I don’t be—”

“I’ve got you now!”

I kicked through an ice lion only for Tina to dart in with a sweep of her rod. Should I follow up on my attack, or should I dodge? I chose the latter and cast a split-second levitation spell.

Floating lightly off the ground, I evaded Tina’s melee strike—practically a first for her in my experience. Doing a half flip and spotting the nearby remains of a mass of ice her blow had smashed, I broke into a grin. Force like that would carry her far, even against her upperclassmen at the Royal Academy.



"I see you've been taking lessons from Lynne," I said proudly, landing on the micro-glacier a short distance away.

"You've helped me learn better control than I ever thought possible," Tina replied. "But I'll never catch up to you if I only do the assignments you write in my notebook."

There came a lull in the assault. Tina must have been planning to finish things with her next attack. She was a classic rear-line fighter who let her overwhelming mana capacity do the talking, and I'd tailored all her lessons to that approach.

But look how far she's come on her own. Girls grow up so fast.

I thought back to Lydia. She had been another "cursed child," almost incapable of spellcasting. Once she got past that block, though? "What are you waiting for? When's the next lesson? I'll learn every spell you have to teach, and I'll do it in a flash."

How long could I keep pace with *two* girl geniuses?

"Ow!" The bracelet and ring on my right hand flashed, snapping me painfully out of my reverie. Neither the angel nor the witch had any patience for my whining.

I know. I still have so much more I want to teach Tina and the other girls!

I closed my left fist and gave it a wide swing. Icy mirrors, missiles, and lions disintegrated into snowflakes, sparkling in the morning sun as they vanished. Snowy winds blew, shaking Tina's hair ribbon as she prepared her grand offensive.

"Wh-What?!" she gasped. "But that was so fast!"

"He's already broken Tina's encryption?" Stella marveled, sipping hot tea inside a barrier of fire flowers.

"Analysis is Allen's specialty," Lily replied, unsurprised.

In truth, I could have forced the spells to break down the moment I'd laid eyes on them. I had crafted the girls' formulae myself, and a little encryption couldn't do much to obscure them from me. But what tutor wouldn't want to see his dear students' efforts? I hadn't been able to help myself.

Despite a frustrated groan, Tina quickly changed tack. She must have foreseen that I would decrypt her spells eventually. "H-Have it your way!" she shouted as the orb atop her rod shone brighter and

even her snow-white hair ribbon started to glow.

A volley of ice shots took shape, an order of magnitude more numerous than the last. She knew that I would neutralize some of them by picking apart the formulae, so she had chosen sheer quantity, hoping to overwhelm me with more spells than I could keep a handle on. Not a bad tactic.

A murmur rose from Minié's contingent.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Good thing we didn't start a shoot-out back on the Four Heroes Sea."

"So this is what little Lady Howard can do?"

"And Allen's no slouch either."

Tina shifted to a two-handed grip. "Ready or not, sir, here I come!"

A vigorous swing of her rod unleashed the magic. A few thousand—no, make that over ten thousand spiraling icy projectiles launched themselves at me.

I could neutralize the barrage by interfering with the underlying control formula, but if Tina's pushing her limits, then so should I!

I waved my hands, multi-casting the elementary spell Divine Ice Mirrors.

Tina let out a startled cry, and the soldiers echoed it as my mirrors deflected the icy blasts at wild angles. Shots collided as though driven by a conscious desire to destroy each other. Not a single one got anywhere near me while clouds of splintered ice lent a mystical quality to the scene.

"Those shots moved so fast, and he shot them all down using ricochets off mirrors?" Stella murmured.

"And not only that. It looked like he sent them back with added force and guidance," Lily added. The two of them seemed to have figured out my trick.

The last ice shot crumbled, leaving Tina and me standing alone in the square.

"That was amazing. I couldn't believe my eyes," the young noblewoman gasped, cheeks flushed. She still showed no sign of running low on mana. "But I'm not going to lose this!"

The splinters of ice drifting on the air whirled, becoming miniature snowstorms that hemmed me in from all sides. I counted seven in all.

Did she model this on my Seven Burning Blade Blossoms?!

"Scatter your power all around, then pull it back together." The girl who would be fourteen on her next birthday gave a decidedly grown-up smile. The mark on her right hand turned a deeper azure as her emotions rose. "You showed me the principle, sir! Now see what I do with it!"

Tina brought her rod down in a fierce two-handed swing.

I can't see myself stopping those seven huge snowstorms with mirrors. On the other hand...

I lightly closed my right hand, and unknown formulae flashed over my bracelet's surface. Chains of thorny azure vines appeared, darting through the air.

Tina let out a strangled cry. Bewildered gasps broke out on all sides.

All seven snowstorms strained against their bonds, ready to explode with fury...and dissipated.

What power! Too much for me, even if I am the one controlling it. And was it really Carina's? It does seem similar. And yet...

"Stay here a while with me," the black-and-white angel, possessing Stella, had told me beneath the palace. "Till the mortal realms crumble and this planet completes its rebirth."

What...what if that wasn't Carina speaking?

"Sir?" Tina called, approaching me. My sudden silence must have worried her.

Whoops. That won't do. Overthinking is one of my worst habits, up there with excess modesty.

"What do you say we call it here for today?" I said, shooting Stella and Lily a look and picking bits of ice out of Tina's hair.

"Oh, all right." Tina nodded, albeit reluctantly.

Minié commenced his withdrawal, tricorn hat clasped in one hand. The maids started filing back into the infirmary as well, no doubt to prepare for breakfast.

"You surprised me," I told my precocious pupil, and meant it. "All

joking aside, I bet you really will surpass me sooner than later."

"Nothing I tried ended up working," she grumbled. Then, almost too softly to hear, "How will I ever stand shoulder to shoulder with you at this rate?"

I chuckled and took her little hand.

"S-Sir?" Tina startled, and that unruly lock swayed from side to side.

"'Excess modesty stunts growth,'" I said. "It's a warning I never stop hearing. Don't repeat my mistakes. I told you once, at your mansion in the northern capital. Now I'll tell you again."

Lady Tina Howard had a gift to rival Lady Lydia Leinster's. One day, this girl genius would be a household name throughout the continent.

"You'll grow strong, Tina," I said with emphasis. "Far stronger than the likes of me!"

A pleasant breeze brushed snow against our hair and faces. The girl's gem-bright eyes opened wide, then she blushed bright red—not only her cheeks, but her whole head, down to the nape of her neck.

"Thank you," she practically whispered. "I'll keep trying."

"I really mean it." I brushed flecks of ice off her ribbon, then moved away. I couldn't afford to rest on my laurels either.

"Mr. Allen," Stella called.

"Allen!" Lily hollered. "We need to get this mess cleaned up before breakfast!"

"I'll be right with you," I answered, thinking that they looked awfully happy considering that they'd just started work on turning this sheet of ice back into a square. I wondered if I would ever get that shirt and coat back.

"Excuse me, sir!" Tina tugged on my sleeve.

"The apostles are formidable opponents," I told her. "We need to prevent that wyrm's revival at any cost."

Brilliant though she was, Tina still lacked Lydia's experience. She had so much more to learn. I had misgivings about getting her involved, and yet...

I stopped and winked over my shoulder. "Would Your Highness

lend me your aid?”

Unmistakable joy flooded the girl’s face. “Yes,” she said, hair standing to attention. “Yes, sir! You can count on me!”

“Tina, keep your mana under con—”

Before I could finish my sentence—or take any other preventative measure—an eruption of azure mana called forth a dozen or more towering ice flowers around us. They punched through the ice-resistant barriers, extending the ice sheet all the way to the main street.

“Tina,” Stella said heavily, “I realize you’re excited, but you need to keep it within reason.”

“Really, Lady Tina, you don’t have to take after Lady Lydia in *everything*,” Lily added. The pair had hastily shielded the infirmary from freezing.

Cries of surprise drifted over from the main street. I would need to apologize later.

“O-Oh, um... I didn’t do it on purpose.” Tina shrank, then dashed off toward the other two noblewomen. “I...I’ll go help with the cleanup too!”

She’ll be practicing spell control for a while yet, I thought, gazing up at the oversized ice flowers.

All of a sudden, I felt a weight on my right shoulder. Turning, I beheld the Dark Lord’s esteemed feline companion.

“Kifune? How can I help you?”

The white cat gave a single mew and promptly vanished.

Come again?

“The wyrm may revive sooner than anticipated?” I repeated to myself, lost in thought while I watched the three noblewomen at play. “What on earth is happening in the city of craft?”

*

“Those are your orders. Levi and I will accompany Cadet Ilaios into the heart of the altar. Zelbert Régnier, I trust you to take command here.”

The voices of the two hooded, gray-robed girls atop the capital’s

great clock tower carried no emotion. Behind Her Holiness's personal attendant Viola and Third Apostle Levi, the new apostle candidate, Ilaios, lay prostrate on the roof.

"Certainly. You won't regret it," the new fourth apostle, the white-haired and crimson-eyed Zelbert Régnier, answered with mock courtesy. His gaze never left the hurried movements of Heaven-and-Earther forces on the streets below and the gaping pit in the wreckage of the independence memorial.

I, Fifth Apostle Ibush-nur, hung back with Sixth Apostle Ifur. Her Holiness had chosen us, bestowing upon us new names and the white robes of our order, yet Viola, Levi, and Io—who had withdrawn following the recent battle for the city—belonged to a world apart. Even the new fourth apostle could ill afford to push his insolence too far.

The pair, however, said nothing. They merely took Ilaios, on whom the prime apostle had bestowed the sublime duty of retrieving Blaze of Ruin despite his rat-clan blood, and vanished. No doubt they had entered the pit in the memorial, where I'd heard that beastfolk from the eastern capital were working day and night, steadily dispelling the wyrm's icy prison. Part of me resented the unclean ones for claiming such glory, but Her Holiness's will trumped all—even if she had chosen not to share the particulars.

Régnier put his spectacles back on and gave an exaggerated shrug, shaking the dagger on his belt. "Sheesh. Way to put the new guy on the spot."

Despite his cavalier tone, the dhampir had achieved startling results in the brief time since his arrival in the city of craft. I couldn't afford to take him lightly.

"You two." He waved his right hand at us, white robe flapping. "Earl Raymond Despenser of the kingdom and Marchese Fossi Folonto of the league, isn't it? If you want to take charge, I won't stop you."

Ripples of disquiet broke my peace of mind. The left arm I had lost and regrown in the recent battle pained me.

"Ibush-nur and Ifur, Zelbert Régnier," I said. I would not tolerate abuse, even from a higher-ranking apostle.

"Oh, sorry." Régnier frowned and ruffled his white hair. "I didn't mean to offend. Cut me some slack."

"No offense taken," I said, while Ifur held his peace.

It seemed that Régnier could be reasonable. Although I'd heard that he had been a "savior of his country" in life, I sensed no loyalty to the kingdom from him.

He snapped his fingers, and chains of blood formed a variety of wards around us.

What unbelievable silence. This man could dispatch Ifur and me with ease if he really wanted to.

"I want to make sure we're on the same page about our forces." The dhampir projected a map of the city with allies' names trailing alongside. The chill I felt never seemed to so much as cross his mind. "The Sa—I mean, Her Holiness's attendant Viola, Third Apostle Levi Atlas, and Cadet Ilaios, who's under the prime apostle's supervision. Then there's me, you, and the inquisitors and heavy spell-soldiers that made it through the opening battles of this war."

Ifur and I had bristled when Régnier nearly denied Her Holiness her proper style. Was this man truly an apostle? I wondered bitterly, but the list of projected names went on.

Gerard Wainwright: test subject.

Isolde Talito: vampiress.

Régnier massaged his temples. "The pitiful ex-Wainwright locked up in the Addison house can't bear the brands of any more great spells, but *it* could prove useful if handled properly. The same goes for the cadet who won't stop wailing about her fiancé running out on her, and for Miles Talito, armed with North Star, and his Heaven-and-Earther troops. Oh, and then there are the beastfolk, but we can't count on them to fight when they're pouring all their mana into unfreezing the wyrm—Ilaios included."

Ifur and I concurred. Régnier had learned the disposition of our forces well considering his short time here.

"But Viola and the third apostle are our strongest fighters," he said, adjusting his spectacles, "and they can't move until the ritual's complete."

"That won't pose a problem," my companion replied.

"I second Ifur's opinion," I added.

During the recent battle, we had faced Heaven's Sword, the Swordmaster, and that detestable "defective key," and we had lost. If not for Io's intervention, we might not be here now. And for that very reason, we had prepared for the next engagement. We would not hesitate to play every card up our sleeves.

"Optimistic, aren't you?" Régnier's crimson eyes narrowed. His gaze pierced us, sharp as a blade of blood. "Don't forget, *he's* in the enemy camp. Allen of the wolf clan. He might not have the Lady of the Sword or the Lady of Light with him, but our advantage is still more fragile than you think."

A crash echoed through the city, probably the result of some blasting.

Régnier had a point—it wouldn't pay to underestimate that man. But we had already devised our countermeasures: forget the trivialities and overwhelm him with sheer quantity. A master of meddling with others' spells he might be, but even he must have his limits.

Ifur and I exchanged a slight nod.

"The enemy has lost the Swordmaster, one of their best pieces on the board," I argued. "You saw to that yourself. And we needn't fear a surprise attack with the wards and surveillance network that Io left us to rely on."

"Even with Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage on their side, we won't get the worst of any direct confrontation," added Ifur.

"I hope you're right," Régnier said glumly and closed his eyes. He edged his dagger free...then resheathed it and clapped us on the shoulder. "Well, a job's a job. I'll figure something out. I'm counting on you guys."

The bloody wards dissolved, and the oppressive atmosphere dispersed.

Ifur struck the breastplate he wore under his robes. "I will return to the spell-soldiers," he said and vanished.

Régnier grinned at me. "That man you've got locked up in the Addison house—Ernest Fosse, was it? Taking him from the royal capital was a good move. Allen's as soft as they come where his

inner circle's concerned. Nothing could make him retreat to the royal capital now. All according to Her Holiness's plan, I guess."

"Oh, yes. That fellow."

I hesitated briefly. The man had completely slipped my mind. I had abducted Ernest during the Algren rebellion on direct orders from Her Holiness, but he remained merely the head of a middling-sized merchant house.

"You seem to hold the Brain of the Lady of the Sword in high regard," I said frankly, my tone questioning.

"Why wouldn't I? What is it you call him? The 'defective key'? Fair enough. Allen hasn't mastered his abilities like the Silver Wolf did a century ago or Shooting Star did a century before that. His mana capacity's below average too."

"Then—"

"But you know..." Régnier interrupted, advancing to the edge of the roof. His white robes flapped as he transfixed me with a crimson gaze awash in...pity. "He's had run-ins with a dragon, a Hero, a devil, and a vampire, and he's still alive and kicking. And that's just the ones I know about. Get rid of any smug assumptions. They'll get you killed."

I made no reply. To us apostles, death was but a passing thing. Any martyrs among us would rise again on the day Her Holiness restored the true Resurrection.

"They'll get you killed"? An empty threat!

"Well, then..." Régnier stretched, perhaps mistaking my silence for agreement. "I might as well go comfort our little crybaby cadet. Oh, but first, would you mind answering one last question?"

"What do you wish to know?" I asked, stifling my feelings. This man still outranked me, and I could ill afford to offend him.

Régnier spread his arms, and Her Holiness's mark, the barbed serpent, appeared on his cheek. "As you see, I never had a choice. But what made you and Ifur become apostles? I doubt you got fed up with your old place in the pecking order. Enlighten me, for future reference."

Disquiet seized me. I had never spoken of that night to anyone. Yet this dhampir's eyes held nothing but undiluted curiosity. So, why

not?

"Because we saw it, both Ifur and I," I said at last, closing my eyes. Formulae for Resurrection and Radiant Shield writhed across the back of my right hand as I pressed it to my heart.

More than ten years had gone by since that storm-lashed night in the eastern capital. Ifur had come to pursue his studies in the city, and together we had whiled away our nights in drunken rambling, stewing in our melancholy as heirs to declining houses with no other prospects to speak of. Stumbling deep into the city's subterranean waterways, we had come face-to-face with the resurrected Saint *and her teacher*.

I slowly opened my eyes and declared, "We witnessed a return from death—a true miracle. And after that experience..."

We could never return to our old world.

Thunder roared and lightning flashed, just as they had on that night.

After a few moments, Régnier let out a small breath. "I guess none of us have it easy."

He gave his left hand a listless wave. To my shock, in the eastern district beyond the great metal bridge, a spire fell, severed by a blade of blood.

Régnier whistled badly. "Dodged, huh? Well, well. Whoever they are, they know their business. Don't bother chasing them," the fourth apostle said, forestalling the detection spell I'd been about to deploy. "This city's about to play host to a battle that'll go down in history. Think twice about beating the bushes here, because you never know what monsters might pop out. Remember the old brawler who swooped in to save the half-dead Swordmaster and the Addison kid? He nearly killed Isolde with one strike and kicked my left arm clean off."

"As you say."

A beastfolk who could contend with a greater apostle and a vampire, even an immature one? The martial artist could have stepped out of my nightmares.

"If we manage to guard the ice wyrm until it gets back on its feet, we win," Régnier said, crimson eyes alight with the joy of

battle. “Time to show what we’re made of, Apostle Ibush-nur. ‘For the Saint and the Holy Spirit,’ and all that!”

*

“Damn that man! Why must every greater apostle be a monster?!” I cursed in the nearby alley I’d fled to after narrowly avoiding the invisible sword stroke from the great clock tower. I had taken every precaution, casting decoy spells as well as wards of concealment and observing from an extreme distance, yet the freak had still discovered me—Master Gregory Algren’s faithful servant Ito.

A deserted window reflected my profile, including the small horns that showed through a fresh rent in my hood. I would need to procure a replacement. Being exposed as a demon would hamper my activities and inconvenience my young master.

Still, what were the apostles doing beneath the independence memorial? I could surmise that they had assembled beastfolk converts to speed the wyrm’s recovery, but why did I see no one enter or leave? Amid a whirl of questions, I noticed something amiss.

“The wind died?” I murmured, instantly casting a detection spell only for it to vanish.

Wh-What on earth...?

“Oh-ho. Fancy meeting a *Tijerina* girl in a place like this,” said a young woman—no, a girl, practically a child.

I shrieked, fell in a disgraceful heap, and froze, covered in goose bumps.

Wh-What can a mere mortal do against mana like this?! It’s inconceivable!

“Fear not. I don’t mean to eat you.”

The girl revealed herself with an exasperated wave. She was short, with snow-white skin and silver hair, which she wore in pigtails, their ends tied with black and azure ribbons. Her white-and-pale-green cloak covered garments of the same hues. Her sleeve swayed, and a white cat appeared at her feet.

“For one thing...” The girl vanished before my startled eyes, only

for her voice to continue from behind me. "*I* gave the Tijerinas secret orders to surrender to the kingdom two hundred years ago. I've heard tell of your hardships from the Croms and Gardners as well. You must belong to the cadet branch that attempted to migrate to some eastern land and failed."

Only a handful of people in the kingdom should have known my secret house name: Master Gregory, my late parents, and a few long-lived members of the main house.

I forced my bone-dry mouth to speak. "M-Might you be Her Dark Ma—"

"I go by 'Rill' here." A cold, pale little finger pressed on the nape of my neck, forcing me to prepare for death as its owner commanded, "Don't mount the stage. You may leave alive, but the Algren boy certainly won't. This war won't stop at a mere man-made wyrm. Nothing could be more terrible than mortal obsession."

How long had she known about me—about us? And what did she mean, the wyrm had been "made"? While fresh questions made my head spin, her cheerful voice floated down to me from above. I looked up to find the silver-haired girl seated, legs crossed, on a crumbling stone wall.

"I don't suppose you're looking for a new mission, girl," she said, stroking the white cat on her lap and flashing the world's most frightening smile, "but how would you like to do me a favor instead? There's a matter I'd like to be sure of. Surely you know what they say of meetings like ours: 'It must be fate.'"

Chapter 2

"Oh, honestly! How do we still not know the latest news from Lalannoy?! And father's council is drawing on interminably. Don't tell me something's happened to Allen and the others," I grumbled to myself, pacing my palace chambers. The windowpanes reflected my blonde hair and white sorceress's garb.

The weather outside was lamentably dismal. I couldn't even see the Royal Academy's Great Tree through the fog.

Two beast-eared children, one with long white hair and the other with scarlet, had fallen asleep before the hearth. The two great elementals still wore their pale cloaks and were using the white wolf Chiffon for a pillow. I risked waking them unless I kept my nerves in check. Lia the Blazing Qilin had been spending her days at the palace long enough to grow used to my habits, but Caren—my younger friend and perhaps future sister-in-law—had left Atra the Thunder Fox in my care because she had a meeting to attend at Allen & Co. And yet, my mounting impatience proved impossible to suppress.

"Never forget to conduct yourself with dignity, Cheryl," my late mother had always cautioned me as a child. "After all, you are a princess."

Ten days had already passed since we had lost contact with the city of craft, capital of the Lalannoy Republic. The House of Zani, among the finest lines of eastern sorcerers, had been observing the region across the Four Heroes Sea and reported a clash between the Bright Wings Party and the Heaven and Earth Party. Following a tremendous surge of mana, my dear Allen, with whom I had attended the Royal Academy, our envoy Lily, and their companions had seemingly fled to the city outskirts. We had received no new information since, and magical communications were being jammed.

To make matters worse, the west of the kingdom seemed to have

suffered a disturbance as well, and my father, his ministers, and Dukes Howard, Leinster, and Lebufera were all occupied debating our response. Could the demonfolk have finally broken the two-hundred-year standoff at Blood River and made their first move since the War of the Dark Lord? Surely not.

A radiant, scarlet-haired young woman dressed for swordplay looked up from the documents she'd been perusing, seated in a wooden chair with her long legs crossed. The magnificent enchanted blade Cresset Fox rested against an empty seat beside her.

"Sit still for once, Cheryl," said Duke Leinster's eldest daughter, Lydia, the Lady of the Sword, my best friend and rival in love. "Do you want to wake the children?"

"Of course not," I answered sheepishly.

She's supposed to be the one who panics at times like this.

Despite my misgivings, I sank into the chair Allen had given me when I'd gone to study in the city of water. Papers slid across my desk.

"I summarized everything we got out of Yana," Lydia said. "Connecting concrete house names to some of the eight ancient grand dukedoms was a breakthrough, given the gaps in our records, although I wish we'd gotten all of them. Do you want tea too?"

"Yes," I answered, still puzzled.

By "Yana," Lydia meant the princess of the massive Yustinian Empire to our north. Our nations had broken off relations since the Algren rebellion, but Yana and her attendant, Huss Saxe, were staying in the royal capital to conclude a long-overdue peace treaty. Unwilling to pass up an opportunity, Lydia and I had spent days questioning her about old lore handed down in the imperial family.

I calmed my mind and studied the papers.

"Everyone knows the sole extant grand dukedom," I murmured. "It belongs to the House of Alvern, the line of Heroes. But I'd never heard of this House of Etherfield before, although its 'star wardens' apparently aided the Alverns until the age of strife five hundred years ago. We still don't know how it's related to Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield, who led the raid on this city, especially since he called himself 'the Sage.' My! That tea smells lovely."

"Made with the finest Rondoiran leaves. They never see market, so savor every drop. And don't forget that Ellie's father had similar titles."

I accepted the cup my best friend offered me in both hands and took a sip. Delicious.

According to Allen, the Great Tree wardens had been a clan dedicated to the protection of the World Tree that had towered into the heavens in the days when gods walked the earth. The tree wardens, meanwhile, had guarded the seedlings of the World Tree that had taken root in each land after the gods had gone.

Or so we're told. Still...it's no use. The information we have is too fragmented for me to see the whole picture.

"Then you have Grand Duke Ernestin of the Shining Bow, who taught the founder of the Yustin dynasty," I continued. "That leaves four houses we don't know. These must be imperial family secrets, I suppose. We owe Yana and Huss our gratitude."

No doubt the old emperor had given his permission, but they had still been a tremendous help.

"Yana has a better attitude than Tiny, who has a rebellious streak where I'm concerned, or Caren, who doesn't know how to treat her sister-in-law," Lydia said matter-of-factly, teacup in hand. "Still, she shouldn't rely on Huss's kindness so much."

"Is that the pot calling the kettle black I hear?" I set my cup on its saucer and gave an exaggerated shrug, ignoring her references to the girl who had launched Allen's tutoring career and to his younger sister by adoption. I'd heard it all before. "Remind me, which Leinster lady has been clinging to a certain young man's affections since her first day at the Royal Academy? A little birdy told me that she still makes him manage all her money to this day."

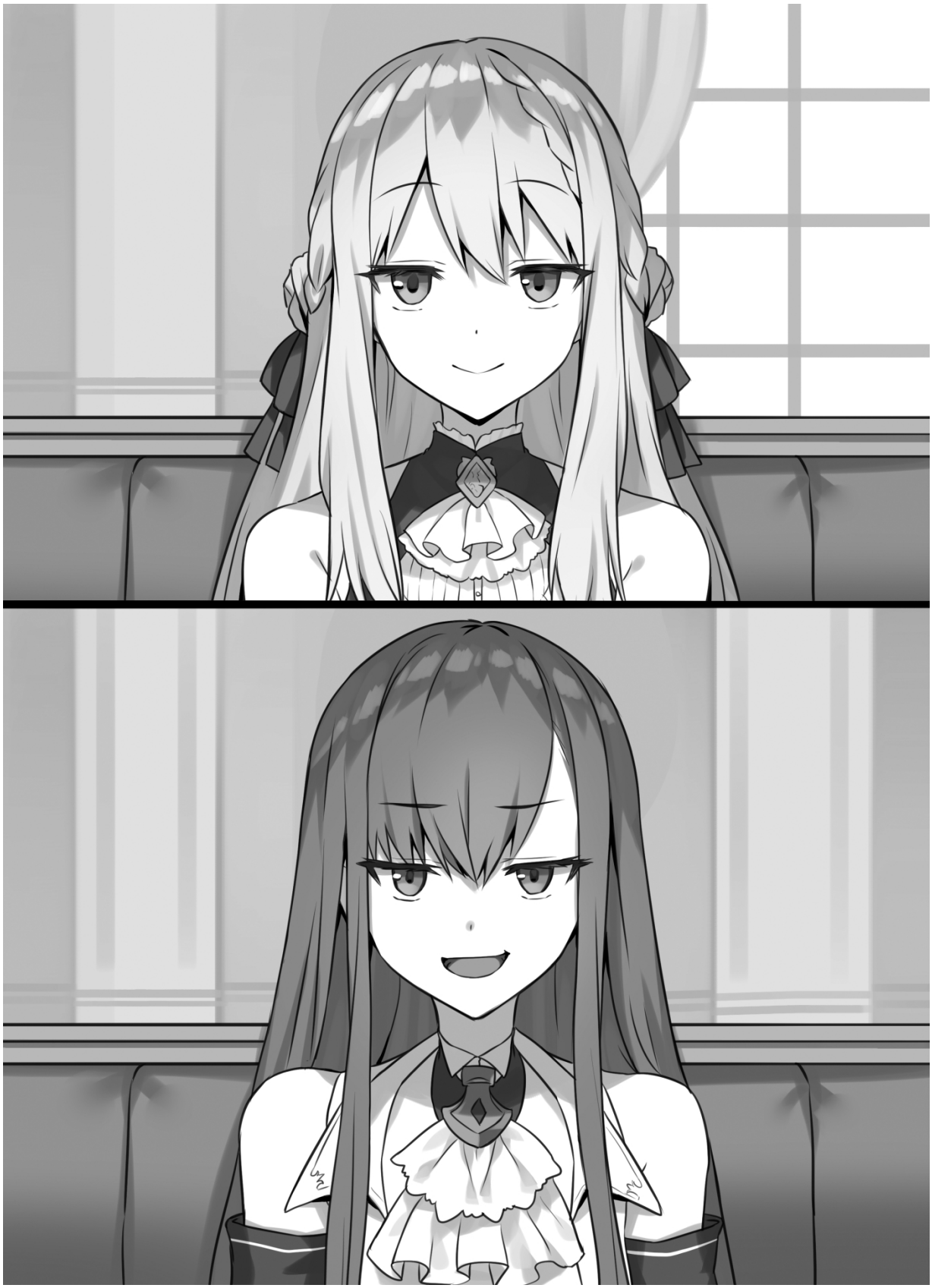
Lydia had performed more feats of arms than I could count, going back as far as our school days. I had taken part in a number of those incidents myself, as had the late Zelbert Régnier. And while most had been consigned to secrecy, she had still received a reward each time. All well and good, except that the young woman across from me had abandoned all responsibility for actually *using* her wealth.

"Who are you talking about?" Lydia asked, running her left ring finger through her bangs and refusing to look me in the eye. "*I* don't take advantage of Allen's kindness one bit."

"Oh? Whenever did I say 'Allen'?" My best friend and romantic rival had a brilliant mind—except where *he* was concerned.

"Cheryl," she growled through a strained smile, mana lifting her long, lustrous scarlet locks around her, "if you want a fight, I'll give you one."

"Don't be silly. Do you want to wake the children?"



A glance at the hearth revealed Atra and Lia lying with their faces buried in Chiffon's belly. If only Anko, the black-cat familiar, were here to complete the scene.

Lydia flung her fiery plumes at me, eyes blazing with undisguised fury, so I dispelled them. Allen had coached me in magical interference, and since she clung to a petulant need to be his star pupil in everything, showing off my greater mastery hit home.

"Y-You...scheming princess!" she spluttered. "Try to make that twisted heart of yours half as pretty as your face, why don't you! Allen agrees with me."

"How rude. As I've always said, I'm honest as a princess can be, and my heart's as pure as the driven snow. Allen even complimented me after I appointed him my investigator. 'You always know how to surprise me, Cheryl,' he said!"

Admittedly, I had been a touch too forceful in the way I rushed things through. Still, I had finally managed to get Allen an official position: personal investigator to Her Royal Highness First Princess Cheryl Wainwright. I could openly summon my soulmate to the palace and invite him to attend me at public functions!

While I swayed, hands pressed together, Lydia's gaze turned mean. "Really?" she said. "You take his 'compliments' at face value? Well, well."

"Wh-What are you getting at?" I asked warily, sensing that the tables might be about to turn.

"Nothing, really. If it doesn't bother you, why start worrying? Now, what time is it?" Lydia made a show of getting out her pocket watch, which formed a matching pair with Allen's.

"Th-That's playing dirty!"

"Silly." Lydia swept back her scarlet hair and thrust her index finger in my face. "The House of Leinster has a lot of rules, but 'go easy on your rival in love' isn't one of them. He's mine! He always has been, and he always will be."

"Just keep telling yourself that, y-you...contrary noblewoman!" I sprang to my feet, teeth clenched as I fumbled for a retort.

"I'm only stating facts." Lydia sneered from her seat. "Give up. I mean he...he called me his 'one and only partner,' and he made a

magical contract with me, and he gave me a new ribbon for my birthday, and now that I'm eighteen, once his next birthday comes around..." My best friend and senior by a few months broke into a giggle, no doubt thinking of Allen. So much for the imperious Lady of the Sword.

How am I supposed to stay mad at her when she gets like this?

"Lydia. Come back down to earth," I called, anger quenched, although I still managed a reproving stare.

My scarlet-haired friend blinked, then cleared her throat with a hint of embarrassment. "Anyway, you're first in line to the throne now, remember? Can *you* picture a match between our future queen and a wolf-clan boy working out?"

I groaned. The "houseless" beastfolk occupied an undeservedly low place in the kingdom's social hierarchy. And to make matters worse, Allen was only wolf clan by adoption. Common sense dictated that he and I could never—

"Wh-What about you, then?!" I protested, shaking off that foreboding line of thought. "I don't see how a duke's daughter would have it any easier."

"If worse comes to worst, I'll flee the country," Lydia said. "My place in the line of succession dropped because of that trip to the city of water, which leaves me even less to worry about than before. I wonder where we should go next."

"Wh-Wh-What?!"

The Four Great Ducal Houses had intermingled with the royal line at our kingdom's inception, and their members were assigned places in the line of succession—although admittedly only as a formality. Naturally, a higher position translated to a greater role in government.

D-Don't tell me she planned that far ahead when she took Allen and ran off to the league!

"Oh, honestly." I sat back down in a huff, realizing my disadvantage.

The children's ears and tails twitched in their sleep, and Chiffon shot me a reproachful glare. The white wolf, it seemed, had fully settled into a maternal role.

Why won't you take my side for once?

I added milk and sugar to my teacup and stirred them in with a spoon.

"Tell me," I said, "do you remember that one time at the Royal Academy? You know, when Allen never came to the café with the sky-blue roof, even though he'd promised to meet us there? He was researching something with Régnier, and he lost track of the time. Weren't they looking up the eight grand dukedoms back then?"

A tinge of loneliness entered Lydia's expression. "I remember."

Baron Zelbert Régnier: our schoolmate and Allen's best friend. Also a dhampir who had put an end to his younger sister's wakeless dream and a champion who had saved the kingdom from a great summoning spell. Those brief, hectic days that the four of us had spent together had been my youth in the truest sense of the word.

But Régnier had risen from the dead at the church's hands and joined the ranks of their apostles. Nothing we could do would change that. And Allen had insisted so forcefully on traveling to Lalannoy because Régnier had called him there.

"Your Royal Scheming-ness couldn't believe that Allen would break his word and flew into a panic, shouting about how 'he must have gotten caught up in something serious.'" Lydia chuckled, although her teasing tone sounded forced, as if she hoped to distract herself from something. "It really was hilarious, looking back on it. Maybe I should ask Anna to dig up the video orb sometime."

"I see we recall events quite differently," I said. "I believe *you* broke down first. You kept nervously checking the clock, didn't you, Lady Lydia Leinster? You were practically in tears by the end! Isn't that why you started carrying a pocket watch?"

"I wish you'd stop fabricating memories. As if I would ever fall to pieces like that."

"You did."

"I did not."

We locked glares. Fiery plumes and flecks of light collided.

I know what this is. Anxiety is gnawing at both of us, deep down. Allen is strong, but his heart is too soft for his own good. When he faces Régnier, turning a blade on his best friend might prove—

Atra and Lia bolted awake, ears and tails bristling. They shared a look, then flung themselves on us, shouting.

"Lydia!"

"Allen trouble!"

"Night when moon gets round!"

"Very, very scary!"

The children's earnest gazes bored into us as they cried in unison:

"So, we go save him!"

I fell speechless. Adorable they might be, but these girls were still great elementals—beings beyond mortal comprehension. And they found something "scary." We had exactly one week until the next full moon—eight days, including this one.

Lydia strode to the door and opened it, Cresset Fox hanging at her hip. "Romy, contact everyone concerned at once. Celenissa, keep an eye on the children," she commanded the two maids standing guard.

"Certainly, my lady." The black-haired, bespectacled second-in-command of the Leinster Maid Corps curtsied.

"Of course, Lady Lydia." The corps's number five, a relative of Ceynoth "the Headhunter," scooped up Atra and Lia and set them astride Chiffon, who had left the room with them.

"Be good girls, now," my scarlet-haired friend told the newly content children, giving them a soft hug before reentering the room and closing the door.

"We ought to hurry to the council chamber and— Lydia?"

I didn't know when I'd seen her looking so uneasy. She seized my left hand the moment she got within reach. I felt her trembling.

"Cheryl," she murmured, "I, um, need a favor."

"I'm listening," I replied. She could be difficult and selfish, and I couldn't stand the way she tried to keep Allen all to herself, but Lydia Leinster was my best friend.

"Thank you."

The crackle of crumbling firewood drowned out her dwindling whisper.

Lydia raised her head. She hadn't said much, but I'd had no choice but to accede to her request.

"Sorry," she said. "You were the only one I could drag into this."

"I suppose so," I answered, with difficulty, and gazed out the window.

All this time, I had wondered why Lydia hadn't followed Allen to Lalannoy. In the past, she would have forced her way into his party, just as Tina and Stella had. But not this time. No matter how much she had matured since our student days, I'd found that hard to believe.

Silently, I held my left hand to my chest.

My best friend had wavered up until the very last moment, debating whether to involve me when I must be one of the church's targets and she was sworn to protect me. She had foreseen that Zelbert Régnier wouldn't appear before Allen until the decisive moment.

"It will be all right, Lydia," I said, hugging her. "I won't make you bear the burden alone."

"Cheryl," she murmured, with a look of sorrow.

"It will be all right. I promise."

From here on out, this is our fight.

"Now, what are we waiting for?" I continued. "We need to wrestle permission out of my father if we want to set out for the city of craft! Isn't that what you asked Felicia to do you that favor for?"

*

"A message from Sally for you, Miss Fosse. Margrave Solos Solnhofen has arrived and is being shown to the drawing room as we speak."

"Th-Thank you for letting me know, Emma." Felicia Fosse—a bespectacled girl with long chestnut hair, all skin and bones except for her full breasts—stood and bobbed her head repeatedly. She'd been doing paperwork for Lydia to take her mind off other business—something about arranging supplies for an "expedition"—but she was still stiff with nerves.

Emma bowed courteously to the sofa where Ellie and I sat before leaving the room. Along with Sally Walker, the Leinster Maid Corps's beautiful number four had been propping up Felicia since the company opened for business. "Miss Caren, Miss Walker," they had asked us not long ago, "would you consider attending this meeting as well? Mr. Allen has given his permission."

It looked like their fears had proven to be founded. My friend didn't feel comfortable around men, with the exception of her family and my brother. At the same time, Ellie and I had been feeling uneasy ourselves since we'd learned that something had gone wrong in Lalannoy. Maybe the maids were thinking of all three of us.

Felicia fussed her way over to us and tugged the sleeve of my uniform. "L-Listen, Caren, I don't look weird in this, d-do I?"

"Felicia," I said, "do you know how many times you've asked that question since this morning?"

"I...I mean, look at me."

Who would believe that this indecisive girl ran a business that had made people in every corner of the kingdom sit up and take notice?

Well, she'll do fine once the meeting starts. She's always had more guts than she lets on.

"You look amazing!" Ellie chimed in, hands pressed together. I had been spending more time with my younger friend in the past few days. Seeing her sit there beaming in her maid uniform, blonde hair tied in pigtails with white ribbon, I could begin to understand why Allen called her an "angel," although I still had my doubts.

"B-But a military uniform? Really?" Felicia protested, slipping off her hat and clutching it to her chest in embarrassment. I felt my gaze sharpen as the gesture gave her breasts added emphasis they definitely didn't need.

The Ducal House of Leinster had ordered Felicia's uniform tailored specially for her, and its white fabric and long skirt suited her perfectly. And yet...

Where are Tina, Lynne, and Alice when I need them?!

"This can't be your first business negotiation, right?" I asked with some asperity, lamenting the absence of comrades who shared my lack of development in one particular area. "What do you usually

do?”

“I’ve a-always made do with whatever seemed professional!” Felicia pouted like a child. “And when it came time to negotiate, I could get away with just sitting next to Allen and adding the occasional comment, so I haven’t had that many chances to talk to really important people.”

Allen, you’ve cut my friend way too much slack. If you must spoil someone, you ought to save it for your one and only little sister. Expect a piece of my mind when you get back.

“Oh, is that so?” I said, steeling my resolve. “I suppose that makes Ellie and me standins for Allen, then. You have to learn how to talk to a man one-on-one sooner or later, you know?”

“You don’t have to be so mean about it, Caren!” a teary-eyed Felicia snapped before hiding behind our startled younger friend. “Oh, Ellieee!”

Whatever am I going to do with her?

The silver wing-and-staff insignia that marked me as vice president of the student council caught the light.

“We’ll all go look at clothes together next time. How does that sound, Miss Head Clerk?”

Felicia groaned. “You sound just like Allen.”

“Of course I do. I *am* his sister.” I stood up, swelling with pride. My ears rose and my tail wagged, but I couldn’t help that. Doing my best impression of Allen, I brought a finger to Felicia’s forehead and gave her a light shove.

She squealed. “C-Caren? What was that for?”

“You could always wear your Royal Academy uniform, like I am. You haven’t gotten rid of it, have you?”

“N-No, I haven’t, but...” Felicia shrank, to my confusion and Ellie’s.

Beyond the windows, distant thunder rumbled. I didn’t like where this was going.

My best friend pressed her fingers together. Her gaze wandered bashfully, then came to rest beseechingly on Ellie. “When I tried it on,” she mumbled, “it felt tight in the ch-chest.”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” Ellie said. “M-My shirts haven’t

been fitting right recently either."

I held my peace. I didn't feel dissatisfied with my own chest. On the other hand, if Allen turned out to prefer women with— No. That was how a certain Lady of the Sword would think.

"Well, Head Clerk Felicia Fosse? What are you waiting for?" I dusted off my uniform with my hands. "Aren't you glad Tina and Alice aren't here? They'd declare you an enemy for certain—just like they did Ellie."

"What do you mean, 'enemy'?" Felicia stammered.

"M-Ms. Caren! That wasn't very nice," Ellie whined.

An elven man with striking reddish-brown hair lounged in one of the drawing room's chairs. His pale-green formal wear was distinctively western. He had shown me kindness during the Algren rebellion, when I had ridden from the eastern to the western capital alone.

I doffed my beret and bowed deeply.

"Why, Caren!" he exclaimed.

"Thank you for all you did for me in the western capital, my lord. My underclassman and I accompanied my friend today at her request. I hope you don't mind." I shot a glance at the pair hiding behind me, willing them to step up and introduce themselves next.

"Please, none of that." Margrave Solos Solnhofen, who had distinguished himself as a member of the Shooting Star Brigade in the War of the Dark Lord and spent the two centuries since guarding the western frontier, waved his hand. "I won't be able to go on living in the west if it gets out that I made the brave rider of the lone flight westward and sister of the new Shooting Star bow her head to me. Our old second-in-command has been boasting of you to everyone she can get hold of, and she's the closest thing to a living goddess we've got."

"Y-You don't say."

Duchess Letty, what do you think you're doing?!

Despite a growing headache, I pushed Felicia and Ellie forward.

Lord Solos narrowed his eyes. "This young lady in the maid uniform must be Ellie Walker. I marched all the way to the eastern

capital, but I never had the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"Y-Yes, my lord." Ellie stood up straighter. Anyone could see how tense she was, but she still managed to spread her skirt in a curtsy. "I am Ellie Walker, personal maid to Her Highness Lady Tina Howard."

"The Flower Sage—*ahem*, Chieftain Chise has told me much about you, including that she means to instruct you in the full breadth and depth of her art."

The young maid let out a startled cry. "Ch-Chieftain Chise said *that*?"

The Flower Sage, Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe of the demisprites, was teaching Ellie the inner workings of botanical magic at my brother's request. The officers of the Shooting Star Brigade were the stuff of fairy tales. It felt strange to know that they talked about us.

My best friend stood stiff as a statue.

"Felicia! Say something!" I hissed, elbowing her as I returned my beret to my head.

"R-Right," she whispered back. Several deep breaths later, she came up beside me and removed her own hat. "My name is Felicia Fosse, and I serve Allen & Co. as head clerk. Allow me to express my sincere gratitude for granting me this meeting."

She carried that off perfectly. Her voice didn't even shake. Honestly, this girl!

"Solos Solnhofen," the margrave said, rising to his feet. "I spend my time growing flowers, fruits, and vegetables in the western countryside, when my heartless erstwhile superiors aren't dropping tricky problems in my lap. I hope you'll forgive me for postponing our discussion on such short notice the other day. Even in the west, your reputation precedes you."

"It's kind of you to say so," Felicia replied, taking a seat across from him with an unaffected smile. I sat to her right.

Ellie took a tray from her cousin Sally, who was standing by in the corridor, and started pouring tea. Emma silently closed the door, leaving herself outside.

"I know this scent," the margrave said, scrutinizing his cup. "Were these leaves grown on my lands?"

"Yes. Duchess Letty kindly presented them to us when she called at our offices," my best friend answered. Her face was free of strain. Under the table, however, her left hand held fast to my skirt, and I felt it tremble slightly.

Meanwhile, Ellie finished deftly serving tea and took her seat beside me.

Felicia drew in a short breath and looked the margrave in the eye. "My lord—"

"'Solos,' please. I won't take offense."

"Lord Solos, then. I believe that you made this visit to discuss a business arrangement with us. Did I hear correctly?"

The tension in the room mounted, infecting even Ellie and me. I held my breath, remembering something a cheerful Duchess Letty had once told me: "The Solnhofens have more coin than any other house in the west. Solos is a shrewder man of business than he lets on." And here Allen & Co. was, about to strike a deal with that same house. I could hardly believe it.

Lord Solos flashed a rueful grin, then nodded with composure. "Our old second-in-command tipped you off, I suppose. Yes, you heard right. I would have preferred to discuss matters while Allen was in residence, but matters of some urgency are recalling Duke Lebufera and me to the western capital. I leave the city by train this evening. I apologize for not calling on you sooner."

"To the western capital?" Ellie and I echoed in startled unison. Both noblemen had arrived in the city only days before.

"Our company would be glad to expand its commercial reach," Felicia replied, adjusting her spectacles. "Please, tell me clearly what you have in mind."

"You would? Splendid!"

"Yes. But first, I would like to discuss another matter that might enable us to reach a more congenial agreement. It concerns Allen's character."

"Indeed? And what about it?" Lord Solos looked perplexed.

Ellie and I had been briefed ahead of time. "When it comes time to negotiate," Felicia had told us, "I'm going to put collecting old folklore for Allen and the *favor* Lydia asked me to do for her first!

And I want you both to help! We need to make the margrave our accomplice."

We both sipped our tea with feigned indifference. It had begun.

Felicia turned to me, right on schedule. "Caren, you're Allen's sister. How do you see him?"

"Let me think," I said slowly, touching the beret on the table before me. "He's the kindest, bravest person I've ever met, and he doesn't know how to give up. He would never abandon someone in distress, and he'd give away everything he has without a second thought. On the other hand, he almost never gives anyone a chance to repay him."

My brother was a handful, almost impossible to manage. After all...

"In spite of which, he never forgets a kindness done to him, no matter how small. I'd say that about sums him up."

"Yes, I think so too." Felicia nodded. "Although he has a mean streak that pokes through every now and then."

"Mr. Allen is as kind as can be—even if he is a little mean." Ellie added her own reserved assent.

Lord Solos chuckled, having seemingly gleaned something from our discussion. "And?" the veteran of the War of the Dark Lord demanded. "What conditions would you impose on a country gentleman like myself to do a 'kindness' for the new Shooting Star you follow?"

"I have two requests," my best friend replied, undaunted.

She had always had an inner strength, but I still found myself taken aback. It reminded me of something my brother had once told me in the café with the sky-blue roof. "Felicia takes my breath away," he had said with feeling. "She could run the company without me, only Emma and Sally won't hear of it, so I don't see that happening anytime soon."

You're half right, Allen. I think I know how Felicia got so strong.

"First," she continued, "I'd like you to collect old legends and folklore when you investigate western markets. Our company plans to pursue the same policy, but we hope to avail ourselves of your lordship's connections."

“Ah, I see,” Lord Solos replied. “Very well. I’ll aid you. And your second condition?”

“We currently do business from the kingdom’s northern border to the Principality of Atlas in the south. With your lordship’s aid, we could expand our reach westward.” Felicia gazed out the window. She hadn’t answered the margrave’s question. The Great Tree’s silhouette swayed as she declared, “But I have no intention of stopping here.”

Lord Solos’s eyebrows rose a fraction. Ellie and I couldn’t interrupt.

Smiling from ear to ear, Felicia brought her hands together and unveiled her grand ambition.

“I want to eventually do business with every corner of the kingdom, the Yustinian Empire, the League of Principalities, the southern isles, the Lalannoy Republic, the commonwealth, and the Thirteen Free Cities. Oh, and the demonfolk as well.”

Silence filled the chamber. We were all too stunned speechless. Felicia had joined the company at my brother’s invitation, and he had asked her to “use this fresh canvas to create something magnificent.” But her plans were too big—too vast. Had her mind been on them all this time?

The margrave let out his breath and propped his elbows on the table. Nothing could hide the ambition blazing in his handsome eyes.

“So, now that you’ve filled my head with such a thrilling scheme,” he said, “what do you hope to talk me into? I don’t doubt it will shave years off my life, but I’ve learned to take unreasonable demands in stride. Come, tell me at your own pace.”

“By your leave, then.” Felicia gave a small nod and brought her hands together again. “I’d like you to personally question the elders of the long-lived races—elves, dwarves, demisprites, dragonfolk, and giants. Ask them for everything they know about the great elementals and the great spells.”

Lord Solos let out a strangled cry as the blood drained from his once composed features. I even heard his chair clatter.

“Allen asked the headmaster for more or less the same thing before the Algren rebellion,” Lydia had told me haughtily when I’d

left Atra with her that morning. “But the mess that followed caused interminable delays. If they can’t be bothered, we’ll have to get things moving ourselves. And I don’t care a fig about any secret accords among the long-lived races.”

Allen made it sound as though those agreements contributed to the ongoing decline of magic, but I didn’t know the specifics. Still, they must have carried a lot of weight, to judge by the margrave’s reaction.

Felicia, on the other hand, betrayed no change in her voice or expression. “My lord, I was born in the west as well,” she said, eyes gleaming with determination behind her spectacles. “I understand the immense authority that the elders of the long-lived races wield. However...” She pressed her hat to her chest, meeting the margrave’s stare head-on. “When our president says he wants to know something, there’s only one thing to be done: Seize the information he needs no matter what stands in our way! Not for the present, but for the battles to come.”

“Felicia,” Ellie and I murmured, moved. I’d known she was strong, but now I really felt it. With the state of affairs in Lalannoy still a mystery, she must have been as anxious as any of us, but she could still take actions for the future. No wonder Lydia had come straight to her when she needed a favor.

Lord Solos closed his eyes. At last, he said, “Might you persuade my vice commander, the professor, and the headmaster—Lord Rodde Foudre, the Archmage—to cooperate? The burden is too great for me to bear alone.”

“I’ve already spoken with them,” Felicia replied. “If you’ll only agree, Allen & Co. will lend its full support to the House of Solnhofen.”

Lord Solos gazed out the window at the Great Tree. He drew in a deep breath...and made up his mind. “Very well. The western houses can’t afford to ignore the church’s machinations any longer. It’s time we yielded to the course of history. And I’ve dumped quite a bit of trouble in Allen’s lap myself.”

“What ‘trouble’?” we asked as one. Words like that demanded an explanation.

According to Lydia, the kingdom's leaders had spent the past few days in councils. I'd assumed they were debating something to do with Lalannoy, but could there be another cause?

Margrave Solos Solnhofen gave no answer, but he sat up straighter in his chair. "Miss Felicia Fosse, I accept your proposal. The Royal Academy has suspended classes, I believe? Then I'll take Lord Rodde west with me. He'll make a fine souvenir for his relatives in the House of Foudre."

*

I kept my pen darting from page to page, single-mindedly sorting through paperwork by the light of a mana lamp. The rain still seemed to be coming down outside, and occasional peals of thunder shook the capacious tent.

Impressive ranks of desks and chairs filled this makeshift logistical headquarters in the heart of the old capital. It was the middle of a long rest period, and we were the only people in evidence. Nothing broke the silence save the shuffling of tarot cards at a nearby table.

"Wow!" Tina exclaimed.

"What a pretty set!" added Lily.

"Thank you. The reading is almost done, so wait just a little longer," said Lady Elna Lothringen, with an elegant smile. Heaven's Sage, a silver-and-gold-eyed beauty with short lilac hair, wore small spectacles and dressed as a sorceress in white and purple.

What had brought us here? Simple: Lalannoy's guardian angel had requested our presence, having finally freed up a few minutes for a meeting.

"Allen!" he had greeted me. "I hate to impose, but won't you help Elna manage our supplies?!"

"Arthur," I had replied, "have you considered that your courtesy loses some of its effect when I can see you have a battery of binding spells ready?"

I sighed, gingerly sifting through classified documents that hardly seemed meant for foreign eyes like mine. Not that I could blame

them for enlisting me—Lady Elna and the logistics division of the Lalannoyan army had only overextended themselves because I had relayed Rill's warning that the ice wyrm would revive at the next full moon. I formed the papers into a neat bundle, deposited it in a box marked "out," and inspected the next document. Then I froze.

"Excuse me, Lady Elna?" I called to Arthur's cousin and fiancée.

The great sorceress, scion of an empire that had once dominated the world and a true lady if ever there was one, looked up from shuffling her antique tarot cards. Something in her pretty smile filled me with dread.

"You needn't call me 'lady' anything, Allen," she said. "And keep quiet! I'm in the middle of a most important procedure. A loss of concentration now could throw off the whole divination."

Even Tina and Lily shushed me from the sofa where they sat.

Ugh.

Seeing Elna's hands stop, I levitated the document to her. It detailed the deployment of the whole army of the republic.

"Surely these are military secrets?" I pressed. "Leaving them in my hands poses—"

"No problem whatsoever."

The papers returned to my hands. She made short-range teleportation look effortless. While I marveled—although I tried not to show it—the great sorceress drew three cards from her deck and set them floating in the air. Tina's and Lily's eyes lit up.

"Arthur places his full confidence in you," Elna continued, "so I'll follow his example. And in any case, we can hardly be faulted for taking a few emergency measures when the republic's continued existence is in peril."

She had a point. If we lost the coming battle, it would spell the end for the Bright Wings. Lalannoy would doubtless fall under the church's rule.

I scratched my cheek and bit into one of Ridley's cookies. "And how do you really feel?"

"Arthur sped up our timetable for retaking the city, and my people have run themselves ragged trying to keep up. Your advice caused the change. So, might I suggest that it wouldn't kill you to lend a

hand? Or to relax for a moment and let me tell your fortune. You can trust my readings, you know? Although a certain someone always avoids them."

In my mind, I heard Arthur roar with laughter. "I can't make war with paperwork! I trust you'll tame it in my stead!"

"When this business is over," I said, speeding my pen across the pages, "what do you say we tie Arthur down and make him wade through all the postwar paperwork?"

"That," Elna replied, "sounds like a wonderful idea. I can't wait to put it into practice. Really, I can't."

We both sank into low chuckles.

"S-Sir? E-Elna?" ventured a nonplussed Tina.

"Don't you grow up to be like them, my lady," Lily cautioned.

How rude!

The tent flap opened, and Stella returned, wearing a cloak over her white uniform. "Mr. Allen, Elna, I've finished tending to the logistics officers who collapsed," she reported, with a radiant smile.

"Well done," I replied.

"Thank you," said the sorceress.

"Welcome back!" Tina called, waving.

"Join us, Lady Stella," Lily added, setting a fresh cushion on the sofa.

Stella glanced at the chair next to mine before removing her wet cloak and taking a seat beside her sister.

Elna touched her three floating cards. "I just finished my reading. We'll start with Lily, if you don't mind."

"Let's hear it!" Lily's bracelet and scarlet hair danced as her left hand shot eagerly into the air.

I set down my pen and shifted my chair to get a better view.

The first card turned over to reveal a cat-clan traveler in a battered cloak trudging up a steep track. Elna took it and held it out.

"This is the Wayfarer," she announced.

"The Wayfarer?" four voices repeated. We all exchanged looks, but none of us seemed familiar with the arcana. Perhaps the Lothringens maintained their own peculiar variants.

"This card signifies the potential to overcome any difficulty and

ultimately reach a destination or achieve a dream," the great sorceress explained. "Lily, it seems you have a hard road ahead of you, but I've no doubt you'll arrive at your goal. Have faith and keep pressing forward."

Lily giggled. "The Wayfarer, huh?"

She dreamed of becoming a maid, so she'd just about gotten her wish alre— Our eyes met for a fraction of a second while the Howard sisters were busy staring at the card. A grown woman graced me with a beautiful smile.

Wh-What brought that on?

Before I could consider the question, Lily clenched her fists and practically sang, "Thank you so much! I'll give it my very best!"

"I'm rooting for you," Elna said. "Now for Stella."

"I...I'm ready."

The moment had passed in the blink of an eye. I glanced at Lily, but she seemed her usual self. Had I imagined that smile?

The lilac-haired sorceress took the second card and displayed it. The design showed a white-clad woman in a temple of some kind, enveloping a fallen man in light.

"Hmm..." Tina murmured. "I feel like I know this one."

"Same here!" Lily chimed in.

While they pondered, Stella reached her conclusion. "I saw this picture when I was little. It's the Saint, isn't it?"

I recognized the image as well, although the version I'd seen in the eastern capital showed a fox-clan woman with white hair.

"Exactly." Elna gave an emphatic nod. "As commonly interpreted, this card means that you will save many people in your lifetime. But the choice rests with you."

"With me?" Stella sounded puzzled. Heavy rain pelted the tent.

The sorceress ran her fingers over the card, a wistful look in her eyes. "Lothringen tradition has it that the Saint pictured here wielded her true power for only one person in the course of her life. Please don't forget what you truly hold dear."

"What I hold dear? In that case, I have nothing to worry about."

"Stella?" Tina mumbled as her sister wrapped her in a gentle hug.

Like Lily, Stella stared at me for just a moment before turning

back to Elna. “Thank you very much.”

“Don’t give up,” the sorceress replied. “I’ll be cheering you on.”

My bracelet flashed, and my ring grew painfully tight.

What are you blaming me *for?!*

While I mentally grumbled at the angel and the witch, Lily took their side with a stare that seemed to say, “You’re such a callous *brute*, Allen!” I considered myself wrongly accused.

“And last but not least, Tina,” Elna said.

“Ready!” the little noblewoman called from Stella’s arms.

The floating card turned over and presented itself. It bore another design I’d never seen before: a sorcerer walking at the head of a crowd. Tina, Stella, and Lily seemed equally unfamiliar with it.

“Hmm...”

“This one wasn’t in my picture books.”

“Nor mine!”

“My!” Elna raised a hand to her mouth, silver-gold eyes wide in amazement. “That’s the Forerunner. Do you know how rare that is? I’ve been reading cards for years, but this is the first time I’ve seen it come up.”

The little noblewoman gasped, her hair snapping to attention.

“Isn’t that amazing, Tina?” Stella said, while Lily contributed an admiring “Wow!”

A moment later, thunder boomed louder than I’d yet heard it that day.

Elna looked grave as she collected her cards. “Many people will follow where you lead, Tina, no matter what field you pursue. You could influence a nation, the whole world...maybe even the planet itself.”

I’d never doubted that Tina rivaled Lydia for brilliance. Still, the planet? Tina herself shared my sentiment, if her nonplussed look was anything to go by.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “That seems awfully far-fetched!”

“I’m sure it does.” Elna chuckled. “Now, how would you like me to tell your fortunes in love? You must be dying to—”

“Begging your pardons.”

Before Elna could finish her sentence, the tent flap opened to

admit a maid. She wore her soft black hair in a braid, and her face, though pretty, betrayed no emotion.

"Chitose?" said the Howard sisters.

"Um..." I faltered.

"The Howard Maid Corps's number five," Lily whispered in my ear. "Her twin sister's a maid too."

"Thank you," I whispered back. Olly had told me about her fellow officer in Lalannoy, but since we had never been introduced, I didn't know her by sight.

No sooner had the maid reached us than she dipped a slight curtsy and said, "Olly has returned from the capital. She wishes to make a report on enemy movements at your earliest convenience."

"Understood," I replied. "The infiltration team all returned safely, I hope?"

"Yes, via underground waterways that link the city of craft to the former capital. They now await you at headquarters."

I felt a weight lift from my shoulders. It sounded as though the number three had carried off her difficult mission with aplomb.

I turned to my highborn companions. "Stella, Tina, Lily, get ready to move."

"Yes, sir!" the Howard sisters answered smartly, matched by a "Sure thing" from Lily. They sprang into action with a speed that inspired confidence.

"Elna, I managed to take care of everything in your inbox," I reported, depositing the last of the paperwork in its container. "May I take it that Lalannoyan logistics draw inspiration from Shelley 'the Mastermind' Walker?"

Ellie's grandmother was head maid to the Ducal House of Howard, and perhaps the finest mind in the kingdom when it came to maintaining supply lines. The armies of the north couldn't have served on the eastern border half so well without her expertise.

The lilac-haired sorceress made a show of surprise. "You got through all that, *and* you uncovered my secret? I'd better watch my back around you."

"I can't compare to Heaven's Sage," I replied.

"I can see why your companions say you have a mean streak.

Take this as a token of my gratitude.” Elna conjured a tarot card from thin air and cast a ward of silence at the same time. She must have read my fortune along with the others’.

The image showed a long-haired girl and a black-haired boy standing beneath a starry sky in motion.

“The Tuner,” she said. “The card’s so old and faded that you can’t even tell what color the girl’s hair used to be, but it comes up even less often than Tina’s Forerunner. And I can’t pretend it’s a particularly good omen. I know of only one other person who drew this card: the last head of the House of Ashfield. Their line died out centuries ago.”

“You don’t say,” I murmured. She must have cast the ward out of concern that my companions would worry if they overheard. Judging by her tone, the card must have been practically taboo.

So, yet another “field” house.

Elna snapped her fingers, and the sound of bells rang throughout the old capital. Break time was over.

The Lothringian princess twirled her pen and assumed a teasing look. “When the gods had gone and the age of the ancient champions was drawing to a close, the pair on that card traveled the world, bringing it back into harmony for a time—or so the story goes in my family. They also say that the boy had quite the troubles with women. So, good luck.”

My bracelet and ring flashed in apparent agreement.

“Troubles with women”? Of all the fortunes I could have drawn!

The ward fell away, and I waved to my companions. We hadn’t a moment to waste. Besides, even though we’d just met, Chitose kept glaring at me from the rear of our group.

While the logistics officers filing into the tent gaped and cheered at the newly leveled mountain of paperwork, I made a bow to Elna.

“Thank you. I’ll bear that in mind.”

*

“Oh, Allen! We’ve been waiting for you!”

A handsome blond man with silver-gold eyes greeted me as I

ducked through a cloth-covered doorway and into the ruined imperial villa that now held military headquarters. Heaven's Sword, Arthur Lothringen, wore white-and-azure armor and a gold-embroidered cape. The enchanted swords Lunar Cresset and Lunar Fox hung at his sides in immaculate white scabbards.

Beside him stood Minié, wearing a tricorn hat, and bodyguards armed with spell-guns. Marquess Oswald Addison, former leader of the Lalannoy Republic, sat on a chair at the back of the room, his face ghostly pale. The only other person present was Olly, waiting quietly to be called on. It appeared that this meeting was to be a matter of utmost secrecy.

"Leave me here, all of you," Arthur commanded.

"As you wish," Minié replied, echoed by a chorus of "Yes, sir" from his subordinates, and they all trooped reluctantly out of headquarters. Lily and Olly multi-cast silencing spells as soon as they were gone.

I approached the table and bowed to the maid who had accomplished the nigh-impossible infiltration. "It's good to have you back, Olly. I hate to rush you, but may we hear your report?"

"Certainly, sir," she said. "Chitose, project it for them."

"Yes, ma'am." The braid-wearing maid invoked light and dark magic together, projecting a three-dimensional map of the city of craft on the table.

What masterful compound spellcasting!

I looked down at the map and gave a start. "The ice wyrm is..."

"Gone?" the Howard sisters finished for me. Lily groaned.

Tina and I had called on Frigid Crane to leave the dreaded monster frozen solid, yet I couldn't find it anywhere on the map. I saw only a gaping pit that seemed to have swallowed the independence memorial whole.

Olly produced a miniature video orb and projected its contents. "Under interrogation, enemy soldiers indicated that the wyrm fell below ground, unable to support its own weight. These individuals are currently working to dispel its icy prison."

Our eyes widened at the sight of beastfolk in shabby church robes descending into the pit on stairs they conjured with botanical

magic. I recognized one of their number.

"N-No," I gasped. "It couldn't be."

The small, gray-headed man looked older than I remembered him, but I wouldn't mistake Yono. The chieftain of the eastern-capital rat clan had joined the ape-clan chieftain, Nishiki, in passing information to the Algren rebels, then fled with his son Kume and a handful of others to the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit after their insurrection. Witnesses had placed him here, true, but I had scarcely credited them. Were Nishiki, Kume, and the rest of the beastfolk fugitives in the city as well?

"Sir!" Tina cried, noticing the change come over me.

"Mr. Allen, please take a seat," Stella added.

"Here you go!" Lily, in no mood to argue, brought over a chair.

"Thank you," I said slowly, sinking into it. I had no fond memories of Yono or of Kume, although the latter was nearly my own age. Even so, the reality of beastfolk collaborating with the very church that had oppressed them hit me hard.

Olly waited for me, downcast.

"Several of my fellow officers and I hoped to gain a clear picture of the situation below ground," she said at last. "Unfortunately, security was tight, and our attempt failed. No beastfolk emerged from the pit during our reconnaissance."

"We beg your pardon," added a stony-faced Chitose.

Tina and Stella jumped in to cheer the maids.

"You did fine!"

"We're just glad you all made it back safe and sound."

Olly and Chitose bowed deeply, gratitude and respect in their eyes.

"That must be what makes the young Howard ladies so popular in their own house *and* with the Leinsters," Lily whispered in my ear. "You might want to learn a thing or two from them, Allen. You'll need it sooner or later."

"Need it"? What for?

Olly reached out to the map, and a succession of markers appeared, representing individuals to be wary of and troops already in position.

“Even more than we anticipated,” Arthur groaned, rubbing his chin. Fifty thousand troops, the main army of the republic, had sided with the Bright Wings Party under Marquess Addison’s banner. Yet the enemy forces ranged around the capital numbered almost as many.

“Miles Talito has concentrated all troops within his party’s sphere of influence on the city’s outskirts,” Olly continued in response to our questioning looks. “It appears to have been church inquisitors who captured the port of Suguri.”

“And he stationed the apostles in the capital to secure the independence memorial with a small elite force under their command.” Arthur grimaced. “If they dig their heels in and stick to defense, we won’t even reach the city before the wyrm wakes up.”

Marquess Addison closed his eyes.

If I knew Gil, he would be monitoring magical communications from the far shore. Word that something was amiss here must have reached the royal capital. But with the Four Heroes Sea blockaded, we could hardly hope for reinforcements from—

I felt tugs on both sleeves.

“Don’t forget me, sir!” Tina piped up eagerly.

“I think you mean ‘us,’” a stately Stella corrected her.

“We won’t let you down!” Lily added, her usual self.

My gloom lifted like morning mist. “I don’t know what I’d do without all three of you.”

“Good!” they answered in unison.

Olly’s expression softened slightly as she made a hand sign. Chitose touched the video orb.

“Next,” Olly said, “the greatest threat: the apostles. We surveyed them at ultralong range from across the bridge to be certain of avoiding detection.”

To our shock, one apostle standing on the remains of the memorial lashed out with a crimson slash. A massive fortress spire collapsed in a cloud of dust, cut through midway up its length. I recognized the blade of blood.

“It appears we were not the only observers,” the maid continued with a sagacity that justified the Howard sisters’ trust. “To sum up

the remaining results of our scouting mission, the apostles Ibush-nur and Ifur remain aboveground at all times. The remainder have sequestered themselves underground, leaving their total number in doubt."

A grim mood settled over headquarters. Even Arthur folded his arms. To make matters worse, the apostles had the Addisons' North Star, an enchanted sword set with an orb worked by the Gemstone, a jeweler from the time gods walked the earth. Their individual strength could only have grown.

The braid-wearing maid waved her hand, changing the image. Not much time could have passed since the tower's fall. I saw a tall man with his back to us deep in conversation with the two apostles. My heart clenched.

"However," Olly went on matter-of-factly, "Black Blossom, who we believe responsible for the widespread jamming, has left the city. We confirmed that this man has taken his place. While his identity remains unclear—"

"I know who he is," I interrupted.

The Lalannoyans gave me puzzled looks, while my companions tightened their grips on my clothes.

"His name," I said, fighting down a torrent of emotion, "is Zelbert Régnier, and he's a formidable enemy. Assume that he's at least a match for Idris, the elder vampire whom Arthur and Ridley slew."

"It can't be," the marquess muttered, scowling. I hadn't heard the details of the battle against Idris, but I could imagine that he must have been bloodcurdling. I had fought that monster myself five years ago, alongside Lydia, Cheryl, and Zel.

"It sounds as though you have a history," Arthur said flatly.

"Yes. He...*was* my best friend."

I'd meant to answer normally, but my voice shook. I should be ashamed of myself.

The girls' hands tightened on my clothes, their faces clouded with worry. The Howard sisters murmured my name.

Oh dear. I doubt I need to worry about Lily—she's survived her share of trouble—but weighing down Tina and Stella with concern for me could end up snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

I shot Olly a look, and she seemed to take my meaning.

"As for other enemies of note," she resumed, "we believe that our two traitors, the ex-naval officer Snider with his spell-gunners and Miles's daughter Isolde Talito, are occupying the Addison residence along with the former Prince Gerard Wainwright. I'm sorry to say that the whereabouts of Lord Ridley and Lord Artie remain a mystery. And finally... Mr. Allen."

Zel's image blinked out. I shot a grateful look at Chitose, who had operated the orb, and she bowed her head in answer. She didn't seem ill-disposed toward me, despite her earlier attention.

The blonde maid brought up another image, and the Howard sisters gasped as one. The picture, evidently taken through an outside window, showed a man chained up in a cell.

"Would you kindly identify this gentleman?" Olly asked.

"Ernest Fosse," I said. "My head clerk's father. I'm relieved to see him alive."

The unfortunate man had collaborated to supply the Algren rebels, believing that they held his daughter Felicia hostage. Raymond Despenser, also known as the apostle Ibush-nur, had abducted him not long after.

Olly Walker curtsied. "I have nothing more to report. Given the number of detection wards laid in and around the capital, may I venture to suggest that taking it unawares would prove impossible?"

Silence fell. Our time was running out, but what could we do without the element of surprise?

"That won't be a problem."

"My lord?" Arthur turned, questioning.

Lord Addison had listened to the report in silence. Now he opened his eyes. "We have a duty to retake the city before the wyrm revives. Should the need arise, we will employ every resource at our disposal—including magic left to us by Floral Heaven. Arthur, you may abandon the search for my son. We can no longer afford such luxuries. I swear to settle matters with my brother—with Miles. And with the treacherous Isolde."

So, he would sacrifice his own son, his brother by adoption, and that brother's daughter for the sake of his country.

"Allen." The marquess bowed, his hair grayer than when I'd first met him, and dark circles under his eyes. "I realize that by all rights I should speed your kingdom's representatives to safety. However—"

"I understand," I cut in, raising a hand to forestall him. I exchanged nods with Tina, Stella, Lily, the waiting maids, and Arthur. We were all of one mind, so I pressed a fist to my heart and said, "We must prevent the wyrm's return at any cost. We're with you."

The brokenhearted marquess strained his cheeks in a feeble effort to smile. "I thank you for it."

My ring flashed.

Yes, I know.

"Permit me to question you on just one point," I said. "What lies in the depths of the cavern beneath the memorial, behind the wyrm? An altar, perhaps?"

Arthur raised one eyebrow. "*Behind* the wyrm?"

The marquess held his peace.

"An altar?" Tina repeated, struck by my grave tone.

"Like the one under the palace?" asked Stella.

Lily seemed lost in thought.

The marquess let out a long breath. I saw gloom and indecision in his eyes.

"I don't know," he said at last. "My grandfather must have, but his end came without warning. To my knowledge, only Floral Heaven has ventured there since. She instructed that it was not to be touched."

Skillful liars mix a drop of truth with their falsehoods. And indeed, Marquess Oswald Addison was lying to me.

"My father taught me that 'even a good thing can do harm in the wrong hands,'" I said.

My parents, Nathan and Ellyn, had often read to Caren and me as children. Those lessons had shaped the person I'd become. Even if I lost my way, I carried a guiding star within.

"Those who side with the church no doubt see their cause as just. But whatever their reasons, we must stop them," I declared as thunder rumbled outside. "We stand between the world and their 'Saint's' fathomless hatred."

A brief silence followed. Then, "I fully concur, Allen the Shooting Star of the wolf clan," the marquess said gravely, raising his left hand. His eyes took on the resolute set of someone who had made his choice. "Forgive me, but would you leave Arthur and me alone? We have private matters to discuss."

"Then this is goodbye," said the Lalannoyan champion. "Allen, if anything rouses your concern, you've leave to act as you see fit. Heaven's Sword Arthur Lothringen, marshal of the republic, gives you a free hand." He clapped me heartily on the shoulder, but his silver-gold eyes weren't smiling. He meant to get the truth out of the marquess.

I left headquarters, motioning my companions to follow. Arthur's mighty wards rose the moment we set foot outside. I sensed his determination to take no chances with these secrets.

Does anything "rouse my concern"? I wondered, taking a few steps away from the girls as they and Chitose swiftly unfurled umbrellas.

"Olly," I asked the blonde maid, "which of your officers in Lalannoy can reach the Yustinian capital the fastest?"

*

Black flowers burned, filling the air with their petals. A crescent moon hung in the sky, showering the nameless place of worship outside the old capital in its ghastly crimson light. Two figures—one white, the other red—clashed at breathtaking speeds not far from me, scattering metallic screams, blazing sparks, and fresh blood. The severed blade of Devoted Blossom, one of the Leinsters' flaming swords, lay embedded in the ground where it had fallen.

I scrambled frantically through the infernal battlefield, the ecstatic cries of a girl in a newly bloodstained nightgown ringing in my ears. Her eyes blazed crimson, sanguinary wings spread out behind her, and her hands lashed out at me gripping daggers of blood.

"Oh! Oh! Oh, my dear Artie! Come, accept Her Holiness's mercy and live with me *forever*!"

I rolled along the ground, narrowly avoiding a blow from the girl

who had been my fiancée—the church spy Isolde Talito. The taste of blood filled my mouth. I had already exhausted my mana. Even so, I raised my metal staff to resist...only to yelp as a bloody dagger pricked the back of my neck.

"I've got you now," its wielder crooned, giggling.

"Why, Isolde?!" I demanded, shrinking in fear and resisting the urge to cry. "Why would you resort to vampirism?!"

Before I got an answer, a red-haired man clutching a broken sword collapsed amid the inky blossoms. He lay still. Blood covered him from head to foot, oozing through rents in his cloak and the Lalannoyan armor beneath.

"Lord Ridley?! N-No!" I cried.

How could the heir to the ancient title of Swordmaster lose? If only he hadn't broken Devoted Blossom saving me. If...if only I hadn't followed Isolde, this would never have happened. Tears clouded my vision, but I couldn't move with the blade of blood at my throat.

The crimson moon passed behind a cloud as the apostle Zelbert Régnier landed atop Devoted Blossom's broken blade. "You've got rotten luck, little Lord Addison. We have that in common," he said, pity in his bloodred eyes. "You might as well throw in the towel."

"My darling Artie is nothing like you!" Isolde snapped. "He's sillier and so much more lovable!"

I guess...this is the end.

Just when I had abandoned all hope, a white flash shot through the temple.

*

I screamed. Pain tore through me as I forced myself into a sitting position.

Did I dream it all?

Dazed, I looked around me. Enveloped in a pale-emerald glow, the space only resembled the temple where we'd fought. And was that water I heard?

"So you're awake, Artie," said a red-haired young man, sliding off

a withered branch nearby. Bandages wrapped his chest and arms, but he seemed his usual self. I felt sincere relief and at the same time a rush of regret.

"Lord Ridley, you're all right! I'm so sorry. It was all...all my fault that..." Tears flooded from my eyes. I wiped and wiped at them, but they refused to stop.

The red-haired lord pulled a blanket off a nearby branch and tossed it to me. "Don't cry. Look! I'm right as rain. I wouldn't die when I still have the art of baking to master!"

At last, I dammed my tears and forced myself to smile. "Of course you wouldn't."

Lord Arthur had taught me to "laugh, even when times are hard."

"But how did we get away from the apostles?" I asked, taking a seat on a root. "And where are we now?"

"In the deepest recess of the workshop city, as well as its origin: the Gemstone's chapel," a man's voice I didn't recognize answered from behind me. It sounded young and old at the same time.

And the Gemstone? Out of the old fairy tales?

I turned—and found myself staring straight into the gaping maw of a floating wolf skull. "A t-talking skeleton!" I yelped, scrambling to knit together a spell.

"Artie." Lord Ridley raised a hand to stop me and casually lobbed a metal water bottle at the apparition. "Sir, I owe you my life, and I mean to repay you for it, but try not to scare the kid too much. It's in bad taste."

The skull vanished, and...

"Humph! I wasn't expecting a lecture from the oddest Leinster."

A beastfolk man appeared. His ears and tail were as gray as his hair, and he wore a ragged cloak over a martial artist's training garb. Short as a child, he looked no older than I was, but his mana seemed bottomless.

"Artie, meet Fugen of the fox clan," Lord Ridley said, biting into a strip of jerky. "This old gentleman put an end to Idris with Arthur and me."

I gasped, struck speechless.

"I was just passing through. And keep your fool hands off my

jerky," Fugen snapped, ignoring me to snatch a cloth bag from Lord Ridley's hand. A nimble bound launched him through the ethereal emerald light onto a stone column far overhead—a miraculous feat.

"That makes twice I've saved you against my better judgment," he continued. "I might end up with more bothersome apostles on my track. I patched you up, and your sword's done healing. Now follow this withered World Tree's roots and leave. I won't have you making this place a battlefield."

He reached out and toward a stone wall. At once, space tore open, and a line of fire burst forth. Lord Ridley caught it easily.

"But how?" I gazed, awestruck, at Devoted Blossom. I had seen the apostle cut the flaming sword in two.

"The gods have long since departed this world, but the elementals remain with the planet," the old beastfolk man said offhandedly, landing noiselessly on the ground. "Weapons rich in their energies don't die easily, especially not in a land as steeped in old power as this one."

He threw a spinning kick. The emerald light brightened as though with a will of its own, throwing the space we occupied into sharp relief.

Seven stone columns ringed a wide-open space with a small shrine at its center. Crystal clear water caught the light on all sides. We were in an underground lake. I had heard rumors that underground waterways connected the old capital to the new one, but I had never really believed it.

Lord Ridley gave his sword a few swings, then slid it into the scabbard propped beside him. "Sir! I hate to ask, but—"

"I won't join your fight." Fugen cut him off, then took a swig from the water bottle. Staring off into the darkness, he added, "I've grown weary of battle. Weary in spite of myself. I can't go on fighting like my school's founder did."

I had no response to that, and neither, it seemed, did Lord Ridley. I couldn't make sense of the old man's words, but his sorrow and self-reproach came through.

"I've followed the teachings and wandered the continent for many summers now. I won't pretend to cling to life, but I owe a

vexing pupil an earful the next time I see him. I won't die till I've given him a piece of my mind, so the answer is no!"

"But sir, if you're looking for Allen—"

"Your wayward ways cause no end of trouble."

Lord Ridley and I jumped and the old master grunted as a lovely girl strode lightly over the water toward us. A white cat perched on her right shoulder. The black and azure ribbons that tied the ends of her long silver hair swayed with every step, as did her sleeves and the hem of her dress, which looked like a traditional elven garment.

Lord Ridley and I froze, unable to comprehend what we were seeing.

I've seen this girl before. Didn't she come with Allen? Rill, I think her name was.

She stepped into the ring of columns and brushed dust off her cloak. "How long has it been, young Fugen? I never expected to meet you in such a place as this."

The old man vanished. A moment later, a massive impact and a flash of light tore through the space.

"Well struck, sir," Lord Ridley said, nonchalantly holding his red hair in place while I let out a scream.

The old man's punch had split the water down to the lake bed and sent boulders hurtling from the ceiling. Yet the area within the columns remained tranquility itself. Was the place enchanted?

"No quarter? Come; we've known each other long enough," the girl said from her seat on a dragon statue atop one of the columns.

"What are you doing in the city of craft?" Fugen demanded, still in a fighting stance. "And that body..."

"It would make a long story. Call me 'Rill,'" the girl replied. "Oh, and Allen is here as well."

Fugen blazed with fury, his mana erupting to new heights. "What have you done to my student?!"

I looked to the red-haired lord, but he gave a slight shake of his head.

Not even the great Swordmaster can stand up to this girl?

"Fugen," she said icily, "as a descendant of my comrade in arms, you ought to understand. I can countenance a pitiful man-made

wyrm. They can blend silver-snow with the offspring of the Wyrm Divine, but it will never amount to more than an imitation. Hardly a threat."

We listened in silence.

Someone made *the Slayer of Champions? I thought they only used the Lothringens' ancestral swords to control it.*

A chill like I'd never felt before ran down my spine.

"But what lies beyond? Never. I hardly think I need fear, but the world is full of one-in-a-millions."

The girl had vanished from her column and now stood on the water by Fugen. I couldn't begin to understand how she had gotten there. An unknown teleportation spell? Cold sweat rolled down my cheeks.

"If *they* threaten to emerge, I'll take up my sword and spear for the first time in two centuries," Rill said. "There's Ross's will to consider. Don't you think you ought to bend and aid your precious pupil before it comes to that?"

Pale, dainty fingers brushed a palpably anguished Fugen's neck.

I didn't understand what they were talking about. Still, I'd learned from Lord Arthur's example: A champion stirred up tempests without even knowing it.

Chapter 3

"What? You mean I'm going to Lalannoy with you?!"

"That's right. We leave the day after tomorrow at the latest. My future sister-in-law wouldn't dream of backing out, would she, Caren?" The scarlet-haired swordswoman crossed her legs on the settee and gave a theatrical shrug. Lydia had called me to the Leinster mansion from Allen & Co., where I'd been helping out, and I was still wearing my uniform.

I touched my bangs and looked out a window at the royal capital. Gray clouds lowered over the landscape, leaving it cold and dreary even in the middle of the day. Winter had arrived.

I reached out and patted Atra, Lia, and Chiffon, who had fallen asleep on the couch, the children hugging cushions. "So, this is why you asked Felicia to arrange supplies for an expedition," I said, my voice hard. "Has the Lalannoyan situation deteriorated that badly?"

"It's worse than I thought," Lydia said.

"We received an urgent message from the Yustinian capital last night," the blonde, white-clad Lady of Light added from the seat beside her. "It came from a Howard maid who'd been working undercover. She must have cut across imperial territory. Here."

Tension hovered around Princess Cheryl as she levitated the report into my hands. I scanned it quickly and clapped a hand to my mouth.

"No," I gasped. The Heaven and Earth Party had not only occupied the republic's capital, they had seized the port of Suguri, blockading the Four Heroes Sea with warships and church inquisitors.

They even shot down our military griffins?! H-How can we ride to Allen and Stella's rescue now? And the city of craft is hiding a wyrm, called the "Slayer of Champions" for what it did in the war of independence, on top of a gang of apostles? Allen and Tina just

barely managed to freeze it, but will it come back on the next full moon?

During the Algren rebellion, my brother had risked his life to protect everyone in the eastern capital. I didn't really know what a "wyrm" was, but it had to be a monster for the ages. The way things were going—

A little hand touched my cheek. The children had woken up when I wasn't looking.

"Caren. Don't forget Atra."

"Or Lia!"

Overcome with affection, I caught them up in a hug. "Thank you both."

The girls in white hummed contentedly.

Lydia split one of the signature tarts from the café with the sky-blue roof with a fork and skewered a piece. "To top it all off, the Knights of the Holy Spirit are massing an army on the eastern border. That will tie up the Algrens, the eastern houses, and the northern forces stationed with them. And as usual, magical communications are jammed."

"Black Blossom again," I muttered. I didn't relish the thought of a rematch with the demisprite sorcerer who called himself the second apostle, but there was every likelihood that we'd face him in Lalannoy.

"Atra, Lia, and Allen all think the ice wyrm will revive on the night of the next full moon," the duke's daughter said, eyes setting in a glare.

"My father has decided to act 'in spite of anything,'" the princess added, equally intimidating. "We've been forced to react to what the church does for too long. It's time we reclaimed the initiative."

The Church of the Holy Spirit had been leading the western powers around by the nose since the Algren rebellion. The kingdom, the league, the empire, and now the Lalannoy Republic. But our period of endurance was finally coming to an end. It was time to strike back!

I nodded to Lydia. "So, His Majesty sent Duke Walter Howard and Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera to reinforce the eastern border,

while Duchess Lisa and Under-duchess Fiane lead the bulk of the Leinster griffin riders to the Four Heroes Sea. But what will we do?"

Not one to miss an opportunity, the king must have called up champions—the "god of war," the Emerald Gale, the Bloodstained Lady, and the Smiling Lady—to strike while the enemy's forces were divided. I didn't doubt that they would deal the Knights of the Holy Spirit a serious blow and break the naval blockade. But a journey from the royal capital to the city of craft took even military griffins five days, and the moon would be full in three. Any conflict en route would guarantee we'd never make it in time.

We needed a way to storm the republic's capital directly. Maybe black griffins could pull it off, but only the Skyhawk Company employed them, and they reserved the fastest, highest-flying creatures in the west of the continent for its most classified messages.

"I gave Lynne her orders," the scarlet-haired noblewoman said grimly, opening and closing her pocket watch. "My grandparents are in the city of water now, meeting with the doge, and neither of my parents can afford to leave the royal capital. I used every connection I could, but I don't have high hopes. Brace yourself for back-to-back fighting over the Four Heroes Sea and in Suguri."

"Lynne?" I said slowly, thinking of my studious junior whom Allen had asked to conduct investigations in the southern capital. She must have been ready to pull her hair out over some impossible demand right about then, if Lydia's expression were anything to go by. "I understand."

"Now that's settled..." Lydia took a piece of tart with her fingers—a display of poor table manners that seemed to mark the end of serious discussion for the present. "Did you forget that my mother and aunt forbid you to use their titles, Caren? My sister-in-law needs a better memory—*and* a punishment. I'll dress you up here next time. The maids requested it in writing, and besides, you ought to enjoy trying on clothes with Allen."

"You mean Allen— *Ahem.* How many hundreds of times must I tell you? You'll never be my sister-in-law. And I'm *not* trying on any clothes!"

My resolve had wavered in the face of temptation, but I'd stopped myself in time. I did want to dress my brother in all sorts of outfits, but I'd rather do that just the two of us.

"Ears go *fwip fwip*!" Lia yelled as she and Atra jumped on Chiffon's belly, waving their ears and tails happily in what I assumed was their impression of me. Moments like this made me long for a video orb. Maybe I should ask about Anna's proposal to lend me one.

"Try being honest with yourself for once," Lydia said with an older-sisterly air that rubbed me the wrong way. I thought I'd better get Allen to give her a talking-to.

Cheryl had been observing us, elegantly sipping her tea. Now she said, "Caren's right, Lydia. She's going to be *my* sister-in—"

"Shut your royal mouth!" we snapped in unison.

Chiffon looked up, seemed satisfied that all was as usual, and went back to dozing.

Thwarted in her nonsense, the princess shook. "I...I must object. You're behaving deplorably, and it's Allen's fault for indulging you day in and day out! Don't you think he ought to spare some of that attention for *me*?!"

"No, not at all," I said.

"Anyway, he doesn't 'indulge' me," Lydia added. I fully concurred that Allen spoiled her rotten, but a big brother caring for his little sister was just the way of the world.

We crossed our arms and took turns poking holes in Cheryl's argument.

"You never show weakness. I don't know how else to put it."

"You're totally self-sufficient."

"And my brother has plenty of good sense."

"He wouldn't get too cavalier with Your Royal Highness."

We made a perfect team at times like this. Maybe that spoke to how long we'd known each other.

Lydia had poured me a fresh cup of tea, so I portioned cookies onto little plates and handed one to her. We always did things this way when Allen wasn't with us.

"Y-You band together the instant I get involved!" Cheryl jabbed

her finger at us, a sulky look in her round eyes. “I have the authority to take you off the mission to Lalannoy, you know!”

“Yes, yes,” we said as one.

“Oh, you bullies! I’ll tell Allen on you!” Our future queen wailed like a child and threw her arms around the white wolf. “Chiffon, Caren and Lydia are being mean to me.”

The actual children tugged unhappily on her white sleeves.

“Hey.”

“Chiffon is Lia’s.”

The scarlet-haired noblewoman gave her best friend an exasperated look. “Now, where were we?” she said, with a wave of her left hand. “Duke Lebufera is tied up with a disturbance close to home. None of the western forces are free to move except Duchess Letty. From the level of secrecy, I’d say it has to do with the demonfolk. Maybe even the Dark Lord.”

“The Dark Lord?” I gave a start. Allen the Shooting Star; Leticia Lebufera, then known as the Comet; and the Crescent Moon had fought the ruler of demonkind in the war two hundred years ago. I had seen Blood River with my own eyes and heard war stories from members of the Shooting Star Brigade. Even so, the Dark Lord didn’t feel real to me. How was I supposed to picture someone whom all those mighty warriors insisted we shouldn’t face?

The blonde princess revived and reclaimed her seat on the settee.

“The die is cast,” she said. “Let’s get this over with and tell Allen what we think of him getting himself mixed up in trouble every time he goes anywhere. Caren, might I have a cookie too?”

“I completely agree, but are you going too?” I asked hesitantly, portioning cookies onto another small plate. Should our future queen really be campaigning abroad?

“Don’t waste your time reasoning with her.” Lydia rested her head on her hand and shook it, as if to say that nothing could be done. “This scheming princess is too stubborn to change her mind once she’s made it up.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do not ‘scheme,’” Cheryl protested, sipping her tea with unruffled dignity. “I’m as honest as can be.”

The other "Highness" in the room pulled a face, pocketed her watch, and stood up. "You, Cheryl, and I will storm the city of craft, and we're taking Atra and Lia with us. Ellie will hold the fort here, at Allen's request. He wants her to 'get the Sealed Archive open as soon as possible.'"

"Members of my personal guard and the royal guard will join us as well," Cheryl added. "You have no idea what I went through to convince my father."

Lydia hadn't run off after Allen this time because she'd anticipated that the church would target Cheryl—or so I speculated. So why was she bringing the princess with us to Lalannoy?

The scarlet-haired noblewoman finished her tart and bit into a cookie. "A few of the professor's students are coming too. The rest will stay to help Ellie."

"They will?" I wondered if these were the same students who were supposed to have accompanied Allen and Lily as bodyguards. Soi and Uri, I thought their names were.

"Who will it be?" Cheryl asked, pouring herself another cup of tea.

"I'm having them work that out as we speak. How many we can take depends on what Lynne manages to negotiate fo—"

"Lydia?" Cheryl and I said. The scarlet-haired noblewoman had fallen silent and sprung to her feet without warning. To our continued surprise, she strode to a window and flung it open.

"What's come over you?" Cheryl asked as an icy wind rustled our hair. Atra and Lia clung to Chiffon.

Through it all, Lydia's gaze never left the sky. From it descended a sea-green griffin with a long neck, yellow beak, and beautiful snow-white plumage.

"I know you!" I cried. But before the shock could set in, the griffin lowered its altitude and vanished behind the building. Luce had flown through numerous battles with Shooting Star in the War of the Dark Lord. After losing its master, the creature had become the leader of the sea-green griffins that inhabited the eastern capital's Great Tree. It had delivered me to the western capital and now served as mount to the Hero, Alice Alvern.

But that rider didn't look like Alice. Not that I could see clearly with the hooded cloak.

A polite knock broke the stillness.

"Begging your pardon." The door opened to admit Romy, the Leinster Maid Corps's black-haired, bespectacled second-in-command.

Atra and Lia rushed to grab her by both hands.

"Lady Lydia, you have a visitor," Romy announced, bowing reverently.

Lydia closed the window. "Who?" she asked as though she dreaded the answer. Alice was her natural enemy.

"A relative of the Hero, Grand Duchess Alvern." The famously unflappable maid broke out in a cold sweat. "She claims that she wishes to deliver a message before you depart for Lalannoy."

Cheryl and I froze, eyes wide. How had they known what we were planning?

Lydia hung her weapon from her belt and set off at a brisk walk. She looked every bit the Lady of the Sword.

"Cheryl, Caren, what are you waiting for? Romy, watch Atra and Lia."

"O-Of course!"

"CComing!"

"Certainly, my lady. I wish you all the best of luck."

*

"*This* is the meeting spot that the president of the Skyhawk Company chose? Are you certain, Saki?"

The sight of the café, tucked like a charming brick hideaway into a side street of the diverse, bustling working quarter in the east of the southern capital, made me stop and turn to my maid-cum-bodyguard. I saw my Royal Academy uniform and beret reflected in the glass window. A sign on the door read "reserved for a private event," and I sensed people inside, but could this really be the place?



"Yes, Lady Lynne. There can be no mistake," the pretty bird-clan maid replied.

"Who would have thought they'd pick a café? I wonder if they've been taking pointers from the doge," an upbeat maid cut in, launching herself off a nearby roof. Cindy's skirt and milky-white hair fluttered as she landed in the alley. "I finished my sweep. Nothing unusual to report! Maybe we shouldn't have left Sida to hold the fort after all."

Honestly! Didn't she realize how important this meeting was? I wished that she would "take pointers" from Sida, who had tearfully begged to join us when we'd left the house.

I touched the Fire Wyrm Dagger in its sheath, recalling the unexpected telephone call that my dear mother and sister had put through from the royal capital two nights before.

"Lynne, we need griffins to help Allen, Lily, and the Howard girls. Black griffins, specifically, and only the Skyhawk Company has them."

"The company will only negotiate with a Leinster, and you're the only Leinster in the southern capital who can negotiate. We're counting on you."

It was unreasonable. It was cruel. I'd had a little cry after they'd hung up. But time was of the essence, and I couldn't refuse a chance to save my dear brother and my friends from peril. I knew that Tina and Ellie must both be doing everything they could.

I can make myself useful too!

I looked Saki and Cindy in the eye, steeled myself, and pushed on the door. A bell rang as we stepped into the café.

"It's sure got atmosphere," Cindy said over a murmured "My" from Saki and a gasp from me.

Antique wooden tables and chairs caught my notice first. Colorful rugs covered the floor. Ornate glass tea containers filled shelves behind the counter, where a white-haired cat-clan boy stood polishing cups. Hazy sunbeams poured through the rear windows, completing the cozy space.

Who knew we had a café like this in the city?

I was still staring when a tall girl poked her head around a pillar.

She had hair a dusty shade of dark brown, and the distinctive designs on her reddish-brown clothing marked her as a dwarf.

"Oh, it looks like the next person's here," she said. "Let's have tea again sometime, Else."

"I'd like that, Amara," said someone hidden by the pillar. "I'll visit you and buy some of Vaubel's jewels next time."

"Please do. I know my grandpa would love that." The girl called Amara finished her goodbyes and left her seat. It appeared that we had indeed come to the right place.

I nodded to the girl in passing. She returned the gesture—and froze, her eyes locked on Cindy.

"Wow. That maid's a knockout—a real sight for sore eyes," she mumbled to herself. "Oh, whoops! See you, Ravi!"

The cat-clan boy carried on his work behind the counter in silence while the dwarf girl practically skipped her way out.

What an odd girl. A "Lily-type," I suppose you could call her.

"Thank you for your patience. Please, have a seat." A smiling bird-clan woman with white feathers poking through her black hair appeared in the passage and motioned me to sit by a window. It was the beauty I'd met in the ruined chapel of the Great Moon.

"Ravi," she added, "would you bring us tea?"

"Of course, ma'am."

I shook free of my nerves, stepped forward, and took the seat. As for Saki and Cindy, they had stationed themselves near the counter and struck up a whispered conversation with the boy.

"I beg your pardon for not introducing myself the other day." The woman bowed low. "I am called Else, and I serve as president of the Skyhawk Company. Being of the bird clan, I have no house name."

A steely strength lurked beneath her soft tone. I felt overwhelmed but still managed to answer.

"I am Lynne, second daughter of Duke and Duchess Leinster. You have my sincere gratitude for agreeing to meet with us today. I only regret that we could not send an older and more experienced relative to negotiate with you."

Dear brother, give me courage, I prayed silently.

The cat-clan boy, Ravi, brought a teapot and cups painted with

little griffins and set them on the table. I caught a faint whiff of spice.

Else said, "Thank you," then turned back to me. "Your Highness __"

"You may call me 'Lynne.'"

The president held a tea strainer over a cup herself, then added milk. The tea had a distinctive aroma, but not one I recognized. My dear brother could have identified it for me, if only he were here.

"Lady Lynne, then. The Ducal House of Leinster is a rather eccentric family, if you'll excuse my saying so. Enjoy." Having finished pouring, she placed the cup before me.

"Thank you." I drank without hesitation.

Oh, this tastes lovely.

"No ordinary noble in this kingdom would bow her head to a beastfolk at first meeting," the bird-clan woman continued. "Many fly into a rage at the 'insult' of being asked to meet me in a humble café like this one. And you are a duke's daughter. Won't you have a minor scandal on your hands if word gets out that you 'debased yourself before a money-grubbing beastwoman'?"

Dyed-in-the-wool aristocrats hadn't gone anywhere, even though their influence had declined precipitously. Prejudice and discrimination against the beastfolk likewise remained. Doing business with "an unknown bird-woman and her upstart company plotting to monopolize the kingdom's airways" could certainly lead to trouble down the road. Nevertheless, I couldn't suppress a chuckle.

Else furrowed her pretty brows. "Did something I said amuse you?"

Meanwhile, the battle unfolding at the counter was becoming audible.

"Come on, tell me. Where are you from?"

"Cindy, you're being a nuisance."

The cat-clan boy maintained a wall of silence in the face of the maid's assault.

"Forgive me," I said. "It was just the way you spoke of 'bowing my head to a beastfolk' when I do that practically every day in the royal capital."

How simple I can be. I'm in no position to laugh at Tina and Ellie.

"Would you tell me more about this person?" The cutthroat young businesswoman looked curious for the first time that day.

I nodded emphatically. "My private tutor, whom I call my 'dear brother'..."

By the time the cat-clan boy brought a fresh teapot and a small plate of sweets, Else wore a bemused smile.

"I'd heard rumors, but..."

She said no more. Still, I knew all too well how she must have felt. I had told her only of my dear brother's exploits since I'd entered the Royal Academy, yet his every action strained credulity when I put it into words. Proud and glad as I felt, I also wished that he would take fewer risks and turn to us for help more often—ideally to me more than Tina or Ellie.

Else drained her teacup before finally continuing, "It sounds as though the Brain of the Lady of the Sword is more impressive than I'd imagined."

"Yes, I believe he is."

I know my dear brother will go on adding to his legend. Allen of the wolf clan carries the kingdom's future on his shoulders!

"But not even I know everything that he's accomplished," I murmured, staring at a sweet in the image of a griffin. I placed it in my mouth, and a gentle sweetness spread from the confection. A hint of bitterness as well.

I looked Else straight in the eye. "My dear brother never tells us of his exploits, and he lets credit for many of them go to my sister, the Lady of the Sword, or to Princess Cheryl, the Lady of Light, with whom he attended the Royal Academy. This is a lovely tea, and quite distinctive."

"It's an everyday drink in the southern isles," she replied. "Ravi recreated it for me."

According to the reports I'd read, "President Else's family once resided in the southern isles, but fled to the continent one hundred years ago, roughly coinciding with a Lebufera expedition to the region."

Her cup clinked. “Lady Lynne Leinster, I think it’s time we discussed the reason for this meeting.”

“Yes, I quite agree.”

Little birds that had been amusing themselves in the sunlit rear courtyard fluttered and took wing. I could no longer hear Cindy pestering the cat-clan boy.

I removed my beret and bowed deeply to the seasoned businesswoman. “I lack the age or experience to bargain. President Else, to tell the truth—”

“You want the Skyhawk Company to lend you our black griffins—griffins that fly high and fast enough to bypass the Four Heroes Sea and the port of Suguri without a fight, I believe. All to aid the kingdom’s envoy, Lady Lily Leinster, and the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. I’m aware of the general situation. And yes, the griffins we use to carry top secret messages could breach the blockade.”

“Th-Then...!”

I looked up with bated breath—and felt a shiver down my spine. Else had listened amicably to everything I’d said. Now her eyes glinted so razor-sharp that I could scarcely believe she was the same woman.

“Lady Lynne, I am a woman of business,” she said, “and you are proposing a deal between my company and the Ducal House of Leinster, if not the Wainwright Kingdom itself. I can hardly agree to it gratis.”

“I, Lynne Leinster, will see that you are suitably compensated. I swear by my name.”

I gulped under the strain. My dear mother and grandmother had taught me that “when push comes to shove, a bold heart is a woman’s best friend,” but my heartbeat rang distractingly loud in my ears.

A slight smile creased Else’s face. “In that case, once the dust of this latest uproar has settled, would you act as intermediary between my company and the ‘Allen & Co.’ I’ve heard so much about lately?”

“Consider it done,” I answered without a second thought.

Thank goodness. I can safely promise that much.

In my mind's eye, I could see my dear brother groaning, "Why, Lynne?" with his head in his hands and a sweater-clad Felicia shouting, "Oh, Lynne! I can't thank you enough!" as she jumped for joy. I knew I had done nothing wrong.

"Thank you." The bird-clan woman opened a briefcase resting on an unoccupied chair. "I have one other request—a personal matter."

She slid a slender old volume across the table, and I felt my heart caught in a vise. Its cloth cover bore a design of a great bird and seven beasts.

Th-This is the book my dear brother was looking for! Dialogues on the Apocrypha of the Great Moon*! He said that Zelbert Régnier had it before he died, so how did she get it?!*

"I'd like you to share everything you know about the cult of the Great Moon," the raven-haired bird-clan beauty said matter-of-factly. I could tell Saki and Cindy had drawn in their breath at the counter.

I touched my bright-scarlet scabbard, took a deep but surreptitious breath, and replied calmly. "May I ask why?"

A brooch came to rest on top of the book. A broken Great Moon insignia.

"This belonged to my dearest friend." The sun hid behind a cloud, and the woman's face darkened as well. "She was murdered five years ago, in winter, just after a vampire threatened the royal capital. She came from the commonwealth, and even though she was human, she laughed, and sang, and sometimes cried with me. She was...such a kind girl. This brooch was found at the scene of the crime..."

The commonwealth? Isn't that where Régnier lived before the kingdom?

"Along with an old Church of the Holy Spirit insignia." Rage colored the up-and-coming businesswoman's face. "This book only escaped being stolen because she happened to have left it with me. 'I'm holding on to this for someone who saved my life,' she said. 'Keep it somewhere safe, Else! Just for a few days.' Her killer still hasn't been caught. Being houseless, I wasn't even allowed to attend her funeral. But I was able to speak with her fiancé, and I've kept these ever since."

I didn’t know what to say. My dear brother had been denied a place at Zelbert Régnier’s funeral for the same reason, my dear sister had told me. He had sobbed and sobbed, pelted by the freezing rain.

“You were inspecting the ruins of a Great Moon chapel when we first met,” Else said flatly. “Unless I miss my guess, you’ve come here on someone else’s orders. And I hear that a son of the House of Nitti, formerly of the League of Principalities, has been tasked to decipher ancient texts as well.”

Oh. It just clicked for me.

Else of the bird clan, president of the Skyhawk Company that ruled the kingdom’s airways, reminded me of someone. She never forgot a kindness and strove to repay every one she received—just like my beloved Allen of the wolf clan.

“I can make myself surprisingly useful.” A daredevil grin spread across her face. “You won’t regret dealing with me. So, what do you say?”

*

“Well then, Lily, keep an eye on Tina and Stella for me.”

“Sure thing! I’m all over it!” The maid opened the bedroom door and turned to give a cheery wave. She’d let her hair down and changed into her nightgown.

The Howard sisters slept side by side on a bed within, although they’d been wide awake not long ago. Through a window, I glimpsed the waxing moon, one night shy of full. We had finished our preparations in time, albeit barely. We would strike the city of craft before dawn. The bulk of the army had marched already. We could do nothing more but give our all.

Lily took a step toward me. I smelled sweet flowers as she prodded my cheek. “You need to hurry up and turn in too, you know? Oh! If you’re not feeling sleepy, why not lay your head on my lap?”

Had she forgotten that I was a man? I appreciated that she’d kept up her usual cheer even with her brother missing, but I didn’t

want her teasing me *all* the time.

"Now there's an idea," I said with feigned composure. "May I take you up on that offer?"

I could see Lily hadn't expected a yes. She let out a dumbfounded "Huh?" and then stiffened as she slowly digested my response, blushing bright red from the neck up. "O-Oh, well, I mean..."

Satisfied, I blew the white cloth that stood in for window curtains shut with a spell. "Merely a jest, Your Highness."

The maid groaned and took another step forward, giving me a glare younger than her years. How many times had she fixed me with it in the course of our acquaintanceship?

"You really are as mean as they come, Allen!" she fumed.

"Leinster girls have trained me well," I said.

"Oh, for the love of—!"

"Ow. That hurts," I protested as she pummeled my chest, but I remained at her mercy. I couldn't raise my voice for fear of waking Tina and Stella.

"I've made up my mind!" Lily leveled her left index finger at the tip of my nose, silver bracelet gleaming. "You're making this up to me when we get back to the royal capital, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Is that so? What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Huh? Oh, well..." Wonder of wonders, Lily faltered and turned thoughtful.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a braid-wearing maid making her rounds. Olly had taken a handpicked team to reinfiltrate the city, which left Chitose the highest-ranking Howard maid in the old capital. Still, she must have loved her work if she was standing guard so soon after her return from the imperial capital, where she'd reported to the professor. The journey would have taken a swift horse ten days, but she'd made the round trip in only four.

Lily plucked at my sleeve. "Go shopping with me? Um, please?"

"Why did you make that sound like a question?" I said. "I'd be happy to."

"You mean it?"

"I never lie."

Lily brightened so much that she practically glowed and retreated a few steps, giggling. After a half turn, she seized both my hands and crowed, "All right! I'm feeling motivated all of a sudden!"

Dancing fire flowers popped up around her—a sign of delight, I hoped. Confidence enhanced her already pretty looks.

"The Leinster Maid Corps's number three, Lily, at your service," she announced theatrically. "Allen of the wolf clan, I swear to fight valiantly tomorrow."

I closed my left hand, dispelling the fire flowers. "As I've said I-don't-know-how-many times, I depend upon it. And..."

"Allen?"

I touched my bracelet to Lily's with a satisfying metallic *clink*. "Let me repeat one more thing I've told you before. Ridley is all right. I know he is."

"I know. Thank you." Lily pressed her bracelet to her chest. Then she went back into the room and plopped herself down on the bed. "That settles it! I'll finish up work lickety-split, catch my stupid brother, and drag his butt back to the royal capital. And then..." She laughed.

"Try not to overdo it," I said. I wanted to let Ridley go on baking for the time being. Extinguishing a nearby mana lamp and levitating a blanket around the maid's shoulders, I added, "Goodnight, Lily. See you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Allen. Same to you!"

Out in the passageway, I greeted maids standing guard on my way back to my own room. I needed to get some sleep myself soon—operations would begin at dawn. I'd hoped for a private talk with Arthur and to ask what Lord Addison had told him the day before, but I couldn't very well have raised the issue at the strategy meeting.

In the midst of my reflections, a little bird appeared, as if from nowhere, and perched on my hand. It appeared my plans had changed. I turned around just outside my door and went outside.

"Chitose," I called, releasing the bird.

"Yes, sir." The maid with the piercing stare immediately emerged from behind the building.

"I doubt we need to worry about surprise attacks, judging by Olly's reconnaissance," I said by the light of a temporary mana lamp, "but would you bolster our detection spells, just to be safe?"

"Certainly, sir." Chitose cast a dark spell I didn't recognize. I could hardly believe how fast she worked.

"And I wanted to tell you I'm sorry," I added, with a deep bow.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said slowly. "I don't take your meaning."

I looked up to find the black pearls of her eyes tinged with uncertainty. She seemed genuinely not to know what I meant.

"For sending you to the imperial capital," I said. "I'm afraid I overtaxed you. You aren't feeling the strain, I hope?"

"You needn't worry. I feel perfectly fine." Her uncertainty vanished, replaced by an unspoken insistence that my concern was wasted.

"Y-You don't say."

I knew she didn't think well of me.

"We'll all be relying on you in the battle tomorrow," I said, changing tack.

"I will ensure you don't regret it." Chitose's mana slipped its leash, and the lamp flickered in response. Her determination inspired confidence. "I suggest you take to your rest soon, sir," she added. "Otherwise..."

"Otherwise?"

A faint smile crossed Chitose's face. "I will share everything I've seen and heard here with Miss Walker—and with Lady Lydia Leinster as well, if the situation calls for it."

"I surrender."

I'd never stood a chance. I didn't want to worry a little angel like Ellie, and Lydia would really take me to task if she heard I'd been missing sleep.

"I'm going to have one last quick chat with Arthur," I explained,

holding an index finger to my lips. “I want to ask him something.”

*

“Oh, there you are, Allen! Take a seat!”

Lalannoy’s guardian and Heaven’s Sword, Arthur Lothringen, greeted me on the outskirts of the old capital. Seeing no one else and sensing no guards, I lowered myself into a folding chair and nodded. A kettle hung over an open fire between us.

“Sorry for calling you out here,” he continued. “I couldn’t make time for a face-to-face conversation otherwise.”

“It’s no trouble,” I said. “I assume you’ve told Elna where you are?”

Arthur was a pillar of the Bright Wings faction. He shouldn’t really have been acting alone on the night before the decisive battle. Still, if others at least knew where to find him—

“I slipped out while she was in the underground waters, giving that massive spell Lord Addison proposed a final inspection. And what a secret weapon it is! Now, drink up.”

Words failed me.

Silly me. How could I forget that he’s Ridley’s best friend?

I massaged my temples and sighed as I accepted a mug. “Don’t blame me if she bites your head off.”

“Not to worry!” he declared. “Elna is the finest woman on earth!”

“You don’t say that every time, do you? I think she might just stab you one of these days,” I said and drank my tea. I could hardly call it refined, but its rustic taste recalled fond memories.

Arthur gazed up at the starry sky. “I drank this tea when I was little. It grows wild, you see, and the old northerner who looked after Elna and me as children taught us how to brew it. I still get the urge to drink it now and then.”

I had no idea what position the House of Lothringen had been made to occupy in the republic, but I could well imagine its members had faced many hardships that never entered the public eye.

I found myself gazing upward too. Uncounted stars twinkled, and

the moon cast its light on us. The night was a quiet one.

"Allen."

Returning to earth, my eyes met the champion's silver-gold gaze.

"You want to ask me something, I think," he said. "Something you can't mention in company."

"You're right. I'm curious what passed between you and Lord Addison the other day. But that's not my most pressing concern." I took another sip of tea and bowed. "Arthur, if you know, tell me: Do the Lothringens have any traditions concerning the 'altars'? One beneath our royal palace was used to create an 'artificial angel.' Something similar must have lain beneath the Old Temple in the city of water, although it seems as though that one was ultimately used to imprison a rampant offspring of the World Tree."

"Oh, that." Arthur scratched his head, disarranging his blond hair, and set his mug on a rock beside him. With a branch, he poked at the fire, scattering sparks. "We don't have time to go over everything I know tonight."

"I understand, but I can't let the matter rest," I said. Beneath the independence memorial, beyond the Slayer of Champions' prison, lurked something that made even the Dark Lord wary.

Arthur looked uneasy as he considered. "It's a terrifically old story. Almost no one takes it seriously these days. Not even Elna really believed, until she saw Stella the other day."

"I'm not surprised."

Stella had linked mana with me in the battle for the city of craft, saving many lives as a "white-winged angel." Of course, her own talents had made the transformation possible, and no doubt Carina had helped as well. But in that case, who had the other girl, the "black angel," been? Incredible though it seemed, I believed that I had met three people that time beneath the palace: Lady Stella Howard herself, Princess Carina Wainwright, and the mystery girl who had first attacked me.

No wonder her personality, her tone, and even the things she talked about had seemed strange. Nothing could be more natural. If my hypothesis proved true, then three wills had intermingled in one body.

I glanced down at my right hand. As always, the ring and bracelet kept silent when I most wanted their input.

Arthur picked up his mug and drained his tea in one gulp. "I've decided. I'll tell you how the altars came to be. You'll never understand them if you don't know the background. It will make a bit of a long story, but bear with me!"

With that, the champion launched into a piece of truly ancient history.

*

First, tell me, Allen: How well do you know your history?

That's right. Our world has no gods.

The Goddess put too much faith in mortals, and so came to ruin.

The Archfiend loved mortals too dearly, and so came to ruin.

The Wyrm Divine grew disgusted with mortals and vanished.

Ages have come and gone since the last of the gods, the Wyrm Divine, left its dwelling atop the World Tree that once towered over the center of our continent. Even with the surviving Lothringen tomes, I have no idea how many years ago that was. A thousand? No, longer. Of that much, I'm certain.

Let me tell you what came to pass after the Wyrm Divine left us. It seems like people panicked at first. We moderns can't understand how the ancient felt. Still, gods must have seemed like a normal part of life back then. But you know as well as I do that people adjust. They carried on into the godless age much as they had before. Wars broke out, blood ran, countries fell, and countries rose. Spheres of influence settled into shape over the course of a few centuries.

In the end, three empires reigned supreme. One united the continent that once lay south of the league. One, far to the east, was built by "samurai" who claimed that their "katana" blades could "cleave even wyrms." And last but not least, the Lothringian Empire covered this whole continent save for the Dark Lord's realm. That was what our history books call the "Old Empire" at its height.

I don't know if I believe it, but they say the age of the three empires saw flying "airships" fill the skies. People grew extravagant,

then arrogant. They thought there was nothing they couldn't do. And that overconfidence brought catastrophe.

*

"Catastrophe?" I echoed. "How so?"

Arthur reached out and took the kettle, refilling his own mug and mine. "Remember I said there were two more vast empires? Have you ever heard their names?"

"No, I can't say that I have," I replied. I was no expert on far-eastern lands, but I at least knew that no continent lay south of the league—only scattered islands.

"There's your answer." The champion waved his left hand, resignation in his silver-gold eyes. "Two of the great empires that dominated the world vanished without a trace. They meddled with things no one should touch and angered beings no one should rouse. Now nothing remains of their continents, their archipelagoes, their thriving cities, and even their names. At most, some weapon or tool they used turns up once in a blue moon. I've heard that the people of the southern isles descend from those who fled the fighting on the southern continent, but even that isn't certain. The tomes claim that even the climate changed radically in the wake of the upheaval."

"Do they say what caused the calamity?"

Arthur snapped a branch and tossed it on the fire. The flames regained their vigor, and for a split second, I spied a bird overhead. The champion must have noticed too, because he winked and said, "On with the story. It looks as though our time is running out."

*

Let me back up a bit. A few centuries after the Wyrm Divine departed, the eternal World Tree that had towered over the continent, sustaining the planet since time immemorial, withered and died. The wyrms and other colossal monsters gradually weakened as well, and the power of the World Tree's worshippers

waned.

But don't you find it strange? Could the planet really go on as before despite losing the Three Divinities and the World Tree? Unfortunately, reality isn't so convenient. No one noticed a change for a long time, but only because someone had prepared substitutes: the saplings of the World Tree that we call "Great Trees" today, the divine Thinking Staff and seven dragons to ensure they grew safely, and the houses of the eight grand dukes to safeguard the world through overwhelming force of arms.

That man lowered the curtain on the age of gods and truly inaugurated the age of mortalkind before he departed with the first of the Alverns. "The gods have gone," he supposedly told my ancestor, "but the world needs something to sustain it." And the system he devised to sustain a godless world was marvelous indeed. No one so much as noticed the change until after the three empires had coalesced. But nothing can be perfect.

When the empires' leaders started to forget him, some schemed to harness the saplings' power. After all, the trees sustained the world. Even a fraction of their power must have seemed enticing.

People showed restraint at first. Once they realized that the dragons would not intervene, they grew bolder. In the end, they ignored repeated warnings from the grand dukes. Of course, not even that sealed their fates. I hate to disappoint you, but I don't know exactly what happened then. The ancient records single out one person: a rare genius born to the same House of Shiki that produced the Gemstone, although they supposedly descended from the one Ridley calls the Sweetsmaster. He laid the theoretical foundation for the altars, which he meant to assist the saplings' growth.

Allen, you must have seen the mysterious "black gates" in many lands. He tapped into their power. Oh, but don't misunderstand me. Though the man was eccentric, he had a good heart. The record states that the young World Trees really did grow faster. But sometimes, mortal folly can beggar belief.

*

At that point, Arthur lowered his eyes. "Allen, I'm sure you of all people can guess what followed," he sighed, voice tinged with self-derision.

"I think I can."

I considered the information I'd gained in my travels thus far in light of what Arthur had just told me. Again, a bird passed overhead. Our time was almost up. And I still had so many questions about the Thinking Staff, not to mention Atra and the other great elementals, who hadn't figured in the story.

"People in every land schemed to misuse the altars and syphon even more power from the saplings," I said, cradling my mug in both hands. "The eastern and southern empires fell as a result. Either the dragons or the grand dukes laid waste to them. Am I close?"

"More or less. I see Elna's caught on."

Arthur grimaced and drained his second mug of tea.

"As the story goes, a mere handful of *witches* brought both empires to ruin," he continued, staring into the flames. "As I said, I don't know the specifics. And the Lothringians remained to face"—the champion closed his eyes—"the Dark Lord, at the head of an alliance, and what we'd now call a 'devil.'"

I gasped. "You mean the sixteen-winged 'First of All Devils' really existed? I thought that was a fairy tale."

Then, it hit me: How had Carina nearly fallen to become an eight-winged devil? Could the First of All Devils have been induced artificially? And if so, who had been behind it?

A third bird flew by, and Arthur rose to his feet. I stood as well.

"Forgive me, Allen. Our time is up. We'll continue this talk—"

"After the battle," I finished for him.

We bumped fists and exchanged nods. We could resume our conversation when the war was over.

Arthur turned and strode off. I saw Elna walking to meet him, a portable mana lamp in hand. Its dim light revealed her bone-chilling smile.

I'd better watch my back too.

The champion paused on his way to join his fiancée.

"The ice wyrm that brought Lalannoy victory in our fight for

independence was *created*," he shouted into the darkness, "by offering a wyrm's remains and a weapon from the age of gods to the altar and the black gate! And we had collaborators! Their representative called themselves a descendant of the Knight, and they wielded the great spell Radiant Shield to prove it!"

The Knight? A relation of the Royal House of Wainwright, then?

"Now you know the truth Lord Addison confided to me the other day." Arthur's blond hair fluttered. His eyes held a loneliness he could not conceal. "Not even he knows more. It seems my homeland faces ruin from a monster of our own making. Should we call this comedy or tragedy? What do you think, Allen?"

"Mortalkind might be as foolish as we were when gods walked the earth," I said, feeling a slight breeze pick up. A burning log split with a *crack*, scattering sparks. "But knowing the truth won't change what I must do tomorrow. Only Heaven's Sword, Arthur Lothringen, and the Little Lady of Ice, Tina Howard, stand a chance of slaying the wyrm before it revives, so I'll support you both in any way I can. My partner always complains that I overthink things."

Arthur closed his eyes. At last, he chuckled. "Well said. Tomorrow!"

He raised his left hand, then walked off to join his lady. Soon, the two of them vanished from sight. It was then that I felt a weight on my right shoulder.

"Good evening, Kifune," I said.

The white cat meowed and rubbed against me.

I picked up my mana lamp. "Rill, it isn't nice to eavesdrop."

"You must forgive me." The silver-haired girl appeared, chuckling, beside the fire. She wore a black kimono tonight. The living witness to history grinned as she sat on a nearby rock and kicked her feet. "What I overheard reminded me of old times, and I couldn't help myself. I'd be happy to tell all, you know? *If* you agree to succeed me as Dark Lord! A generous offer, if I do say so myself!"

I poured hot water from the kettle into the teapot. "What really brings you here?"

"What? That was your cue to compromise. I'll have you know the tale of how my comrades and I put down the World Tree's

rampaging offspring would bring a tear to any eye.” The girl pouted, visibly miffed.

So, she “put them down.”

I filled a spare mug with tea and passed it to Rill. “Your timing can’t be a coincidence. Is there more cause for concern?”

“A little,” she admitted. “I cannot join the final battle in this body. You ought to go forewarned.”

Quietly, the Dark Lord began her tale. The white cat added a mournful *mew*.

*

If not for our instinct, nourished over seventy-odd years, we might not have noticed the disturbance. We levered our old body out of bed. Darkness veiled the better part of our drab chamber, broken only by a small mana lamp and the sharper shadows it cast.

Who would take this for the heart of the imperial palace? we wondered as our ears, which had yet to show their age, caught an all-too-familiar orchestra of swords and spells, screams, shouts, and roars: the music of the battlefield.

Fighting in the Yustinian capital? So near to the palace?

We recalled our other half’s incessant badgering as we took a dagger from our bedside table and approached the window. “Your Imperial Majesty! Emperor Yuri Yustin!” Grand Marshal Moss Saxe was fond of booming. “Please never sleep without a weapon in reach!”

Our wrinkled hand flung wide the curtains, and we grunted at the sight that sprang to our eyes: a vast black flower blooming in the moonless night. So, this was the grand-scale teleportation magic we had heard so much about.

Through it emerged three skeletal dragons, teeth bristling like rows of spears. Each beat of their bony wings spread a sinister dark ash, no doubt to jam magical communications. And the colossi seemed to have spotted us at the window, though we didn’t know how. They opened their jaws wide, deploying the advanced spell Imperial Shadow Sphere in the air around them.

"So, these are the constructs they say the church's apostles employed at Rostlay." We sniffed, stroking our now fully gray beard. "Modeled on a dragon, no doubt, but in abominable taste."

The skeletons prepared to unleash well over a hundred advanced spells on the palace, only for the lion's share to be swallowed by uncanny black cubes or shredded by flashes of light too numerous to count. Atop a stone colonnade nearby stood a tall man and a small woman. The professor, the Wainwright Kingdom's most dangerous sorcerer, was in residence as an envoy, while Anna, "the Angel of Death," had seen at least a few centuries. She might even recall the days before the age of strife. Unthinking creatures of death though they were, we pitied the skeletons' ill fortune. The Angel of Death had departed our empire more than twenty years before and only just returned to report the kingdom's response to Lalannoy.

Before the skeletal dragons could make their next move, Moss Saxe let out a bellow like thunder. Dozens of strategic barriers shielded our palace, yet his voice rang through them all. And he hadn't even used magic. While we sighed at the feat, Moss left the ground and rose above the nearest skeleton's head in one mighty leap. Castle Breaker shone with bright death as he brought it down, cleaving the creature in two along with the dark imitations of Radiant Shield that protected it.

The thing tried to piece itself back together, bearing out reports that the church imbued its creations with vestiges of Resurrection as well, but a suited figure sped through the air. Duke Howard's head butler, Graham "the Abyss" Walker, delivered a crushing blow to the head. Its skull shattered, the construct dissolved into ash.

Meanwhile, seasoned imperial bodyguards answerable directly to our grand marshal bombarded the remaining two skeletons with Divine Light Spears from the ground and from the heights of the palace, keeping them pinned down. We admired their handiwork. But no sooner had we settled back in a chair to survey the battle than we heard frantic footfalls from the corridor.

"Your Imperial Majesty!"

The door slammed open as Carl Labyria, the young knight commander of our imperial guard, burst in with a troop of

subordinates. We had not expected him to recover from the surprise assault and take action so soon.

"How goes the battle?" we asked as Carl dropped to one knee at the head of his knights.

"The enemy force comprises only three skeletal dragons," he said. "The lord grand marshal and Your Imperial Majesty's personal guard have gone out to intercept them. The Wainwright envoys offered their assistance, and I accepted it on my own authority."

"We grant our formal approval. Now..." We regarded the young knight from our chair. His hair gleamed the same shade of platinum blond that ours once had. Aftershocks of mana rattled the barrier-shielded windows, but we took no notice as we barked, "What do you think you're playing at? Our old bones need no defending! We have one foot in the grave already!"

The young knights went wide-eyed.

We drew our dagger. "This is the capital of the Yustinian Empire. *Our* empire. Fail to defend even one of its people, and the shame will haunt us for all eternity." Turning our gaze back to the window, we witnessed the Abyss and the Angel of Death bring a second skeletal dragon crashing to earth. "Let every knight, save those under Moss's command, strive to safeguard the citizenry. Run like the wind, young whippersnappers."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!" Carl and his knights struck their breastplates in perfect unison, then left the room, youthful eyes alight with fighting spirit.

Be you good knights. Good knights to keep the people of our empire from harm. Good knights to slay the monsters of Star's End when at last they come from the north.

We offered an old prayer and returned our attention to the battle. The Angel of Death and the Abyss must have been on the ground, though we couldn't see them. The professor picked apart a skeletal dragon's dark magic, while Moss lopped off its regrown tail. The old guards kept up their hail of spells, restricting the thing's movements.

"Three skeletal dragons," we murmured. "An impressive fighting force, but not quite enough for an attempt on our life."

Only chance had put the kingdom's freaks in our capital this

night. Even so, the palace defenses, Moss's guards, and our knightly orders could have dealt with this.

"They're a distraction. But where else in our capital could the apostles want to— No."

The recent words of an old acquaintance flashed through our mind: "My successor might act while I'm away, but please take special care not to interfere. We have an unusual guest, and I can't guarantee the life of anyone who sticks their nose in."

We squinted our old eyes at the city, from part of which dark flames had begun to rise. A second, smaller black flower was spreading its petals in the misty northern outskirts.

Just like the attack on the Alverns fourteen years ago. Or worse, we suppose.

"We ought to have ceded our throne to Yana and retired when we had the chance. The Angel of Death was right when she said the world seldom conforms to our wishes. Why, of all times, must they come during *her* stay? That woman doesn't know the meaning of 'restraint.'"

Our lament vanished into empty air. Out the window, we saw Moss strike a skeleton's head clean off.

*

The first thing that met my eyes as I, second among the apostles, left the teleportation circle was an expanse of mist-shrouded woodland. Landing on a branch of a towering tree that must have stood for a century at least, I lifted the brim of my white witch hat. Ancient magic permeated the very space around me.

"Well, well. So this is the Alverns' famous forest labyrinth."

"Don't lose your way, now, Io. Would you like to hold my hand?" gibed a vampiress in a black dress and black hat, crescent earrings flashing. Alicia "Crescent Moon" Coalfield had arrived mere moments after I had.

I clicked my tongue and swung my staff. Black petals whirled, forming a path forward. I kicked off the branch and resumed my journey, gliding through the mist on black wings that had once made

me “an embarrassment to demisprites everywhere.”

“Still, are you sure this was wise?” I said snidely. “Even you can only have so many dragon bones lying around, O great prime apostle. You certainly spared no expense, wasting three of those constructs on a diversion. I could say the same about recalling me from the city of craft.”

“You needn’t worry. I merely used them because their time had come. And as planned, the Hero left the city on her white sea-green griffin,” Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield answered dispassionately. “The Sage” flew beside us, wearing his azure-trimmed white robes and clutching his antique staff. “I claimed seven pieces of dragon bone a century ago, from the altar in the southern isles. Great power comes at a price, and interference made it difficult to procure more.”

“You mean that time you fought the Shooting Star Brigade behind the scenes,” chimed in the vampiress, tarnished-silver hair streaming as she matched our pace with her magically enhanced strength alone.

One hundred years ago? That would be just after someone in the royal capital lost control of Radiant Shield.

My petals started to flag in the face of the interfering mist. I reinforced them, white robe fluttering in the wind. “Just like the great spells?” I sneered. “Is that what you’re implying? I hear the ex-Wainwright prince who served you so well as a repository and test subject finally broke.”

What was his name? Gerard? I suppose I ought to pity him. His fate must have been sealed the moment he met that Saint-worshipper Ibush-nur.

Aster’s azure eyes glared from beneath his hood. “I’ve already found a replacement. This one won’t lose control. Atavistic beastfolk are durable.”

“Beastfolk?” I repeated. “Oh, you mean the baby rat the Saint sent to the city of craft when I left it. Let’s see. Resurrection, Radiant Shield, Watery Grave, Falling Star, and now Blaze of Ruin. He must be durable if he can bear five great spells, I’ll grant you that.”

Too much power destroys its wielder. We need the rat boy to

hang in there for all of our sakes.

Alicia darted ahead of us and turned in midair with a revolting grin. "So, what about the dragon bones?"

"Well, Prime Apostle?" I added grudgingly.

"Of those seven bones, I've used only two before now: one in Rostlay and one in the city of water," Aster explained. "It wouldn't do to underestimate Moss Saxe, the Castle Breaker, even if he is long past his prime. Would *you* want him interrupting our battle with the Alverns? Three skeletal dragons is a small price to pay."

"I'm happy as long as I get to play with strong little boys and girls." Still airborne, Alicia cocked her head in a show of puzzlement as the mist thinned. "Edith did mention that the boy I met in the city of water had come to Lalannoy."

I snorted. "Who cares about that defective key?!"

"Hardly cause for concern," said Aster. "I've instructed the Saint to give one of the lesser apostles my sixth shard of dragon bone. And don't forget Zelbert Régnier. Not even Heaven's Sword can stop the ice wyrm in time."

Paving stones appeared as the mist's power waned.

"In any case, I've already accounted for ultimate defeat in the city of craft." The enigmatic prime apostle's lips curled up slightly at the corners. "Not even a revived wyrm can vanquish the Hero, whatever it does to the chaff. And it won't stand a chance if the flower and water dragons intervene. Of course, no one knows just how many dragons are awake at the moment."

That was apparently his idea of a joke. I grimaced, recalling a most unpleasant conversation: "Listen up, Io. Whatever you do, never pick a fight with the Hero or the seven dragons! That's begging for death, plain and simple." Hard as it was to believe, there were freaks that not even my teacher, audacity made flesh, dared to cross.

Alicia extended a slender arm. "We're coming out of the mist."

All of a sudden, my vision cleared, and beds of flowers blooming out of season filled my view. A stone-paved path split them, leading to a building atop a low hill. The vampiress and I squinted at it from midair.

“So, that’s it,” I murmured.

“The Alvern’s old church. I’ve heard they modeled it on something in the Holy Land. Do you think it’s true?” Alicia tittered, although I couldn’t guess what she found funny.

The Holy Land lay in the west of the continent, across Blood River. A child of the World Tree towered high above it, they said, although it must have been centuries since anyone from our side had seen it and lived to tell the tale.

I was about to respond with something acerbic when a massive mana disturbance behind us drew my attention.

“My,” Alicia said as we both looked over our shoulders, back into the mist we’d just left. One of the skeletal dragons had already fallen.

Aster struck the paving stones with the butt of his staff. “Stop dawdling. Don’t forget we’ve come for an Alvern treasure: the forbidden codex of the Bibliophage, a great sorceress from the age of gods and the first to violate the Star Oath.”

“You don’t have to remind me.” I snorted.

“I can’t wait to read it,” said Alicia.

We prepared to resume our advance—and immediately scattered in three directions. Creeping vines poured from the flower beds to attack us. To my consternation, neither the paving stones nor the flowers themselves got a scratch on them.

“Grand-scale botanical magic?!” I spat, shredding the vines that reached for me with the advanced spell Imperial Storm Tornado before incinerating them with a Scorching Sphere.

“Oh, Io, how could you?” Alicia twirled her black parasol atop vines that Aster’s ice magic had frozen solid. “What if you’d hurt poor, fragile, little me?”

“Be quiet! If spells like those could put a dent in you, you’d already be long—”

The sea of vines parted as a woman with the build of a child walked down the path toward us. A jade-green ribbon secured her long lavender hair behind her head, on which rested a floral beret, an honor permitted to only a select few demisprites. I couldn’t begin to understand why she wore a Royal Academy uniform, though with

no wings on her back, she looked nothing but human. She planted her left hand on her hip, lilac eyes brimming with disdain.

"Ha! Look what the cat dragged in." Her glacial stare transfixed me as I deployed spells, knuckles white on my staff. "I wondered who would be fool enough to barge in here, but I didn't expect my brainless apprentice to be one of them. How long has it been since you threw a tantrum and stormed out on me, Io? More than twenty years now?"

"Die." I multi-cast the advanced spell Divine Light Squall. A shining rain pelted down to skewer the woman and—

"Your control always was sloppy, and you leave too many tells."

An equal number of equally potent rays canceled out every one of mine.

"Shise Glenbysidhe! Floral Heaven! What the hell are you doing here?!" I shouted, thrusting my staff at her.

Instantly, you could cut the tension with a knife.

"Excuse me?" she said slowly.

Alicia closed her parasol, and even Aster started readying spells. The demisprites boasted the longest history of any mortal race. Now their mightiest and most dangerous sorceress, who had won herself the title of an ancient champion despite being the first of our kind born wingless in a millennium, bared her canines in a grin.

"Io, when did you learn to talk to your teacher like that? Look at you, tagging along with the blockheads of the Holy Spirit in that ridiculous getup. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Sh-Shut your mouth, you—"

I raised my staff high and deployed the tactical taboo I'd been weaving, North Wind of Dark Death...only to have it picked apart.

Sh-She stole my *magic out from under me?!*

Having demonstrated her almost miraculous skill, Shise turned her freezing gaze on Aster. "Now for the self-styled 'Sage' and—"

Alicia kicked off her perch on the vines, charging Shise in mid-sentence. Her black parasol struck without mercy, and a crash like thunder followed. The blow would have killed any ordinary target.

"The funny vampiress with sticky fingers. I wasn't done speaking, in case you hadn't noticed."

But she was fighting another freak to end all freaks. Shise had retreated too quickly for me to follow, and now a spell book hovered in the air.

"Now, who are you?" she demanded, dusting herself off. "You look an awful lot like Alicia 'the Crescent Moon' *Coalheart*."

"Goodness, have you forgotten?" the vampiress replied. "It's me, Alicia Coalfield. We fought together so many times in the War of the Dark Lord."

Space creaked under the strain of the torrent of mana bursting from Shise's tiny body.

Alicia's right. The two of them must have been comrades. What's going on?

I turned to Aster, but he didn't move a muscle.

"You know," Floral Heaven murmured, opening her spell book, "I don't much care what you're scheming, although I bet it's nothing good. Still..."

All three of us tensed as gale winds filled the air with flower petals, and another ancient tome took shape in Shise's hand.

"I do have a question for that man with you." My erstwhile teacher's lilac hair fluttered as she fixed her sights on the prime apostle. "Are you the one who cursed my dear sweet Rosa to death?"

"What?" I gave a start.

Rosa Etherheart, the Lady of Ice, had apprenticed with me under Shise—although I'd started training first. She'd been a magical genius—the only one I'd ever felt outclassed by. News of her death had reached me through the grapevine, but what was this about a curse?

"Your suspicion is misplaced," Aster said at last. "I did no such thing."

"You expect me to believe that? Ha! I never thought I'd hear one of you high-and-mighty apostles crack a joke. I guess you've made *some* progress in the past two hundred years," Shise spat, hair bristling with fury. "We should have killed all *eight* of you at Blood River."

Meanwhile, a second skeletal dragon went down. Unless we acted

quickly, enemy reinforcements would arrive before we eliminated the Alverns. I wanted to avoid a fruitless battle, but that didn't seem possible.

"You there. Vampiress." The furious sorceress raised a hand to her eyes. "Let me ask you one question while you're still alive to answer."

"How can I help you?" Alicia stuck her parasol in the ground with a bemused expression.

Shise dismissed her second tome. "If you're *the* Alicia..." She lowered her hand, revealing a gaze frostier than any I had seen in all my time as her apprentice. "Then tell me, how did Shooting Star die at Blood River? If you really met your end with that terminally softhearted wolf, that should be a cinch."

Alicia froze. Aster's expression remained unchanged. The vampiress raised a slender arm above her head. Her eyes and hair turned crimson.

"How could you make me remember? I'll kill you."

A potent burst of mana stained the night bloodred.

"Everlasting Scarlet Dream," Shise murmured, instantly recognizing the spell. "A tactical taboo for conjuring moonlit nights. What do you think?"

"Mm. Artless."

A great flash made the sky pale for a split second. Lightning was tearing down the crimson moon before it finished rising.

Th-This magic! Could it be?!

"You're a pack of fools, so I'll give you an easy one." Shise sneered down at us from the air while we stood speechless. She sat atop a massive spell book with a tongue lolling from its open mouth.

None of us could spare the thought to respond. My body was on high alert, screaming at me to get out of here this instant.

"Who do you think guards this graveyard?" asked my erstwhile teacher. Damn her rotten heart.

A girl so beautiful she could have stepped out of myth walked slowly down the stone path toward us. She had long platinum-blonde hair and was dressed in spotless white. A jet-black sword hung at her side.

Bitterly, Aster muttered the name of the last person who should have been here.

"The Hero, Alice Alvern."

The monster, a mortal capable of destroying a dragon, planted her hands on her hips and threw out her scrawny chest. "Mm-hmm. If you thought I'd go to the city of craft, you have another thing coming. And you have a lot to learn if you got taken in by Aurelia and Luce under a perception-blocking spell. That place already has my comrade, Saint Wolf, my enemy number three..."

Pillars of lightning crackled into being around us. *A barrier?!*

Alice Alvern started to draw her black blade while above, Shise Glenbysidhe was conjuring spell books in rapid succession.

"And last but not least, my Allen. You should worry about your own lives."

"You'll tell us everything," added Shise. "I might not look it, but I have a lot of interrogations under my belt."

Our desperate fight against the Hero and Floral Heaven began amid a hail of lightning bolts.



Chapter 4

"There you are, Ibush-nur. The mist is thick this morning. It reminds me of the city of water."

"Ifur," I said. "I didn't expect you so soon."

The gray of dawn tinged the moon over the Lalannoyan capital, one night shy of full. I had been surveying the remains of the independence memorial from the roof of a jeweler's shop when my sworn friend alighted behind me.

"What do you make of the military situation?" I asked.

"Your man Rupert just delivered a report. The vanguards have begun fighting on the western outskirts." He paused. "It sounds as though we're getting the worst of it."

I clasped the little bag hanging around my neck, a gift from Her Holiness. Rupert might look like a portly, middle-aged knight, but he had been conducting reconnaissance for many years now. I trusted his judgment. Mana leaked, too vast for any seal to fully contain, and vanished in a holy afterglow.

No matter how hard the beastfolk pushed themselves, they wouldn't get the wyrm unfrozen before nightfall. Our enemies were no fools. Anyone could foresee that they would commit to an all-out attack before the creature revived. If Régnier would only make up his mind to take the offensive, we could override Miles's stubborn objections.

While I ground my teeth, my friend strode forward and placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Miles Talito is a capable man. He kept order in the occupied capital, repaired the iron bridge, and relocated the potentially hostile citizenry to the western districts."

"I realize that, but we're facing the republic's finest with a champion to lead them. Can we afford to let our commander in chief stay holed up in his headquarters in the Addison house, even if he is a figurehead?"

To be frank, we could have handled the enemy soldiers without him. It was Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage I worried about. Them and the defective key.

"They'll storm the city before the wyrm revives." I squeezed the bag even tighter. "And last night, Régnier took Isolde to join the two greater apostles in a church in the western district. They've magically barricaded themselves in. We'll have to find a solution ourselves."

As one of Her Holiness's apostles, I couldn't afford a second failure. The moment of truth had come. We had the remaining inquisitors and heavy spell-soldiers to command. We could also deploy Gerard, who remained on standby in the Addison house, although he had lost most of his identity. But one thing, I couldn't stomach.

"What's wrong?" My friend's severe face looked suspicious. "Do you have doubts about Régnier?"

"No, about that rat boy."

Our latest cadet, Ilaios, had formerly gone by Kume, son of Chieftain Yono of the eastern capital rat clan. The whelp's servile smile never faltered, and his strong affinity for great magic had made him Gerard's successor as our "repository."

I brushed a white tendril aside. The mist had nearly reached us. It was astonishingly thick this morning, even for the river-straddling city of craft.

"I'll admit he deserves our thanks for retrieving Blaze of Ruin from the wyrm's restraints," I continued. "Someone needed to do it, now that the disinherited prince has broken. But why must he stay underground afterward?"

Her Holiness had no love for discrimination. Even so, I could hardly accept a mission we knew nothing of going to a green cadet, and a filthy beastfolk at that. Why had she elevated him into our lofty ranks?

"Still, what do you imagine the Sage plans to do with the wyrm once we revive it?" I asked, awkwardly changing the subject as I ran a hand roughly through my hair. "Be frank with me, Fossi. I can't fathom what the greater apostles are thinking."

"Neither can I, Raymond."

It felt like a long time since we had called each other by those names.

I took a few theatrical strides forward along the roof. "Sometimes I daydream, you know. Trying to picture whether I would have been happy living as Earl Raymond Despenser of the kingdom."

"Now there's a coincidence," my friend replied, ever calm and collected, though I caught a lonesome note in his voice. "Sometimes I wonder what future I might have had as Marchese Fossi Folonto of the league. Then again, even if I had another life to live, I doubt I could devote it to just one woman like Carlyle Carnien did."

Marchese Carlyle Carnien had betrayed his homeland solely to save his wife. The woman had committed the sin of poking her nose into the affairs of the church and Her Holiness, and she had suffered the punishment. Carlotta, I believed her name was. I recalled Fossi mentioning the couple often during our time in the eastern capital. He had called them some of the few people he could trust. Their fate must have weighed on him, though of course there had been no alternative. We were apostles in service to Her Holiness the Saint, and at the same time, we were only mortal.

I let out a deep breath and gave my best impression of a smile. "I envy Edith. She must be free of doubts if anyone is. 'Everything for Her Holiness!' What a wonderful outlook."

"Hence why she enjoys Her Holiness's favor. It all comes down to the depth of our faith."

"I can't fault your reasoning."

We didn't laugh like we had in our drunken youth. Those happy days of childhood, when we'd known nothing of miracles, were far behind us. We could never go back.

At last, the mist started to thin, exposing the soon-to-be-embattled city to the light. For an instant, I glimpsed several shapes scurrying near a spire.

White rabbits? Here?

Naturally, Ifur noticed them as well. We swiftly cast detection spells—to no result. As insufferable as Second Apostle Io Lockfield could be, his skill was genuine. The wards he had left would alert us

to any enemy approach. We must have imag—

A deafening roar engulfed the mist-shrouded city as fire consumed a number of military towers. The destruction extended even to the fortified buildings around the memorial. Mist and debris obscured our view.

We're under attack!

I drew my dagger, and Ifur, his longsword.

"E-Enemy...of them..." Our communication orbs crackled, useless with interference. Mana detection was blocked as well.

"A surprise attack?" I muttered, racking my brain. "How did they fool Io's—"

"Raymond!" Fossi shoved me off the roof.

Airborne, I reached out my left hand toward my friend. A voiceless scream tore unbidden from my throat. I saw a colossal blade of light split the building clean in two.

*

Searing light suffused the city of craft and the *magical* mist that buried it. The jeweler's shop on which the apostles stood sundered and crumbled along with many more buildings, lamps, and roadways in the line of fire. Who would believe this jaw-dropping power came from covering fire, barely even in range?

"Forgive me, Allen!" Arthur called. "I meant to cut them both down at once, but they dodged! Still, keep to the plan! I'll break from the main force to hunt heavy spell-soldiers. I leave the apostles to you. Let us meet in the memorial square!"

"Understood. Best of luck!" I responded into the communication orb in my inner pocket.

It seemed as though Arthur and Lord Addison had made it safely back aboveground with the handpicked force that they'd led into the subterranean waterways. And the white rabbits that Chitose had conjured and set loose in the city formed the nodes of a communications network that functioned despite Black Blossom's jamming. Three cheers for the Howard Maid Corps's number five.

"Stop, please." Silver Bloom in hand, I signaled to the girls behind

me as I neared the jeweler's at a sprint.

"They're not beaten yet, are they?" Lily asked, sporting a greatsword and her familiar getup.

"I think one got clear," Stella answered, rapier at the ready and Carina's hair clip pinned to the left breast of her military uniform, as they raised defensive walls of fire flowers and ice flakes.

"I was slow off the mark," Tina groaned, running to bring up the rear. She wore a pale cloak over a white blouse and azure skirt. Although she squeezed her rod in frustration, the fact that she could keep up with us at all spoke to extraordinary progress.

I surveyed the battlefield through the birds I'd conjured, keeping a wary eye on the shop. We had planned a surprise attack—an elite force infiltrating through the waterways under cover of Floral Heaven's Maze of Mist, a grand-scale strategic spell that the demisprite sorceress had left the House of Addison, and which inundated a chosen area with fog. It seemed to be going off without a hitch. I could only stand in awe of Lady Elna, who had single-handedly worked the spells to fool Black Blossom's web of detection magic.

Olly and her fellow maids had succeeded in demolishing the military towers all at once. Minié's naval force had already engaged the enemy in front of their headquarters at the Addison mansion. The Heaven-and-Earthers had massed the bulk of their army on the city outskirts, as our reconnaissance had indicated. The traitor Snider commanded just about the only unit in the city proper worth worrying about. The heavy spell-soldiers could have made things difficult, but Arthur was picking them off one by one, so—

"Sir!" Tina shouted a shrill warning, Frigid Crane's mark flashing on the back of her right hand.

An avalanche of inky chains burst out of the mist toward us. I recognized the church inquisitors' favorite spell.

"That won't work!" Lily laughed.

"You think we'd let you through?" Stella scoffed as fire and ice intercepted every chain.

I, meanwhile, cast the elementary spell Divine Wind Wave in a circle around us. The mist rolled back.

“How did you evade Black Blossom’s alarms? No. This mist. Can it be...?” Ibush-nur stood before the rubble, a scowl twisting his handsome face. His white robes were stained with the blood of the hulking Ifur, who rested on one knee beside him. The apostles seemed to have regrown the arms they’d lost in our last encounter, but even the vestiges of Resurrection had their limits. We could count them out of this fight.

Gray-hooded inquisitors raised their signature single-edged daggers to defend the pair. They were weaving spells, but nothing I didn’t recognize.

“Curse you, defective key!” Ibush-nur glared murder at me and tore a small bag from around his neck. Its mana made my skin crawl. “Don’t think you’ve—”

“Ibush-nur.” A massive, bloodstained hand jerked up from below him.

The apostle faltered in the act of invoking whatever wicked arts his own bag made possible. “B-But Ifur—”

“I’ll buy you time. Use it...”

“Jump back, all of you!” I shouted, to a chorus of assent.

The sixth apostle’s robes stained a bright blood red. Then he was gone, and a shadow dimmed the morning sun.

“...And do your duty!” he roared as I blocked a murderous blow of his longsword with Silver Bloom. He must have only pretended to be incapacitated, biding his time to make the most of a teleportation talisman.

I parried Ifur’s follow-up strikes, noting spell formulae writhe over his cheeks and in the cracks of his battered gauntlets, while the inquisitors circled behind me. A well-executed pincer, although I hated to compliment our enemy.

“Die!” came the chorus as at least a dozen blades flashed, dripping deadly poison, and Ibush-nur assembled a ghastly magic circle.

Yet I kept my cool. Although I didn’t have Lydia Leinster to watch my back, as she had for so long...

“Not on my watch!” Tina howled along with an icy gale and brought her rod down, rapidly casting Swift Ice Lances. The

advanced spell shattered the inquisitors' daggers, pierced their magical defenses, and pinned them to the newly frozen ground.

Ifur cursed, struck at my rod, and backed away, sullying the snow with another gout of his fresh blood. The inquisitors wailed from their prisons of sharp ice.

"I-Impossible!"

"How could our barriers fall so easily?!"

"To hell with them!"

A cheery yell rang out as a scarlet flash shot past them, low to the ground. Lily swept her greatsword sideways for all she was worth, and the snowy expanse erupted into a swathe of fire. The impact split the ground and slammed startled inquisitors into the surrounding rubble.

"Lady Stella, if you please?" The maid winked over her shoulder.

"I won't let them self-destruct!" The noblewoman crossed her sword and staff, casting the experimental bi-elemental spell Ice-Glint Shackles. Chains of pure-white ice overwhelmed the inquisitors as they struggled to their feet, binding them fast.

I came up with that spell on our way to Lalannoy. When did she find time to practice it?

Stella gave a soft giggle, a faint blush in her cheeks, and stuck out her tongue so that only I could see. What *was* I to do with her?

"Curse you!" Ibush-nur screamed from the center of his circle, eyes bloodshot. "Her Holiness's apostles will not fall to the likes of you!"

"Never!" Ifur echoed, thrusting his longsword into the ground before the circle with his right arm. His left had frozen solid. Dark blood spread into a rumbling tangle of spell formulae. He meant to stall us.

"This spell looks like— Sir!" Tina cried, joined by a warning shout from Stella.

"We have nothing to worry about," I assured the Howard sisters, grateful for their presence of mind—and for Lily, who had already finished weaving a Firebird, greatsword resting on her shoulder. Then I rounded on the hulking apostle, whose face had lost all color. "You won't survive pouring your vestiges of great magic into a

taboo, especially not with those wounds. Unless I miss my guess, that spell was meant for two casters."

"You waste your breath! Death lost its terror for me long ago! Praise be to Her Holiness!" he bellowed, heedless of the damage to his sword as he thrust it deeper into the ground. Formulae pulsed beneath their convoluted encryption...and Reverie of Restless Revenants activated.

Unnumbered skeletons clawed free of the rubble-strewn ground.

Now!

"Stella!" I called, sprinting forward with split-second timing.

"I'm with you, Mr. Allen!"

The noblewoman ran beside me, hair and sky-blue ribbon flying. I gave her back a gentle push and linked our mana. At once, a joyous smile crossed her face, and she rose sharply on spotless white wings.

"See what you make of this!"

Stella crossed her staff and rapier a second time, showering a wide area in the bi-elemental spell Immaculate Snow-Gleam. Pale-azure snowflakes danced down, cleansing not only the skeleton army but the taboo spell itself.

She's never looked more like a miracle-working angel!

"Im...possi..." The big apostle collapsed, struck speechless.

"Ifur!" Ibush-nur screamed, abandoning his own incomplete spell and racing to his comrade's side. The discarded pouch floated in the center of his circle.

Now's my chance!

I broke into a sprint, pushing my strength-enhancing magic as far as it would go.

"I'll back you up!" Tina swung her rod, multi-casting more Swift Ice Lances.

"Don't forget me!" Lily cast Heavenly Wind Bound on her feet and wove through the rapid barrage, practically running on air as she overtook me.

What speed!

"Don't think you've won!" Ibush-nur roared, holding the dying Ifur. The formulae for Radiant Shield and Resurrection emerged on

his cheeks as he lashed out with his dagger. Swift casts of Ocean Orb cannoned into the icy spears. Several kept going, closing in on Lily, but her fire flowers closed ranks.

"Better luck next time!" Tri-elemental Scarlet Blossom Shields danced amid the gleaming snowfall, stopping the apostle's advanced spells in their tracks. Lily even made a point to hold out her left hand for the last one, crowing, "Nothing gets past me now that my magic matches Allen's!"

She broke the watery ball on her silver bracelet for all to see, not forgetting to throw me a sidelong glance that said, "A compliment wouldn't hurt, you know?"

Why are all the Leinsters like this?!

Ibush-nur's eyes widened in shock. I hurled a quick volley of Divine Light Shots in case he got other ideas. Tina, Stella, and Lily added javelins of ice and fire.

"D-Damn the lot of you!" Ibush-nur bellowed from behind a phalanx of charcoal-gray shields.

I slipped past him and into the circle. A fragment of dragon bone peeked from the torn pouch. I reached out to grab it and—

"Alleeeeeen!"

The shrill wail shattered what glass remained in the nearby windows and threw me off-balance. Blood dripped from the forest of dark needles bearing down on me.

Stella and Lily screamed my name, racing to intervene with Divine Light Walls and Scarlet Blossom Shields. Their many-layered defense banished the needles back to their source. I recognized them—the spines of that millennium-old monster, the Stinging Sea.

"S-Sir, what *is* that?" Tina pointed to the roof of a building up ahead. A hush fell over not only our group but the apostles as well.

There crouched the grotesque creature that had once been Gerard Wainwright. Fire wreathed the right side of his body, while his left shifted moment to moment between turbid light, ice, and water. Fresh wounds formed only for darkness to close them in a never-ending cycle. His hands and feet had merged with blades of ice. A sickening forest of dark, liquid arms sprouted from his back, tearing out the spines that grew on it to aim at us. He hadn't looked

like this when we'd fought on the bridge. What was this mana?

"Has he eaten vestiges of Blaze of Ruin?" I muttered.

Tina and Stella gasped. Lily scowled and spat, "Horrible."

They're treating him like a laboratory animal.

A derisive chuckle reached my ears. "I never dreamed that piece of refuse would prove useful!" Ibush-nur rejoiced. Then he and Ifur vanished. No sooner had they gone than the circle lurched back into motion.

No!

"Her Holiness chose us for a reason! Now see what you get for looking down on men who've witnessed miracles!"

"Oh, be quiet!"

Ibush-nur's roar and Lily's Firebird rang out at almost the same moment. The blazing bird of ill omen engulfed Gerard and the circle. For a split second, I glimpsed a thorny black spell formula spread and—

Tina and Stella shrieked as a massive shock wave blew everything back. I called to them, hastily multi-casting Divine Earth Wall, and swept the noblewomen behind me with botanical magic. Lily dove into cover next, and I clasped her right hand as we braced against the impact. Fresh destruction ravaged the surrounding buildings. At last, it subsided. Wind whipped foul mana and pale mist.

Tina looked up and gasped.

"No," Stella murmured, eyes wide.

Lily added a pensive "Hmm..."

From high above, a monster glared down at us. No skin covered its vast reptilian head. Dark spines formed its wings. Long razor fangs like rows of greatswords lined a maw that stretched far back into its cheeks. Immense mana of fire, water, light, darkness, and ice scattered amid its spreading corruption. And through a thin membrane on its forehead loomed Gerard's twisted visage.

"A fake dragon?" Tina murmured.

"The same thing happened at Rostlay!" cried Stella. "But how on earth...?"

"I don't understand how, but it seems to have merged with Gerard," I said, striving to assess the situation with a cool head.

Of the two apostles, Ifur was out of action, and his Reverie of Restless Revenants, dispelled. Ibush-nur had largely depleted his own mana as well. He lay atop rubble, awaiting his chance to use a teleportation talisman. The false dragon hovering over us posed a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Tina and Stella had made great strides, and Lily was frankly stronger than I was. But we had come for the ice wyrm. With the two apostles neutralized, it made no sense to stand and fight. At the same time, we could hardly ignore a threat of this—

A bird alighted on my shoulder and delivered its message. Assured that the state of the board was about to change, I gave my rod a twirl and cast another of my experiments: Lightning-Flash Shackles. Chains of light and electricity tangled the airborne monster from all sides. They wouldn't hold it long, but they would buy time.

"Really, Mr. Allen." Stella used her wings to blow a gust down at me, evidently miffed that I had drawn the mana from my rod instead of her.

Make those eyes all you like. The answer is no.

"Stella, until reinforcements arrive, I want you to use purification spells to stall—"

A white rabbit hopped onto my shoulder in mid-sentence. "Mr. Allen, I have urgent news to report," came Chitose's anxious voice from my orb.

A battlefield symphony of cuts, blows, and spells blared behind the maid's words. "Isolde, why?!" a boy screamed, on the verge of tears.

"Lord Addison's force has nearly finished seizing the enemy headquarters," Chitose continued. "But Olly, her detachment of Howard maids, and Lord Artie Addison are engaging a vampire. The traitor Isolde Talito attacked us without warning. I don't believe we can send you reinforcements."

"Artie's fighting?" I repeated. "And against... I understand."

Relieved though I was to hear that the young lord lived, it gave me cause to think. Was Ridley with him?

Ibush-nur's lips moved. "Impossible," I read. "How could headquarters fall so easily? Can we still revive the wyrm in time?"

So, the apostle hadn't seen this coming.

The false dragon struggled, snapping one chain and then another. Gerard's murderous gaze transfixed me.

"Come on, Tina!" Stella shouted.

"Right with you!"

The platinum-haired noblewoman flapped her wings, carrying Tina aloft. In the blink of an eye, the Howard sisters had matched altitude with the false dragon. They cried out in unison, unleashing a Blizzard Wolf armored in Immaculate Snow-Gleam. The dragon-thing writhed in midair, struggling to defend with its twisted parodies of Radiant Shield.

"I've seen enough of that for one lifetime!" I shouted, picking its defenses apart with a sweep of my rod.

Gerard's mouth opened, but the sanctified wolf barreled into him before he could get out a scream. Even his innate magical defenses started to crumble.

Scarlet hair streaming, Lily kicked off the ground—and vanished. Black Cat Promenade teleported her above the dragon-thing's frozen head. "Ready or not, here I come!" She gathered her fire flowers into her greatsword and brought it crashing down.

The monster screamed and plummeted to earth, unable to withstand the fiery scarlet slash to its skull. Its bulk crushed the rubble beneath it, kicking up a blizzard and an inferno at one. My highborn companions were proving almost *too* dependable.

"Damn it all!" Ibush-nur cradled Ifur, brandished his talisman, and teleported away. His odds had grown too poor for him to stomach.

Perfect! That leaves only Gerard.

"Be careful when I let you down," Stella said.

"I will!" Tina promised as her feet touched the ground.

Stella rose again, swinging her staff and rapier in a wide arc. A pair of Frost-Gleam Hawks took shape, beating their wings as she called, "Lily! This is our fight!"

"I'm with you!" the cheerful maid hollered back.

"Stella, Lily, I—"

I swallowed my words, staring at the young women's backs. The false dragon burst from the rubble, its back sprouting arms of foul

water and dark flame, and they strode forth to meet it.

"Sir!"

"Tina, let's leave this to the two of them," I said, watching the dragon-thing fire an eerie ray of charcoal light, only for Stella to deflect it with her Azure Shields while Lily's fire flowers tore through dark wings. "Oh, just who I was hoping to see."

A garbled "Huh?" escaped Tina as I looked up. A pure-white sea-green griffin and several black griffins were winging their way toward us.

Reinforcements from the royal capital! But the Four Heroes Sea and the port of Suguri are still blockaded. And I thought only the Skyhawk Company kept black griffins.

While I pondered, the white griffin dove.

"Allen!" a wolf-clan girl in a Royal Academy uniform and my old beret yelled as she jumped off. A singing child in a white cloak came with her. I could see their ears up and tails wagging, silver-gray and violet-tinged white.

"What?! I mean... What?!"

I watched Tina goggle out of the corner of my eye as I caught the pair. "Whoa there! Why hello, Caren, Atra." I gently smoothed the hair of the world's most lovable little sister and the Thunder Fox of the great elementals, who had come a long way to see me in this foreign land. "Caren, that was Luce you rode in on, wasn't it? Don't tell me Alice—"

"Mr. Allen!"

"Allen!"

Stella's and Lily's anxious warnings rang in my ears. Denied a chance to heal, the struggling false dragon had slammed a bunch of new-grown tails into the ground and launched itself forward with the recoil. Could it be gaining control of its draconic power?

I didn't move. I could have dodged, but I didn't like the thought of what might have come next.

The grotesque creature opened its jaws wide—and its right wing fell in flames, neatly severed straight through magical defenses so potent I could see them with my naked eyes. Its left wing returned to ash, pulverized by a radiant kick. A follow-up Firebird scorched

the whole area, and an unbelievably dense burst of Momentary Flash Rays rained destruction.

I slid the exasperated Caren, stunned Tina, and excited Atra behind me as a swordswoman with long scarlet locks alighted on the ground nearby. She held the enchanted blade Cresset Fox.

"Fragile, isn't it?" she said.

"Quite a pushover!" A white-clad sorceress with gleaming golden tresses landed a moment later and stood proud. A sacred sword that rarely saw the light of day hung at her side.

Why are all my old school friends like this?!

Grinning in spite of myself, I gave the contrite-looking Chiffon, who had landed last, a pat on the head. "You know, I don't think that's the issue, Lydia, Cheryl."

*

Debris scattered as the dragon-thing crawled free.

"We'll take it from here!" Lily promptly launched a Firebird.

"We won't let anything like that happen again!" Stella added a purification spell, doing further damage to the repulsive floating shields.

Lydia glanced at the fray and planted a hand on her left hip. "Caren, Tiny! We need to talk, so keep that thing busy."

"Oh, all right." My sister drew her dagger and crackled into Lightning Apotheosis. In a flash, the electric spear she'd conjured mowed down a foul, watery arm poised to strike at Stella.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Tina dashed after her. "Just shout if you need me, sir!"

A swing of her rod unleashed an enormous Blizzard Wolf. Gerard's phalanx of shields and black arms froze solid in the blink of an eye, and Caren seized the opportunity to hammer home eight casts of the advanced spell Thunder Fang Spear. Another Immaculate Snow-Gleam from Stella left the false dragon writhing and screeching in agony. A desperate burst of flaming spines bounced harmlessly off Lily's Scarlet Blossom Shields. It looked like we could spare a moment to talk.

In the meantime, Lydia sidled up to me.

"Yes, hound the apostles who fled," Cheryl ordered her bodyguards via orb. "Coordinate your pursuit with the royal guard."

They brought the guard with them?!

"Now, don't you have something to say?" The scarlet-haired noblewoman poked a dainty finger into my left cheek.

"To say!" Lia the Blazing Qilin echoed from within her.

"Touchy-touch?" Atra stared enviously up at Lydia.

What is she teaching them?!

Watching the black griffins break their circle overhead and scatter toward the city's western district, I gave the self-assured albatross around my neck a piece of my mind.

"Really? You brought Cheryl along?"

"Excuse me?!" she snapped. "I think you mean, 'Thank you so much for coming to my rescue, mistress'! Honestly! You forget your manners the minute I take my eyes off you. Do I need to train you all over a—"

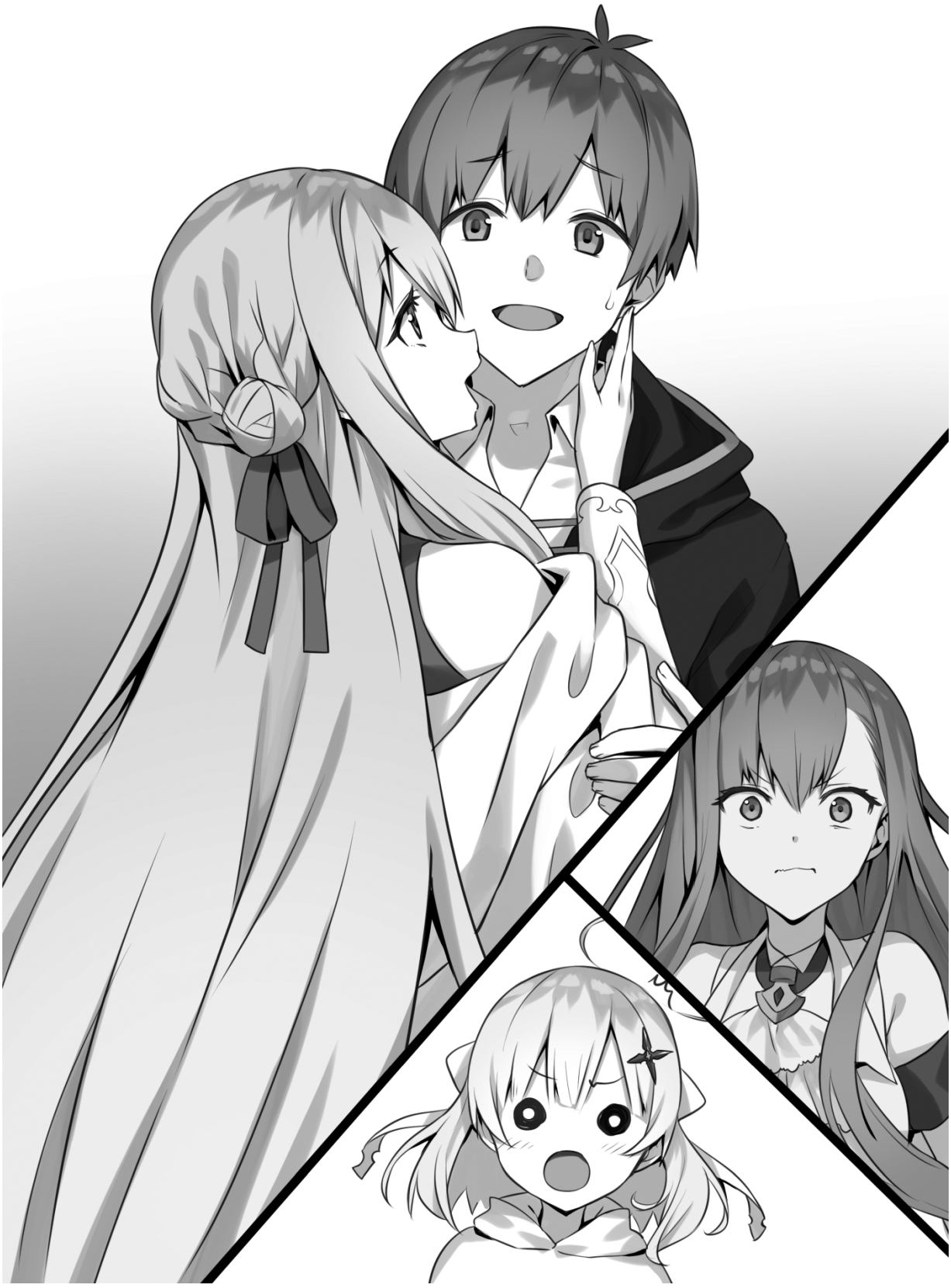
"Stand aside, Lydia!"

The princess in white pushed between us, blonde hair shining in the sunlight. Then...

"Allen," she cooed, wrapping her arms around me as though nothing could be more natural. Her delicate softness left me flustered. My old school friend was a beauty.

Lydia let out a strangled cry, and she wasn't alone in her outrage; Tina, Stella, Lily, and Caren all took a moment from their fierce battle to glare icy daggers our way. Not that Her Royal Highness seemed to care.

"I arrived too late to say this in the city of water, but not this time." She ran a finger along my cheek, beaming as her mana glittered brighter. "Cheryl Wainwright has come to render Allen of the wolf clan her aid! Now, aren't you glad?"



There was nothing dishonest about her feelings. This future queen had overcome both political hurdles and national borders purely to save me. How could I fault her for that?

"I am," I said, shuddering as I silently chided the impatient noblewoman who had begun shedding feathers of black flame behind me. "At the same time—"

"I'm glad to hear it." Cheryl giggled. "Oh, and I almost forgot. I made sure you'll get *all* the public credit for this when the dust settles!"

"I beg your pardon?!" I reeled in the face of this preposterous declaration.

O-Oh dear. This looks bad. Dreadful. I need to think fast.

The very air shook, and the false dragon went flying, its vast bulk sailing over multiple streets as the girls broke into a chorus of protests.

"G-Get your scheming hands off him!"

"Only his sister has the right to touch him like that."

"I'd like a word with Your Royal Highness."

"Have some decency! Yes, you too, sir!"

"Agreed on all counts!"

"Hm? No, thank you," Her Royal Highness said in response.

Cheryl clenched her left fist, and the advanced spell Imperial Radiant Prison caged the dragon-thing as it attempted to slither through a volley of elemental javelins. Seven massive, cross-headed spears of light skewered it through the bars. The echoes of the ensuing scream must have reached every corner of the city.

"How I pity Gerard."

Cheryl chose to lower her eyes rather than watch the erstwhile prince trying to gnaw through his cage. She hadn't been close to her half brother. It might even be fair to say he'd abused her. Yet she still mourned his fate. I felt certain her compassion would make her a fine queen. Lydia scowled in silence, but I could feel through our pact that she agreed.

The false dragon broke free of its cage, much the worse for wear, only for the girls to bar its path.

"We brought the best of the royal guard to reinforce you," Cheryl

began, moving to my left side. “Four of your university friends joined the expedition as well. We’ve already informed Heaven’s Sage of Lalannoy. I didn’t expect Lord Oswald Addison to take to the front lines himself.”

“You owe Felicia and Lynne some praise when we get back,” Lydia added. “They arranged everything we needed to get here, including the black griffins. And my mother and aunt deserve a thank-you for their work on the Four Heroes Sea.”

“How did you come up with all this?” I groaned. Yes, black griffins could fly out of range of anything that might try to intercept them, but that didn’t make it safe to risk those altitudes. And Lydia’s not-so-subtle hints pointed to a major military operation.

“Move, Richard!” a familiar voice blared from my communication orb. “Find that fool Ridley!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice, Owain!” came another, and not the last.

“S-Somebody stop the commanders!”

“How?!”

“Do you imagine this will do, Val?”

“I’d expect better of you, Suse. Wouldn’t you, Vil?”

“We ought to clear out the riffraff. What do you say, Uri?”

“I agree with Val.”

Why hadn’t they brought anyone who might apply the brakes? I turned to ask my two old classmates, but just then, a little bird heralded the person I’d been waiting for.

“You’d better help me cheer up Soi when we get back,” I said, adjusting my grip on Silver Bloom and trying not to let my nerves show.

“Don’t be silly. I’m not the right person for that job,” said Lydia. “Fall back, all of you!”

The Howard sisters, Lily, and Caren broke off whittling away at the false dragon and retreated to join us. Despite a chorus of affirmatives, they all looked nonplussed.

The next moment, a crimson-eyed man wearing distinctive spectacles and apostolic robes as white as his hair alighted before the battered dragon-thing, which began reverting to Gerard as it lay

there, motionless. Red wings of blood spread disturbingly from his back, and a single-edged dagger hung at his hip.

"Zel!" I hissed through gritted teeth.

"Hi there, Allen. I see you showed up." My best friend, Zelbert Régnier, crouched down and drew a pouch from inside his robe. His return from death at the church's hands hadn't changed his flippant tone. "This guy ate what's left of five great spells, the Stinging Sea, and a bit of dragon bone, and look where it got him. Your students—and everyone else you hang out with—are too strong for comfort. It takes the fun out of placing bets."

"Zel, I...I've come to...!"

"Allen, no," said Lia's voice.

"No." Atra gripped my sleeve.

Another shard of dragon bone tumbled out of my friend's pouch and onto Gerard's heart. The disinherited prince jerked like a marionette as his body absorbed it and floated off the ground. His flesh bubbled and swelled as a fresh transformation began...and fiery plumes filled the air.

"Really, my ladies? Give a guy some warning," Zel griped as Lydia's Firebird and Cheryl's Imperial Shining Shackles—another advanced spell—engulfed him and the lump of flesh. The inferno incinerated everything it touched, threatening to sear the very heavens, while a maelstrom of bright chains dealt out unsparing devastation.

"Lydia, Cheryl! I wasn't done talking to—"

"The answer is no," they said as one, forestalling my unfinished protest.

The white-haired child squeezed my hand, then vanished. Within me, Atra began to sing. I couldn't slay the ice wyrm without her and Lia's help—the power of the great elementals. And yet...

While I hesitated, Lydia barked, "Stella, Caren, work with Chiffon and make sure Gerard doesn't cause trouble. Chiffon, you've got a job to do."

"You can count on us!"

"Tina and Lily, accompany Allen to the memorial square," Cheryl called from atop a broken stone wall ahead. "Lydia and I will keep

this apostle busy."

"R-Right!"

"Sure thing!"

The girls sprang into action while I hung my head, shaking. I'd made my peace with this. At least, I'd thought I had. But Zel...Zel would always be my best friend.

Warm hands touched my shoulders. I jerked my head up. "Lydia, Cheryl..."

"You owe us."

"And we charge interest."

They sounded no different from usual at first blush. But I could see the resolve in their eyes. Allen of the wolf clan couldn't defeat Fourth Apostle Zelbert Régnier. That was what they were here for.

I really am no match for them.

"Allen!" Arthur's voice burst from my orb. "I just finished mopping up the heavy spell-soldiers! Expect me at the memorial shortly!"

A moment passed. Then I said only, "Understood." It was time to go.

"Allen." My partner pressed her head against my chest and whispered, "I'll catch up to you in no time. Be careful."

I brushed her left ring finger. "Yes, I know you will. Cheryl, keep an eye on everyone for me!"

"I will! They're in good hands!" The Lady of Light waved enthusiastically from her perch on the wall.

I raised my left hand to her and broke into a run. I didn't look back.

*

To my great relief, Allen left matters in my hands and ran off, vanishing into the gathering mist. He was far too kind for what was about to happen here. I couldn't let him stay.

"Lydia," Caren murmured.

"Your Royal Highness," said Stella, "could it be...?"

They had guessed why we'd chosen to remain. I gave a curt nod, glaring into the inferno ahead. A tall figure strode nonchalantly

toward us, while the lump of flesh slowly took on the features of a genuine dragon.

I petted Chiffon. "Lydia and I will be fine. Would you lend the others a paw?"

The white wolf, my companion since childhood, let out a howl and grew so large that we had to crane our necks.

"Don't expect the same Gerard you just fought," my best friend called. There was no one I'd rather have with me on a battlefield.

"We know!" Caren snapped, gripping her cross-headed lightning spear.

"Please take care yourselves!" Our snow-white angel took to the air, rapier and floral-topped staff in hand. Chiffon raced ahead of them.

Silhouetted against the flames, our enemy waved his left hand, and the chains of light shattered. A wild gust heralded the former fleshy lump's incursion into our airspace.

Caren and Stella gasped. No word but "hideous" could do justice to the monstrous parody of a dragon. Countless white eyes rolled in its reptilian head. Its jaws were sealed so tightly they could have been sewn shut. Murky water and dark fire formed twisted wings and a forest of spines on its back. At least a dozen human arms and legs sprouted without rhyme or reason from its long trunk. Nothing remained of Gerard Wainwright save his bloodshot left eye.

Yet Stella and Caren called to each other and charged the monster, no more daunted than Chiffon. Blows from both sides took their toll on the famed avenues and time-honored architecture of the city of craft.

I ignored the devastation, taking my place to Lydia's right as we stared down the man before us. Zelbert Régnier stepped into clear air, brushing dust from his white robes. He looked nothing like I remembered him, but when he spoke, it was with the same glib raillery of our student days.

"What's Allen's problem? He came all this way just to give me the cold shoulder and go haring off after some boring old wyrm somebody cooked up a hundred years ago. I mean, the cunning Sage and ever-so-wily Saint had such high hopes for me that they

made me fourth apostle. The least he could do is give me the time of day. Don't you agree, my ladies?"

We didn't answer.

"Cooked up." Not used, then; made.

Lydia shifted her sword to her left hand and angrily flipped her scarlet hair with her right. "How stupid can you be? I didn't think much of your brains back when we were in school..." Fiery plumes spilled forth, igniting whatever they touched as she fixed our erstwhile friend with an icy sneer. "But I still thought you were smarter than this. You let the church's 'Saint' and 'Sage' pull your strings? You, Baron Zelbert Régnier, the indomitable sorcerer-swordsman who won Allen's trust and respect? Ha! As if!"

Chiffon's forepaw swatted the hideous dragon-thing into a building on our right. Caren and Stella charged fearlessly in after it. No wonder Allen made much of them.

"Why do you follow the Saint and Sage?" Lydia said. "Simple."

"You never got a chance to really fight Allen when you were alive," I finished.

The apostle's white eyebrows twitched.

Ever since I'd met Allen, he had been the light that showed my way. Continuing to walk at his side had proven harder than any test or ordeal. Still, I'd never wanted to pit myself against him. The same surely went for Lydia, openly seething next to me.

"You're too stupid for words." She shook her head, scarlet hair levitating with wrath. "If that's all you came back for, you should have stayed dead."

"I'll be blunt," I said. "You're being a nuisance."

"Whoa! Some welcome! Sugarcoat it, why don't you? I really am bound so I can't turn traitor, you know? And I'm probably made to bring out my old wishes too." For all his clowning, there was no humor in the crimson eyes behind his spectacles. "Well, I won't pretend I never felt that way. What man wouldn't want to find out how he stacks up against the kind of prodigy who comes around once in a hundred—hell, maybe even once in a thousand—years?"

"Did you know, Fourth Apostle?" Lydia clenched her right fist, whipping her fiery plumes into a fury as mana deepened the scarlet

of her hair. The Lady of the Sword had a bone to pick with the former friend who had broken the heart of the boy who'd saved hers. Cracks spread through the few surviving paving stones. "After you died, Allen threw away every honor he'd earned just to get you a place in the catacombs. 'Zelbert Régnier saved the kingdom,' he said. 'It would disgrace the nation to deny him a champion's burial. If you believe I've done something worthy of reward, then please, let it all go to him!'"

I still vividly recalled the anguish on his face then. Our beloved had made every effort to preserve his late friend's honor, even knowing the fossilized old laws would bar him from the funeral.

Lydia took a left-handed swipe. Her slash grazed the silent apostle's cheek, and hellfire annihilated a stone wall behind him. She stamped, leaving a crater in the ground around her in another gout of flame.

"He never asks for anything for himself, but he went on groveling to my parents, to the headmaster, even to me and Cheryl in the end!" Her enchanted blade moved slowly as her invective rose to a roar. "And *this* is who he did it for?! Give me a break!"

Under normal circumstances, I would have stopped her. But not this time. I shared her feelings.

"I'm Allen's sword. I slash and burn anything that makes him sad." Lydia pressed her right hand to her chest and delivered a grand farewell. "If someone wounds his heart, I have no reason to let that someone live. Is that simple enough for you, Fourth Apostle Zelbert Régnier?"

Allen meant quite literally the world to Lydia. Everything else paled into insignificance compared to keeping her place at his side. Yet my rival in love had resolved to eliminate Régnier, knowing it could cost her his affections. I couldn't call myself her best friend if I failed to answer in kind.

I drew the Wainwrights' sacred sword, Dear Departed Dark. "Even if you did manage to drag him into a duel in some battle, he could never slay you. If it came to it, rather than strike down someone he owes so much..." I closed my eyes and touched my left hand to my heart. His bemused grin appeared behind my eyelids.

“Allen would let himself die smiling. You ought to know that as well as I do.”

I opened my eyes to see Régnier’s lips twist ever so slightly. “Yeah,” he said, “you may be right.”

The corners of our mouths rose a fraction as well.

Farther ahead, Stella took the dragon-thing’s breath head-on, deflecting it into the sky with the Azure Sword and Azure Shield that Allen had devised for her. The blast scattered the overhanging mist and the clouds above it.

Lydia and I readied our swords.

“Well, I’ll still visit your sister’s grave for you.”

“We won’t let anyone demolish that one.”

Régnier’s younger sister Chloé, turned by the elder vampire Idris, had a grave in the royal capital, where his long pursuit had come to an end. Some would start raising questions about that.

Our erstwhile friend pushed his spectacles back into place. “Thank you.”

The time for farewells had come to an end. The four of us would never again amuse ourselves with silly talk in that café with the sky-blue roof.

“Now...” Régnier gathered blood in his hands, fashioning swords. His feet left the ground as he conjured hundreds of sanguine spears, then thousands. “Let’s make this flashy to mark the occasion. I always wanted to have it out with you two, anyway.”

Brandishing twin blades of blood, the dhampir bared his fangs and howled.

“Try to keep me entertained, Lady of the Sword, Lady of Light!”

“I always knew he had a screw loose!” Lydia spat, scarlet hair whipping in a rush of wind.

“I quite agree!” I said as she raised her right hand, and I, my left. Then, we drew.

Deep crimson flame and dazzling light overran everything around us, instantly disintegrating the phalanx of bloody spears.

Behind his spectacles, Régnier’s eyes narrowed. “You know, I never did get a look at those before I died.”

Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, now gripped a beautiful

fiery blade in her right hand. I, the Lady of Light, held a shining staff adorned with white buds in my left. When had we last fought with two weapons each? Not since five years ago, surely.

"So, that's a sample of what the long-lived races pooled their wisdom to make before the War of the Dark Lord," the dhampir said, grinning from ear to ear and imbuing his sanguine blades with all the mana they would hold. "A last whiff of the age of gods: the Leinsters' True Scarlet and the Wainwrights' Moon Bright!"

Fiery plumes and flecks of light whirled all around us. No doubt we would have reduced the area to vacant lots by the time we finished this fight. But I had no time to savor the melancholy of it all before Lydia crossed her blazing swords, and two colossal Firebirds materialized over Régnier's head. I crossed my weapons as well, enclosing a wide radius in a fence of cross-headed spears wrought from light and lightning.

Having cut off the dhampir's retreat, we kicked off the ground and leapt forward as one.

"There won't even be ashes left when we're done with you!"

"We'll be sure to tell Allen you turned tail and ran!"

*

The person I'd been waiting for fought alone, ferociously, on the broad street before the independence memorial square. Each brilliant flash chipped away at the inquisitors' morale. Every nearby building lay in ruins, but not a speck of dirt stained his cape or his white-and-azure armor.

I shot a look at Lily, who stuck close to me, carrying Tina, then leapt down from the rooftops. Raising my rod, I cast the elementary spell Divine Ice Vines over a wide area as I fell.

"Arthur!" I called. Freezing ivy tangled inquisitors poised to slash at the champion.

"Allen! You've come in time!"

Arthur let out a war cry, flipping Lunar Cresset and Lunar Fox as he swung them. Not a foe remained standing.

"I'm delighted to see you safe and sound as well, Tina, Lily." He

flashed a fearless grin as we landed. “Elna’s kept me up to date on your travails. You must have had a hard time of it.”

“Yes,” I said. I couldn’t manage more through the pain in my heart. I had no illusions about why Lydia and Cheryl had come here now, ignoring the threat of the church and their own social standing. My kindhearted old school friends had thrown themselves into battle for only one reason: to slay Zel in my place. That made another debt I owed them.

“L-Lily!” Tina shouted. “Put me down! Now!”

“But we’ll be back on the move in no time. Let me see... How about”—the scarlet-haired maid released Tina and hugged her from behind—“something like this?!”

“O-Out of the que—”

The unusual clash did something to soothe me. I struck the ground with the butt of my rod and cast Divine Lightning Detection.

“How do things stand?” I asked, wary of an attack from any angle.

“Elna has the rebel army surrounded on the outskirts,” Arthur said. “And as I told you, I’ve cut down every heavy spell-soldier in the city.”

“You don’t say.” I’d gone beyond surprise, but Tina and Lily couldn’t hide theirs.

“*Every* spell-soldier?!”

“You got *all* of them?”

The church imbued its heavy spell-soldiers with vestiges of Resurrection and Radiant Shield. Single-handedly dispatching nearly a hundred of them in such a short time marked Heaven’s Sword as a man to be feared.

The magical fog blanketing the city started to carry away on natural winds. Lady Elna must have stopped casting Floral Heaven’s Maze of Mist. I could feel Stella fighting through our mana link. As for Lydia and Cheryl, they must have been using True Scarlet and Moon Bright. Even at this distance, I could hear the air and earth screeching.

“All clear. Not an enemy to be found,” Lily reported, still hugging Tina, so I resumed exchanging information with the blond champion.

“There’s no sign of Miles Talito at the enemy headquarters, and Isolde is fighting the Howard maids and a thankfully alive Artie. What worries me...”

“Is that we’ve seen no sign of our most dangerous foes, Viola Kokonoe and Levi Atlas,” Arthur finished for me. “Nor of that apostle cadet and the other beastfolk. I expect we’ll find them waiting to intercept us at the memorial.”

I could understand the greater apostles hanging back, but Kume and the beastfolk couldn’t amount to much in a fight. Why keep them in reserve as well? The question unsettled me.

“I’m glad to hear Artie is fighting the good fight,” Arthur said, “but I’d love to know what Ridley’s gotten up to.”

We fell silent, sensing the unease behind his joke. I, too, would have appreciated having the Swordmaster on our side.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Arthur flicked the blood from his blades. “Minié’s force rescued that fellow you were looking for! Ernest Fosse, wasn’t it? I’m told they had him escorted to headquarters.”

“Mr. Fosse?!” I cried, while my companions perked up. What a weight off my shoulders. I would have good news for the masterful head clerk I’d put to so much trouble—if only I survived to deliver it.

A lilac bird alighted on Arthur’s left shoulder. “It’s from Elna,” he said. “Our army won the battle on the outskirts. That leaves our part.”

“Yes.” The champion and I exchanged nods and bumped fists. Then, I turned to the noblewomen, both spoiling for a fight. “Let’s go, Tina, Lily. We have a wyrm to keep in its grave!”

“Yes, sir! I’m with you!”

“You can always count on a maid!”

We raced through the burning city without encountering any resistance worthy of the name. I noted severe damage to historic workshops, and the buildings commandeered for military use went without saying. How long would it take to restore the prewar townscape?

“Halt,” Arthur said as soon as we reached our destination, holding a sword out to his left side. He’d kept in the lead.

A thin blanket of mist still obscured our view. And our orbs? No luck there. Jamming in the memorial square left fewer loopholes.

"Down you go, my lady!"

Tina squealed as Lily dropped her and strode up beside me, greatsword held in easy readiness. The newly liberated young noblewoman dusted off her skirt, psyched herself up with a "Ready as I'll ever be," and took her place behind me. She was already weaving a Blizzard Wolf on her rod.

"What's this? I thought my darling Artie would be hot on my heels."

A girl's voice wafted down to us. My Divine Wind Wave reacted with Lily's fire flowers to burn the mist from the square. A vampiress wearing a white apostolic robe over a bloodstained nightgown—the treacherous Isolde Talito—appeared atop a large stone, her crimson eyes narrowed in a sullen glare. She must have broken off the fight for the enemy headquarters.

"That wasn't very nice," she said. "You could at least stop to talk before—"

Arthur and Lily pounced into range, cutting her banter short. Despite her overwhelming strength and vast stores of mana, Isolde lacked the combat experience to react.

"We've nothing against you..."

"But please exit stage left."

Twin blades and greatsword swept toward the vampiress. A metallic screech rent the air. A long, curved, single-edged sword had stopped Arthur's and Lily's slashes.

A silent young woman's black eyes flashed annoyance from the shadow of her gray robe's hood. Viola Kokonoe, servant to the Saint, hurled Isolde into the pit with her left hand before crossing blades with Arthur and Lily another dozen or so times in midair. Her skill defied belief, but I set my admiration aside and multi-cast Divine Light Spears. That drove Viola back. Unfortunately, a lightning-quick spear swept in to stop us pressing our advantage.

Third Apostle Levi Atlas, another girl in a hooded gray robe, gave her long spear an ostentatious spin. Light magic boasted the greatest speed of any element, but she had made intercepting it

look easy. I didn't see the Addisons' stolen sword on her.

"Cadet Isolde," Viola snapped, "if you think this is a game, I suggest you fulfill your duty to Her Holiness and martyr yourself immediately. I'll send young Lord Addison to join you presently."

"I...I beg your pardon, ma'am." Isolde's deathly pale cheeks lost what color they had as she got to her feet.

"Report," Levi demanded, although she kept her spearpoint trained on my heart. One careless move would mean my death.

"I did all Her Holiness bid me. As did they."

The ground shook. The edges of the great pit in the ruined memorial started to freeze.

The ice wyrm?! But how could they manage to free it so soon?!

Isolde unfurled wings of blood and surveyed the pit from the sky. "You know my father," she said. "Honest to a fault, and ever so pious."

So, Miles Talito and the beastfolk are underground! That explains why they haven't tried to stop us.

Blades of blood arrayed themselves in midair, hurtling down at us almost before I realized what was happening.

"Oh no you don't!" Lily met the storm with her greatsword and fire flowers, her scarlet hair flashing. She must have felt we needed something to break the deadlock.

Viola and Levi shifted into crouching stances, poised to...

"Tina!" I shouted.

"Yes, sir!"

Working in concert, we multi-cast Ice Mirror Shower and Divine Ice Vines, deflecting the bloody blades at all angles. The vines helped to delay the gray-robed pair, buying us time to rush to Lily's—

"You're a danger."

"And a nuisance."

Lightning-quick slashes and thrusts made short work of our elementary spells. The pair charged, keeping low to the ground, Viola at the lead while Levi lurked behind her. They had their sights on...

Tina!

I conjured an electric blade on the tip of my rod, scrambling to

intercept.

"Allen! It's a trap!" Arthur yelled, catching Viola's blade between both of his as she drew and struck with one motion. Levi vanished.

A teleportation talisman!

"Die."

"T-Take this!" Tina rushed to cast the Blizzard Wolf she'd been weaving straight up, but she would never make it in time.

A pale figure dropped lightly into our midst.

"No one dies on my watch!" An old fox-clan fighter snapped the head off Levi's long spear with a well-placed kick.

"Pardon the intrusion!" A red-haired lord charged Viola along the ground as she traded blows with Arthur. She retreated, dodging a sweep of his fiery sword. A few strands of black hair fell, burning.

"M-Master?!" I gaped, while Lily took the offensive against Isolde. The old fox had taught me martial arts until I'd gone off to the Royal Academy.

"Ridley!" Arthur shouted. "You took your sweet time!"

Lord Ridley Leinster, the Swordmaster, and Master Fugen stepped forward, faces stern. Their eyes were locked on Viola and Levi, whose hood had torn, exposing her beast ears, white hair, and golden eyes. Despite all that the Lalannoyans had told me, I hadn't pictured her so young. She couldn't have been much older than Stella and Caren—maybe even younger. And she really was of the cat clan.

My old teacher skewered me with his gaze. "Details can wait. The Leinster lordling and I will see to this lot. Go!"

"Right!"

We all started to move just as another tremor struck. A moment later, gargantuan icicles impaled the square. I couldn't believe my eyes, but I still managed to grab Tina's arm and retreat to stare from a safe distance.

"What on earth?"

"Sir! Here it comes!" Tina shouted, Frigid Crane's mark appearing on her right hand.

"Below us, Allen!" Lily yelled, equally frantic.

Arthur, Ridley, and even Master Fugen stared at the rapidly

freezing square, unable to move a muscle. The ground cracked, and the wyrm's foreleg surfaced, a living hill enlarging a new glacier.

A hateful bellow thundered up from below, shaking the very air as it echoed across the capital. Viola and Levi were already poised to strike again. So was Isolde. But if we let the monster fully revive, the city was doomed.

"Tina! Lily! Arthur!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Stick to the plan!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"You got it!"

"I'm with you!"

We all charged at once. I recalled the wyrm-slaying tips that Rill had shared with me the night before we marched. "Decapitate the creature, crush its head and the heart in its chest, and make certain it's dead. Under no circumstances let it become a sacrifice."

The ground shook again as the left foreleg emerged. I scooped up Tina, who gasped as I cast an as-yet-unnamed flight spell I'd been tinkering with. Conjuring ice mirrors for Lily to step on, I chased the blond champion leading the charge toward the surfacing monster. Mere reverberations of its mana blocked our path with sharp splinters and dense chunks of ice.

"Allow me!"

But Lily's Firebird and fire flowers kept a route clear. The maid performed her bodyguard duties with gusto as she mouthed, "I can't wait to see how you'll make it up to me."

Once this is all over, I promise I will.

Master Fugen and Ridley continued their silent standoff against the church agents, gauging the distance between them.

The time for a secret weapon is now!

"Tina!" I called.

"Help yourself!" she replied, as if to say she'd been ready and waiting.

I squeezed the young noblewoman's little hand and linked our mana. I hadn't broken contact with Stella, so this made a double connection.

"It's so warm. I can feel courage welling up inside me," the girl

murmured, eyes closed and hand on her heart. Her hair grew amid a glittering spill of mana.

"Here goes nothing!"

"Ready, sir!"

I swung my rod, binding the wyrm's serpentine bulk with eight chains of shining ice as it finally slithered to the surface. The Lothringens' sacred swords were still lodged in its neck, but Blaze of Ruin no longer chained its limbs. Had someone lifted the great spell?

The synthetic monstrosity made to unfurl its icy wings, azure eyes bloodshot. Its inky-blue body thrashed, flinging blocks and spikes of ice in all directions and turning the square into a fresh hell.

"Tina, jump!" I shouted.

"Yes, sir!"

We landed on a mass of ice. Black Cat Promenade teleported us up beside Heaven's Sword, who had made it within hailing distance of the wyrm.

"Arthur!" I called. "We'll only get one chance!"

"Leave everything in my hands! You might not guess it, but here in Lalannoy, I pass for a champion!" His swords carved through another wall of ice ahead, and he put on another burst of speed. A hail of ice spears showed no sign of slowing, but Lily's Scarlet Blossom Shields stopped them short of us.

"You can always count on a maid!" she crowed from behind us.

"Most maids don't consider violence part of their job description," Ridley chimed in. Presumably leaving Viola and the apostle to my old teacher, he sprang in front of Arthur and swung Devoted Blossom with all his might. The sword burned with more than its usual brilliance, sending tongues of flame licking through the glaciated square and blazing our trail to the monster. The thing threatened to level the city merely by writhing free, but at least we had a clear shot. The question was, would my plan have its intended effect?

Without warning, Frigid Crane's voice came to me.

"WIELD MY POWER. ANNIHILATE THE IMITATION."

Her words took me back. And I could hear Atra singing.

Tina squeezed my hand tight. "Sir!"

"Whoa there!" I dodged around an airborne icicle and scooped

her up in my arms.

"We're ready for anything!" She held up the back of her right hand for me to see. "And I hope you'll name her later!"

My resolve firmed. "Well then, don't mind if I do!"

"We'll give this all we've got!" Tina promised.

I set her on a patch of nearby ground, and we brought our rods together, weaving Frigid Crane's and Atra's formulae. The old me would have hesitated, but the girl had come far since our first meeting. Looking at the serious set of her face in profile, I could no longer bring myself to deny her. Tina Howard rivaled Lydia Leinster for brilliance.

"O great wyrm!" Arthur yelled. "Slayer of Champions! Lingering of the divine, made by mortal hands to bear a sad fate! I will not ask you to forgive me."

He had finally overcome the myriad blocks, missiles, spears, and pillars of ice to close with the wyrm. A staggering torrent of mana poured into his twin swords, now dazzling in their radiance. The blades lodged in the monster's neck flashed in sympathy.

"But," the champion roared, "for the peace of my homeland and my world, I, Heaven's Sword, Arthur Lothringen, shall take your head!"

A blinding slash from his two swords together made contact with the wyrm's magical defenses.

Now!

Through our joined rods, Tina and I channeled Frigid Crane's power into Arthur's swords. The blade of light turned azure and swelled to gargantuan proportions. It broke through the barrier, freezing as it went. We had almost pulled it off—almost, but not quite. If I used the magic I'd been weaving now—

Two red-haired siblings sped past Arthur and leapt.

"Lily, a maid needs guts!"

"That's my line!"

Ridley and Lily let out a war cry and struck in unison, he with Devoted Blossom, she with all her fire flowers focused into her greatsword. The last line of defense split open, and Arthur wasn't about to pass up his chance. He roared his lungs out, finishing his

mighty swing—and severing the ice wyrm's head.

But that wasn't the end. Icy vines sprouted from the wound, relinking head to body and starting to knit them back together. The thing clung to life with unbelievable tenacity.

Putting my shock aside, I aimed my rod and chanted:

"Lightning Flash."

The spell I'd spent all this time weaving from the Thunder Fox's borrowed power activated. A blinding light sped over the glacier, found its mark in the wyrm's chest, and burst.

The ensuing gale and shock wave shook friend and foe alike. Fighting had become the least of our worries. While I hunkered behind barriers and Divine Earth Walls, holding Tina close, what remained of the square collapsed and sent the wyrm plummeting back beneath the ground.

The platinum-haired girl in my arms murmured, "Did we get it?"

"No, not yet! It will revive unless we crush its head!" Arthur shouted. He had stayed in the vanguard to dampen the impact.

Faint traces of mana rose from below. The wyrm still lived.

I turned and called, "Master, Ridley, Lily, I trust you to handle things here!"

"Not a bad look in your eye. I see you've learned something." Master Fugen, who had been holding off the Saint's agent, a greater apostle, and a vampiress single-handed—albeit briefly—raised his white eyebrows and lashed his tail in evident high spirits.

"We'll hold the line!" Ridley shouted over Lily's "I'd rather go with *you*!"

"You're all in my way!" Isolde screeched, bursting from the mist now mixed with clouds of dirt and ice. Her allies emerged in silence. Master Fugen launched into battle against Viola's long blade, while Ridley pitted himself against Levi's broken spear, and Lily tackled the blood-winged vampiress.

"Arthur, Tina, to the pit!" I shouted. "Time for the coup de grâce!"

"I'm with you!"

"Yes, sir!"

Wrapping my arm around the newly long-haired Tina, I threw myself after the fallen wyrm into the pit.

Chapter 5

A blazing bird of prey, far larger than any I'd seen in our Royal Academy days, vaporized hundreds of bloody spears and shields as it swooped down on Zelbert Régnier. Allen never stopped refining Lydia's Firebird. Not even a dhampir could shrug off a direct hit.

"What is it with you prodigies, always leaving the rest of us in the dust?!" The white-haired apostle cursed under his breath, bloodstained robes flapping as he spread crimson wings, jerking himself into an evasive maneuver. But he'd need to do better than that.

"Cheryl!" Lydia shouted from the burning, cratered avenue, True Scarlet held ready in one hand and Cresset Fox in the other.

"You don't need to remind me!" I sprinted up a bent lamppost on the opposite side, bringing Dear Departed Dark and Moon Bright together to multi-cast the advanced spell Blooming Bonds of the Light Dragon. Bright white petals joined into shining chains that streaked toward the apostle like a meteor shower.

"Your mana already gave you a leg up! Adding a sacred sword and that staff of light is just plain cheating!" Régnier griped, defending himself with twin blades of blood and his newly sharpened wings while I drove him back into the middle of the road.

"This is..." Lydia began her charge, a Firebird diving at her enchanted blades. An inferno leapt and danced—the Ducal House of Leinster's secret Scarlet Sword, and with two weapons at once. The Lady of the Sword became a streak straight down the avenue, scarlet hair streaming behind her. "The end!"

Scarlet slashes cleaved through the blood-wing blades and bore down on their owner, now knocked off-balance. He couldn't dodge.

"Damn! You know how to party!" Régnier shouted, canines bared, as he reached toward his hip. "But don't count me out yet."

He pulled his dagger free and blocked the full force of Lydia's

Scarlet Swords in one smooth motion. Flames and dusky crimson mana clashed, visiting fresh devastation on the vicinity.

I targeted Régnier with a branching blade of light.

"Whoa! That looks like bad news!" The apostle countered by deflecting my blow with shields of blood while a barrage of crimson javelins occupied Lydia. Then he chose to fall back. He lost his left arm in the retreat, but while it turned to ash and fresh blood sprayed from the wound, he didn't seem to mind. No sooner had he alighted a safe distance away on one of the few lampposts still standing than pale ashes gathered to reform his severed limb.

Lydia clicked her tongue in heartfelt vexation.

"Only a vampire could pull off that trick," I groused. "And this is *without* a moon in the sky?"

We had the upper hand, albeit slightly. But we couldn't land a decisive blow. Régnier's formidable expertise in melee combat and bottomless reserves of mana were turning the battle into a stalemate, even though we had him outnumbered two to one. He truly was a force to be reckoned with. I couldn't recall Lydia and me ever making such a mess of our clothes in a fight before. And our merciless clash had demolished the time-honored cityscape. Stella and Caren's ongoing battle against the false dragon that had been Gerard left a similar trail of destruction.

"My ladies know their ways around a fight." Régnier smirked, holding the timeworn dagger in his right hand. "It looks like the ex-prince's tussle is getting to the climax too, so let's settle this with—Hmm?"

The whole city shuddered.

Where is this mana coming from? The memorial square! Th-Then...!

"Well, shucks. I guess we're out of time." The apostle squinted into the distance, sheathing his dagger with an audible *clank*. He made a show of wiping the blood off his lips with his right thumb.

Lydia and I gave our tacit agreement.

A moment later, the false dragon cannoned into a tailor's shop behind Régnier and lay still. Stella dropped onto the rubble beside me, wingless and panting heavily. Caren dropped out of Lightning

Apotheosis as she bent to help, calling her friend's name. Chiffon crashed through a burning building, looking none the worse for wear. Still, the girls seemed exhausted.

"You ought to know this better than anyone, but I'll remind you anyway," the apostle said flatly, brushing back his white hair. He flourished a teleportation talisman, and Gerard appeared, back to human form, though with his eyes rolled back in his head. The crimson gaze traveled between Lydia and me. "A legend is someone who makes the impossible possible, and that goes double for Allen of the wolf clan. You can count on him to find a way to slay a wyrm or two."

We frowned, conflicted. Régnier had fallen a long way, but he hadn't lost respect for Allen. The unconscious Gerard sank into the apostle's shadow and out of sight. I couldn't identify the magic responsible. As I noted Chiffon circling behind Régnier, the apostle raised a hand to his eyes.

"But," he said, "what if that's all part of the Saint's trick?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, unable to comprehend. My best friend made her wrath obvious without words.

Régnier removed his cracked spectacles and tucked them carefully into an inner pocket. "Lydia Leinster, Cheryl Wainwright, you showed me a good time. I'll repay you with a warning. 'Her Holiness' is slyer—and meaner—than either of you think."

A little bird winged its way through a sky stained with burning soot. Lydia and I gave a start. So did Stella and Caren, who had gotten behind Régnier. Were we imagining things, or had someone just been watching us?

"She believes in Allen, you know? Like a fanatic," Régnier murmured, awestruck as he gazed heavenward. "And she threads needles so fine no normal person would ever bother trying. She doesn't trust any of her allies—not the Church of the Holy Spirit and its pontiff, not the apostles, and not even her accomplice the so-called 'Sage.' That woman only has faith in one living person, and that's Allen. The way she sees it, nothing is impossible for 'her savior.' And no one has a knack for blazing a trail through this world of dead ends like he does. They couldn't be worse matched. Unless

you manage to get your hands on some secret truth even the Saint doesn't know, give up on trying to get ahead of her."

"All that wasted breath..."

"And that's all you have to say?"

Recovered, Lydia and I snapped an icy retort. Our rage filled the air with fiery plumes and flecks of light. We needed all the information about the church's "Saint" that we could get, but right now, she could wait.

"Yeah, that covers it. Now, get going." Régnier gave a flippant, left-handed wave. "Oh, and I know I'm in no position to ask..."

Blood started tracing a magic circle.

Caren's ears twitched as she held Stella, and her lips quivered. "Demisprite teleportation magic? I don't believe it."

The apostle locked eyes with Lydia and then with me. His gaze carried its old dry humor. "Watch my buddy's back. He's too nice for his own good. For starters, Your Royal Highness has some catching up to do!"

"What?! L-Listen here, you—"

Régnier vanished into his circle without leaving me so much as a moment to argue. My fingers tightened painfully around my sword and staff. He had been a mean-spirited classmate, but he had also been among my few friends. How—why—had it come to this?

"See you later, Cheryl."

"Lydia!"

The scarlet-haired lady ignored me and broke into a run. She was headed straight for the source of the sinister mana: the gaping pit in the independence memorial.

"Oh, honestly!" I checked the latest news with my bodyguards via orb, then exchanged opinions with Lady Elna Lothringen—for all intents and purposes the leader of the Lalannoyan army. Then I turned to the girls who could no longer maintain Lightning Apotheosis or angelic attributes. "Caren, Stella, I want you at the Addison estate. I'll leave Chiffon to guard you."

"But Cheryl!"

"Take us with you to the memorial!"

"No." Touching my fingers to Chiffon's nose, I added, "Keep an

eye on them for me!" Then I gave my juniors a pat on the shoulders, just like *he* would have done. "Allen left you in my care. Let Lydia and me handle the rest. Okay?"

*

Something seemed terribly wrong as we landed in the cavern that the House of Addison had concealed since the founding of the republic. The pit went deeper than I'd thought possible, but the ice wyrm wasn't at the bottom of it.

Everywhere I looked, a field of blood-spattered snow covered the subterranean space lined with stone pillars. Sickeningly potent mana prickled my skin. Had something dragged the body away? What could transport such a colossus?

"Allen," Arthur called from up ahead.

"S-Sir," Tina whispered from my left. They must have picked up on the oddity as well.

I frowned and multi-cast Divine Lightning Detection from my rod. Electricity crackled through the cavern and its massive stone supports—then abruptly vanished. Portable mana lamps hanging on the pillars that had escaped destruction flickered, and several fell to shatter on the stone-tiled floor. Wards seemed to shield an area beyond where Blaze of Ruin had imprisoned the wyrm.

"I'm here, Tina," I said, squeezing the young noblewoman's shoulders. "You'll guard my side, won't you?"

"Y-Yes, sir! You can count on me!" Her eyes widened, and that lock of her platinum hair shot to attention. I hoped I hadn't given her *too* much encouragement.

The bracelet and ring on my right hand gave a flash that reminded me of a sigh. The angel and witch held me to an exacting standard.

I shot Arthur a look, and we resumed our advance. The battle for Lalannoy had entered its endgame. Only one person had tripped my detection, but we couldn't be too careful.

We walked for a short while by the light of the mana lamps. Then the champion, always in the lead, stopped and held out one of his

swords without warning. Its tip pointed at a massive stone door, dimly lit and slightly ajar. There was no mistaking the "altar" where the wyrm had been sealed.

"Strange," Arthur muttered, his silver-gold eyes alert and charged with loathing. "The beastfolk from your eastern capital were gathered down here. Where did they go? One or two might slip out, but not all of them, and we've had no word of any leaving."

Tina looked puzzled. Then, "Y-You don't mean...?"

I didn't answer. She seemed to have arrived at the worst possibility on her own.

"Arthur!" I called.

"Right!" The champion swung the same swords with which he'd just lopped off the ice wyrm's head. Two flashes streaked through the gloom, cleaving through the stone door. A cloud of dust and ice rose in their wake.

We charged through.

The stone chamber looked worse for wear than when I'd last seen it. Cracks webbed the eight stone columns. The drifting scarlet and azure glows had left the air, and a reek of blood stung my nostrils. All trace of Blaze of Ruin's mana had been extinguished, replaced by an icy azure wind that obscured our view.

Mana from Falling Star. The prime apostle used it to—

"Why, hello, Allen. You made good time down here, just like Her Holiness said!"

An excited boy's voice descended on us, along with a wind spell—mana rich yet sloppily constructed. Our vision rapidly cleared to reveal the altar, flickering with unknown formulae.

The wyrm's great head was slowly sinking into it, coiled in chains of ice. Several dozen beastfolk lay on the floor around it, blood soaking their coarse robes. I spotted Chieftains Yono of the rat clan and Nishiki of the ape clan among them. Every face had frozen in terror.

So, the church used them for all it could, then discarded them like so much trash.

I recognized the great spell Falling Star in the icy chains.

Darkness still shrouded what lay past the chamber's center. I

could just barely make out a jumble of battered weapons lodged in the floor—greatswords, short spears, katanas, and even a giant's greataxe.

"Kume," I addressed the boy perched on the wyrm's head, "why?"

"I'm Cadet Ilaios now. Of course, I'll be a full apostle before long! Her Holiness bestowed this robe and scroll on me!" The rat-clan boy clad in an apostle's hooded white robe sneered, chuckling to himself. His left hand grasped a scroll from which I sensed mana identical to that of Aster Etherfield, the so-called Sage. He must have used it to drag the wyrm inside.

The boy hopped down off the wyrm and dramatically threw back his hood. To our shock, formulae in dark blood writhed over his cheeks, his neck, even the hands peeking from his sleeves.

They branded him with Radiant Shield, Resurrection, Watery Grave, Falling Star, and now Blaze of Ruin?!

"Well, what do you think? Isn't this mana something else?!" Kume demanded, meeting my stunned gaze. He sounded cheerful in a way he never had trailing after his longtime friend Toneri in the eastern capital.

"Kume..." was the most I could manage. I started to step forward, only for the ring and bracelet to give me a jolt of pain.

Tina tugged my left sleeve and whispered, "Sir! She says he's 'perilous'!"

"Really bad magic!" a child's voice added in my mind. What could alarm Frigid Crane and Atra like this?

Sadness washed over me. "Get away from there now, Kume," I pleaded with the boy from my hometown. "I'm saying this for your own good."

"It's 'Ilaios.' Didn't I just tell you? I'm an apostle in the making! The great prime apostle gave me this robe himself! Not that my fool of a father or his friends realized what that meant!" Mana oozed from the boy's small frame, falling to the floor in a spreading pool of corruption. Anyone could see he was on the verge of losing control.

Aster plans to sacrifice Kume to the altar!

Oblivious to his own predicament, the boy did a twirl in place to show off his robes. Blood and inky mana had begun staining the

white sleeves and hem.

"I'm not piddling little Kume of the rat clan anymore!" he cried. "I don't need to bow and scrape to anyone or cower in fear like so many beastfolk do! I'm no boorish, idiotic good-for-nothing like Toneri! I've been chosen, gifted with incredible power!"

I didn't know much about how he'd lived in the eastern capital. I remembered his cowardice, sniping at me from behind stronger people, and the warped affection he'd shown my sister behind Toneri's back.

Kume chuckled, gripping his scroll in both hands. "Hey, I have an idea. Surrender right now, and I'll spare your lives. If you give me Caren, that is."

Like Gerard, he had lost control of his emotions. Tina's long platinum hair bristled in anger at the insult, but I raised my left hand to restrain her.

"So you've been chosen," I said. "Is that why you killed your father, Chieftain Nishiki, and all the others once they'd served their purpose?"

"Oh, I guess you wouldn't understand. You've always been that way. Even though you're human, you do botanical magic better than we do, and you've got this weird sense of camaraderie. I really hated that." Theatrically, Kume started to unfurl the scroll. "My father and his friends didn't die! They achieved glorious martyrdom!"

The formulae on the floor sprouted blades of ice, impaling the eight columns as though with a life of their own. They pulsed with light as chain-tangled swords froze into being, intertwining to assemble an impossibly intricate circle in the air. I'd witnessed an attempt to create an angel in the royal capital. This was something else.

Within the bounds of the altar, Kume glanced at the wyrm's head and the swords embedded in it. "They've all earned the honor of a new life once Her Holiness completes the true Resurrection. They couldn't follow in my footsteps if they were still alive now, so what does it matter if they're dead?"

He laughed. "Wouldn't you like to know what these wonderful spells of the Sage's are for? Well, Allen..." Deep azure formulae

joined to the battered weapons lodged in the floor and started to beat like a heart. Triumphant, Kume crowed, "They create a champion who knows the age of gods and who met an untimely end in this land."

"What?" Tina looked up at me, bewildered.

The altars in the royal capital and the city of water had each birthed different entities. Could this really be some kind of experiment? I supposed Rill's fears had proven to be founded.

Kume's gaze shifted to Lalannoy's champion as he continued unfurling the scroll. "Blond hair, silver-gold eyes, shining white-and-azure armor, a cape, and a gorgeous pair of swords... You must be Heaven's Sword, Arthur Lothringen. You're supposed to be strong, aren't you? Strong as anything?" His eyes held scorn and a tinge of envy. Still, he considered himself one of the elect. He couldn't have hidden that if he'd tried, and he wasn't trying. "But you're nothing compared to legends who lived through the age of gods! I've read the forbidden tomes in the pontiff's archives! I know a single strike from them could part seas, obliterate islands..."

Blood and spell formulae were eating away at his white robes, defiling their once pristine fabric. I wanted information, but I'd need to pick a point to stop him.

"And slay wyrms. Can you comprehend what that means? A being that will add to my already immense power is about to be born! Here! Today! The Sage has spent long centuries lamenting the fate of the mortal world. His plans never go wrong."

So, the prime apostle is older than he looks. And to judge from how Kume's behaving...

Arthur shuddered, taken aback. "Then, the one who incited the then Lord Addison and my great-grandfather during the war of independence, who urged them to use our ancestral swords at the altar and create the ice wyrm, must have been that same..."

"All for this day! This very moment! A monster that's gorged on so many mighty warriors will yield plenty of mana. Anyone you've defeated will add fuel to the fire, and so will my father and all the others who died breaking that spell before its time." Kume sounded oddly laid-back as he unrolled the scroll to its end.

The intricate, interlocking circles on the floor and in the air halted, then separated. More icy swords wrapped in chains showered the wyrm's head and the beastfolk corpses as the altar gulped them down.

"You sacrifice your family, your people, even your allies," said the grim-faced young noblewoman. "You've lost your minds!"

"The world is mad, Your Highness, not us," Kume said. "Humans have abused the beastfolk since gods walked the earth. And all because we 'have our origins in the north,' whatever that means."

I had been trying to decipher the circles since I'd set eyes on the boy, calling on help from Atra as well as the ring and bracelet, but it would take more time than I had. They would do their work unless we found another way soon. I signed to the blond champion with the fingers of my right hand.

"You should be able to understand!" the cadet shouted, his whole body now stained dark crimson. "You know what it's like to be looked down on as 'the Howards' cursed child'! What would you do with overwhelming power right in front of you?! Do you expect me to believe you wouldn't reach for it?!"

"You don't need to listen to him, Tina!" I said, stopping her even as her platinum hair and white ribbon stood on end. "Arthur!"

The champion roared, and his twin swords gushed piercing light. The lethal *X* of his slash caught Kume dead center—only to shatter against a black, eight-petaled flower that burst from the boy's chest.

"This barrier has a time limit, but it was laid by the second apostle, the great Black Blossom," Kume said as we reeled in shock. "Not even Heaven's Sword can breach it without a struggle, so twiddle your thumbs out there and watch."

"Curses!" Arthur charged straight at the altar, sparing no thought for his own safety. I followed his lead. Blades of dark-red ice surged to intercept us.

"Tina!" I shouted.

"Yes, sir!" The girl cast her best Blizzard Wolf, freezing the icy blades as it carved a path for us through them.

"See how you like this!" I yelled while Arthur bellowed at the top of his lungs and we both darted right up to Kume. At melee range,

not even one of Black Blossom's barriers could—

Without warning, Arthur and I found ourselves teleported into the air. Black petals drifted around us.

So he got creative with his defenses!

I quickly waved my right hand, drawing on my bracelet to erase a freezing blade with a little black cube before it could impale Arthur. Heavenly Wind Bound let me kick off thin air. Thwarted by the barrier, Tina's Blizzard Wolf hadn't reached the center of the altar either.

No!

My eyes met Kume's.

He chuckled. "So many legends fell here. Take the Arch Bladesman, who made his name far to the east. They say he defeated a hundred thousand foes single-handed. Or the Bravest of the Brave, who wielded two swords and two spears and ruled an empire that spanned the lost southern continent. Oh, I can hardly wait to see how they kill you. I have the best seat in the house for—Huh?"

"Allen!" Arthur called. He'd noticed the change too.

"I know!" I shouted as we beat a temporary retreat.

The barrier and the ice wolf shattered, destroying each other just as the formulae that had been steadily taking shape began to lose their glow. Did they need more mana?

Kume stood dumbfounded, staring down at the scroll in his hands. "Wh-Why?!" he wailed. "Why won't it activate?!"

"That should be obvious. Because it's a different spell entirely."

The shadow of the farthest column wavered, and a pale figure dashed out of it.

"Kume! Behind you!" I screamed over the rat-clan boy's stunned "Huh?"

I heard a dull *thud*. Two figures overlapped in the center of the altar.

"So this is where it's been," Arthur spat, while Tina stifled a scream.

North Star had run Kume through. Fresh blood gushed from his belly, and the circles lapped it up. The failing formulae were

overwritten as a new spell began to assemble itself.

Bit by bit, the darkness lifted from the depths of the altar. I could see a black door.

"L-Lord Miles?" Kume asked his attacker, staring blankly at the enchanted sword protruding from him.

"Silence, vermin."

The blade drove deeper, and the boy coughed blood, tears rolling down his face.

"Do you recall how eager you were to show off that scroll?" said the white-robed assassin: Miles Talito, leader of the Heaven and Earth Party and Lord Addison's brother by adoption. "Viola, Levi, Régnier, and I—the glorious apostle Yz—overwrote it."

"No," Kume gasped, digging his fingers into his attacker's shoulders. He was struggling to close his wounds, but it was all he could do to keep the great spells in check.

The newly minted apostle, who had sold his country to the church in the hope that they would resurrect his son, responded with cold disdain. "Her Holiness had words with Régnier. 'I only hope,' she said, 'that Ilaios won't abuse the great spells' power by using it for anything other than the great purpose we all share.' And sure enough, you let power intoxicate you! You didn't even realize your spell had been overwritten! And so, you can fulfill your duty in only one way—by martyring yourself here and now! My daughter Isolde will succeed you as our repository of great spells. You served well, if only for a short time, you despicable, kin-slaying rat. Die swiftly. The longer you draw breath, the longer I must wait until my dearest Alf rises again."

"B-But I...I just..." The boy collapsed on the spot, unable even to catch himself on his hands as the sword pulled free of him.

Miles took a massive leap, distancing himself from the altar.

"Kume!" I tried to run to the boy, but Arthur grabbed my left arm and shook his head.

"No, Allen! It's too late!"

"N-No. No! No, no, *no*!" The sobbing boy shrieked louder with each repetition. "I don't want to die! I don't want to die! *I don't want to die!* H-Her Holiness chose me! I'm special! I'm going to be

an apostle! I...I can't die like thi..."

Before my eyes, the formulae inside the altar flashed, then started to converge. Thorny brambles sprouted without warning, dark as a night without stars.

I-Is this...the same thing that appeared when Stella nearly became an eight-winged devil in the cathedral?

The brambles spiraled, mercilessly dragging Kume into their midst. I heard the black door slowly—ever so slowly—creak open.

More black brambles crept across the underground chamber, carrying the reek of blood. Tina screamed as a fierce gust nearly blew her off her feet.

"Grab on to me!" I shouted, holding out my hand. I multi-cast wind-and ice-resistant barriers as I caught her and withdrew. In the meantime, the brambles blanketed the whole altar.

"Miles Talito!" Arthur roared above us, swords at the ready.

"Arthur Lothringen, Heaven's Sword, champion of Lalannoy and its guardian angel. I esteemed you as highly as anyone. Truly, I did," Miles said, clinging to the ceiling with a teleportation talisman in one hand and a little black box in the other. He closed his eyes. "But you, too, shall die—a sacrifice for my son!"

No sooner had he driven those parting words home than he teleported out of sight. The little box dropped, spilling open in mid-fall. A black-rose hairpin vanished into the swirling brambles. Their mana surged, then abruptly died down. A mist rose, laced with tiny crystals of black ice.

"I-Is it over?" Tina murmured, still clinging to me.

Arthur squinted but said nothing. Dark brambles covered the ceiling, the walls, and the weapon-studded floor.

"I'm going to put you down now," I said.

"Y-Yes, sir."

I released the young Howard and slowly stood up. A horizontal sweep of my rod cast the elementary spell Divine Wind Wave over a wide area. The mist began to clear.

Tina gasped. "A...girl?"

At the heart of the thorn-blanketed altar stood a statuesque girl, almost divine in her beauty. She had white eyes and midnight-blue

hair that barely brushed her shoulders, secured with a black-rose pin. I would have guessed she was older than Tina, though her hands looked terribly young reaching for a worn sword and staff before the black door, which the brambles hadn't touched.

A sharp breeze blew.

"Do not take her lightly. You look on a false goddess, the spawn of mortal obsession."

A girl with black and azure ribbons in the ends of her long silver hair landed on the rubble ahead of us without even a trace of mana to give her away. The Dark Lord Rill's elven garb fluttered in the icy breeze, and the white cat Kifune mewed at her feet.

Startled cries burst from Tina and Arthur. They turned to me, but I could only shrug.

"To create a 'champion' by offering the pitiful wyrm at the altar strains credulity. An unorthodox plan, to say the least," the silver-haired girl continued, stroking her cat. "But it seems even that was a ruse. I never dreamed of making another sacrifice, fattened on multiple great spells, to forcibly overwrite the ritual."

The instant the false goddess laid hands on the sword and staff, there came an eruption of inky mana.

There's no end to it! Forget the wyrm; not even the black dragon could match this!

Rill shook her head sadly, steadying her long hair with one hand. "The light-wyrm sword left by the planet's savior, the Lady of Lightning, and the staff of the Great Moon, who wept for the world. I thought this land might hold them. She's a goddess for a godless age, created by misusing the power of the black gate with the Blue Rose's hairpin. We must slay her before she grows used to her body. Take no chances!"

Before our astonished eyes, the midnight-haired girl yanked the battered sword and staff free of the floor. Black brambles twined around the weapons. The sword recalled Alice's, and the staff, Tina's rod. She would be the toughest foe I'd ever faced.

"Hello to you too, Rill," I said with feigned composure. "I see

you're fashionably late."

*

Tina quite literally jumped at the girl's unexpected arrival, that lock of her hair standing bolt upright. "R-Rill?! Wh-What are you doing here?"

Staring down at the motionless false goddess, the Dark Lord frowned. "Hmm? Allen, have you not told her?"

Kifune added a disapproving meow.

"How could I?" I said, forcing a smile, although I never took my eyes off the midnight-haired girl cloaked in cold, dark brambles. The rags she had been wearing were transforming into something very much like the military uniform I'd seen on Linaria "Twin Heavens" Etherheart, except that it was the same unsettling midnight blue as her hair.

Arthur's immense mana flowed in Lunar Cresset and Lunar Fox, and a dazzling light blanketed the underground chamber. "I'd appreciate the particulars as well!" he called. "I see Your Dark Majesty has chosen to cut quite a charming figure."

"D-Dark Majesty? Dark as in the, um, Dark Lord? What? I mean, what?!" Tina's eyes opened wider than ever before as she took turns gaping at Rill, then at me. To every human in the kingdom, the Dark Lord stood for ultimate menace, the supreme commander of the forces we had spent two hundred years facing down across Blood River.

"As you wish, scion of the Lothringens. There isn't much to it, in any case," Rill said easily and held out her right hand before her eyes. Winds whirled, and a long-barreled antique spell-gun materialized. Its muzzle pointed at the newly uniformed false goddess standing amid the writhing thorns of the altar. "But stopping her comes first. Brace yourselves, boys!"

The next instant, the girl vanished, and a metallic screech resounded through the chamber while a shock wave cracked walls and floor. Arthur had used both his swords to stop the false goddess's slash.

“No matter who you are, I won’t go down easily! Now kindly go back where you came from!” the champion roared as his mana surged. Light eradicated dark brambles, purifying them and driving them back.

I glimpsed a flicker of change in the false goddess’s expression around the sword in her right hand. Silently, she raised the staff in her left. A terrible chill shot up my spine, and Tina and I shouted as one.

“Arthur!”

“Fall back, boy!” Rill snapped.

I conjured a burst of botanical magic from the ground, using vines to grab Lalannoy’s guardian angel and pull him toward me as he jumped back. Tina multi-cast Swift Ice Lances to give us cover. Her arrow-swift shafts ringed the false goddess. In response, the ersatz deity flicked her staff up, then down again.

We gaped as fresh brambles, thin as threads, slashed the ice lances to ribbons and seized control of the space they’d occupied. Then they struck at Arthur. Dodging seemed just the wrong side of possible, and I would never reach him in time.

“Too soon to die, I think.” Rill fired her long spell-gun. I heard Kifune mew.

Countless bursts of light tore through the thorns poised to shred Arthur. The lion’s share disintegrated, but the champion still didn’t land behind us unscathed. No sooner had he set his back against a wall than he slid down it to one knee and closed his eyes. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead, and bloodstains spread over his shining white armor. I cast a battery of healing spells, only to find that they bounced off him.

A curse?! And why does it remind me of ten-day fever?!

I immediately switched to Immaculate Snow-Gleam, and Arthur’s ragged breathing steadied somewhat. Kifune kept close, aiding his recovery. Still, I couldn’t see him rejoining the fray anytime soon.

The false goddess had disabled Lalannoy’s guardian angel with practically a single blow. Now she crossed her sword and staff, and brambles started to coil around the weapons still lodged in the earth.

“No more of that.”

Rill fired her spell-gun from overhead, and Kifune yowled. A star chart appeared in the air, and a hail of shining missiles shattered one weapon after another. At last, the magic ceased, and the silver-haired girl hopped down from the rubble.

"She lacks the sacrifices to manifest anywhere near fully, and we managed to keep her from all but two of the legends here," she spat, resting her gun on her shoulder. "Even so, I can't finish her as I am. I'll need to 'thank' whoever dreamed up this trick!"

"Rill," I murmured, hesitant to continue.

"Please tell us!" Tina cut in. "What on earth is she?!"

The Dark Lord squinted at a shape moving amid the clouds of dust and ice. She swept her silver tresses back with her left hand and said sadly, "The woman she derives from was called Tatiana —'the Blue Rose,' Tatiana Wainwright."

That name. That title. It can't be.

Two massive thorny vines spiraled, starting to converge.

"She was the last of the great champions who saved the planet, and yes, she founded the Wainwright dynasty. The hill called the Indomitable in the north of their kingdom was named for her exploits!" Rill shouted the last word as she unleashed another storm of spell-bullets on the false goddess, only for a pair of crimson-haired girls to intercept them.

"*More* girls?" Tina boggled.

"Shades." Rill grimaced. "Shadows of legends who lived in the age of gods."

The false goddess emerged from the icy dust cloud. The girls with short dark-crimson hair took up positions on either side of her, one gripping a large bramble-tangled katana and the other, a long pike. The weapons must have served as mediums in their summoning. We would have been doomed if Rill hadn't intervened when she had.

"I take it Reverie of Restless Revenants was based on that magic," I said, tightening my grip on Silver Bloom, "although I doubt it begins to measure up."

"The original is a step up in every way," Rill confirmed. "A tactical annihilation spell called Summons to Soulless Shades. It's acting through a dagger from the vanished eastern realm of Akitsushima

and a short spear from the southern Lumirian Empire. The shades won't go quietly. Still..." She smirked and winked. "We do have some cause for hope."

"Huh?" was the most Tina or I could manage before the crimson-haired girls took action—and flaming and sacred swords, respectively, smashed them into the walls on either side. Fiery plumes and flecks of light peppered the false goddess, scattering her dark briar patch.

"Unbelievable," a young woman grumbled.

"Allen, what's taking you so long?!" demanded another.

"Lydia! Your Royal Highness!" Tina greeted the highborn duo who had stationed themselves in front of us with a look of heartfelt relief. Despite their scuffed clothing, neither seemed injured.

"Régnier and the lesser apostles withdrew," Lydia said, True Scarlet in her right hand and Cresset Fox in her left. "Caren and Stella are fine. I take it the old fox-clan man fighting Viola and Levi outside the memorial square is the 'master' you've mentioned? Enemy reinforcements won't be coming."

"He is. And thank you," I said.

So, Zel left with the rest of them. Chiffon must have stayed to guard Caren and Stella. No fear of reinforcements must mean that Master Fugen, Lily, and Ridley are holding their own.

"How dreadful," Cheryl murmured, multi-casting the advanced spells Imperial Light Healing and Imperial Light Exorcism on Arthur, who still leaned against a wall, gasping for breath.

Lydia briefly noted the numinous radiance, then turned haughtily to the Dark Lord. "You must be Rill. Give us a plan of attack, and don't beat around the bush!"

She must have realized at a glance who had the information here. I'd expect no less of my one and only partner. Cheryl, meanwhile...

"What? Why would that girl know? Or rather, who is she?"

"Scarlet hair and a flaming blade." Rill blinked her big eyes and teased her left hand through her silver hair. "You must be the current Lady of the Sword. Being Allen's partner must be quite an ordeal!"

"Not really," Lydia said. "Not once you get used to it. And I *always*

make him pay me back with interest."

"Oh-ho. You don't say." The Dark Lord chuckled.

"Excuse me, Rill? Lydia?" I ventured. If one of us was undergoing an "ordeal," I felt certain it was me.

The shades emerged from the rubble, now decked out in oxblood military uniforms. The false goddess reappeared with sword and staff, extinguishing Lydia's fire and Cheryl's light. They'd had no effect.

I multi-cast another advanced spell, Imperial Incandescent Fetters, hoping to buy time. Shining chains rushed the girls with dark-crimson hair from all sides.

Rill paused to observe the effect before continuing, "You and I cannot truly vanquish them as we are now. However..." She stopped in front of me and laid a little hand on my heart. "You, Allen, and your *companions* should prove able to sever them from the black gate and close it! Never fear—nothing could be simpler. Just hit the false goddess with all the might you can muster!"

Within me, Atra launched into a cheerful song. The marks of Blazing Qilin and Frigid Crane stood out boldly on the backs of Lydia's and Tina's hands. It looked as though we would have to risk it.

"That simplifies things. Now, you know what to do. Give us our marching orders." The scarlet-haired noblewoman glanced at me, then turned her haughtiness on Tina and Cheryl. "Not that we'll need either of them. Tina is quaking in her boots, and Her Royal Highness is still trying to work out what's happening."

"What?! I...I am *not* 'quaking'! I'm...trembling with anticipation! Of all the fighting I'll do!"

"Lydia?! H-How could you turn on me *now*?!"

Even in the midst of a decisive battle, they kept up their usual banter. Rill winked, obviously enjoying herself. Strange though it was, our victory seemed assured. A smile crept over my face.

Then dark brambles climbed my chains, tearing every shining link to pieces. The midnight-haired girl, beautiful despite her lack of expression, had her sights on me and no one else. I felt a chill. Still, I traced an arc in the air with Silver Bloom and shouted instructions.

"Tina, Lydia, and I will assemble a spell! Rill, keep the shades occupied!"

"Depend upon it, though my help doesn't come cheap!" Her Dark Majesty immediately fired her spell-gun. The shots branched into tens, hundreds, thousands of missiles, which pelted the dark-haired girls. I couldn't begin to guess how she did it, but I felt glad to have her on our side.

Meanwhile, the false goddess slowly raised her sword without moving from the heart of the altar. Our eyes widened.

"So she can use the shields too," Rill muttered, "though not perfectly."

A hazy, five-petaled black rose materialized, fending off the storm of spell-bullets.

Is she protecting the black door? I'd also love to know what "shields" Rill means, but questions can wait.

I abandoned that line of thinking and continued, "As for stalling the false goddess herself—"

"I'll see to that, naturally! Won't I, Allen?!" Cheryl strode boldly forward, golden locks gleaming. I saw unshakable confidence.

Ahead of us, the katana-wielder charged headlong, and the heel of Rill's palm sent her cannoning into the girl with the pike. The Dark Lord followed up with a massive magical blast from her gun. All the while, she held the false goddess at bay with another storm of shots. Her skill strained credulity.

"Yes, I can't count on anyone else to see this through," I replied, always conscious of Lydia and Tina exerting silent pressure. "Would you, Cheryl?"

The faintest of shivers shook the princess's shoulders. Sullenly, back still turned, she said, "Don't be silly."

The orb set in her floral staff unleashed a blinding burst of light. For the first time, a flicker of surprise crossed the false goddess's face—a field of luminescent flowers ringed the altar. Steeping her sacred sword in light, Cheryl cast me a wink over her shoulder.

"Cheryl Wainwright made up her mind to make Allen of the wolf clan's wishes come true the day she first met him at the Royal Academy. Don't complain if I beat her!"

She darted into range on a shining breeze, slamming her blade down on the ersatz deity. The midnight-haired girl easily took the blow on her own sword and struck back with thorny strings from her staff.

"I don't think so!" Cheryl snapped.

The shining flowers she had seeded through the chamber severed every dark thread as though she'd seen them coming. She followed with a point-blank barrage of the advanced spell Imperial Luminous Lances, driving the girl backward while avoiding any direct hits on the black rose. This was Cheryl Wainwright in her element. I had nicknamed her the Lady of Light for the figure she cut, sacred sword and shining staff in hand, virtually armored in flowers of radiance.

"Oh no you don't!"

The false god tried to turn the tables with a sweep of her staff, but Cheryl struck faster, launching a tremendous blast of light and meeting the challenge with bold close-quarters blows of her own.

"H-How does she see every attack coming?" Tina asked, stunned.

"Using the same basic principle as mana detection," Lydia answered with a hint of exasperation. Cheryl was controlling every fleck of light in the chamber with more than mortal skill, predicting the false goddess's every move through infinitesimal currents of mana. Glimpsing her lovely face as she went toe to toe with this god for a godless age sent fond memories of our school days flitting through my mind.

"Tina," I said, touching my ring and bracelet.

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"I could never make it to the black door on my own." I deployed the formulae I'd been weaving. "Please, lend me your strength."

"Help yourself!"

"Whoa there!"

Tina flung her arms around me in a bear hug. Lydia arched one eyebrow. All at once, our link deepened.

"That goes without saying!" Tina looked me straight in the eye, cheeks flushed as four icy wings sprouted from her back. "You ought to count on me for more! Lots more! I'm always, *always* ready to rush to your—"

Tina squealed as Lydia planted her swords in the ground, scooped the girl up, and tossed her aside. “Okay, time to switch.”

“N-Not so fast! It’s still my turn!” Tina fumed. Inside her, Frigid Crane added a dissatisfied grumble.

The scarlet-haired young woman gave her a scathing glance, sniffed, and jabbed her index finger at the tip of my nose. Ignoring the ferocious battle unfolding behind her, she pursed her lips and said, “This is what I get for letting you out of my sight. Left hand!”

“Pardon?”

“I’m waiting!”

“O-Of course.” Cowed, I held out my left hand, and Lydia tangled her fingers with mine.

Cheryl cast several hundred Gleaming Globes. The advanced spells caught the midnight-haired girl in midair, slamming her and her black rose into the ceiling, chunks of which crumbled and fell in her wake. Lydia stood motionless as gusts whipped her scarlet hair.

“Is something the ma—”

I couldn’t finish the question. The noblewoman had lowered her lips to my left ring finger. For a moment, I couldn’t make sense of what she’d done. Cheryl startled, Tina wailed, Rill oohed as she battled both shades with her gun at close quarters, Atra sang, and Lia cheered, “Lydia wins!” Then my mind caught up, and I blushed. I was still struggling to regain my equilibrium as I joined our mana on a profound level.



“Oh? What have we here?” Lydia pressed close to me, looking mischievous. “What are you all red for? Would you rather I’d done it on your lips?”

I groaned and tried to hide my face, but she stopped me. A delicate hand stroked my head. A young woman smiled and let out a little laugh, for all the world as though she couldn’t be happier.

“I’d say I win,” she said.

It’s hopeless. It always has been, since the day we met. I don’t stand a chance against her.

I sighed. “Honestly, what is it with Lady Lydia Leinster?!”

“You can’t be serious. Anything less...” Gaze utterly self-assured, the Lady of the Sword gripped the hilts of the enchanted weapons she’d left stuck in the ground. “And I wouldn’t have what it takes to stand by you when the whole world turns against us!”

In a flash, she pulled them free. Eight wings of pale fire materialized behind her, and her scarlet hair lifted as Lia added her own mana from within. I could feel only her overwhelming joy and pure affection. From Tina, I sensed awe of Lydia, intense frustration, and displeasure with me. Their feelings might reach all the way to Stella if I wasn’t careful.

Done evading reality, I called, “Rill?”

“I’m fine!” the Dark Lord shouted, putting the shades at a distance with a rapid burst from her spell-gun.

Cheryl was putting up a blistering fight, switching between melee and magical combat at breakneck speed. But while she had scuffed the false goddess’s clothes, the black rose prevented any real harm. Somehow, we needed to breach the faux divinity’s defense and reach the black door.

I nodded, about to issue my final instructions, when Atra and Lia cried out in my mind.

“Allen!”

“Make her like us!”

What do they— Of course!

The realization hit me just as Tina finished tying her hair ribbon to her rod and held up the back of her right hand for me to see.

“Sir, give her a name!”

The mark flashed—Frigid Crane echoing her insistence.

I thought back to something I had learned as a child at my mother's knee. "It isn't easy naming things," she had said. "But when it's time to decide, it just comes to you. That's how it was when we named you."

I touched Tina's mark and said:

"Lena."

Azure snow wafted on a breeze, freezing the whole briar patch solid.

"Allen?!" Cheryl cried, startled into backing away.

Tina let out a cry of her own, blinking in surprise and clutching her rod.

Lydia added a cold stare and an aggrieved "Honestly."

"Oh-ho." Rill smirked. "Not half bad."

While Atra and Lia celebrated, Frigid Crane said, "Acceptable, I suppose." Their openness was evidently not among her virtues.

The midnight-haired false goddess narrowed her eyes and locked gazes with me. I read wariness in her silent look.

Fresh brambles spread with renewed vigor, and chill winds spurred the shades into action. I cast the bi-elemental spell Iced Lightning Sprint on my feet and charged. My goal: the false goddess and then the black door.

"I'll carve a path!" my partner yelled, beating her eight wings of pale fire as to follow in my wake.

"I'll back you up!" added the other young noblewoman, who had taken to the air on her four wings of azure ice.

Hacking through the dark thicket with a blade of lightning on the tip of my rod, I shouted, "Cheryl! Rill!"

"You can count on me, Allen!" Cheryl ran alongside us, multi-casting Momentary Flash Ray.

"Run straight on, child of wolves!" The Dark Lord slid her right hand over the old wooden stock of her weapon and resumed firing.

A meteor shower of light and spell-bullets enhanced by the power of the great spell Dividing Wind pelted the false goddess and her shades. They struck, needless to say, with the very definition of brutality, piercing and pulverizing any brambles that tried to block

their path. Even so, we raced through the barrage with growing desperation.

"They never moved like this before!" Cheryl cried, awestruck, although she never stopped casting.

The shades swung their weapons every which way, extinguishing rays in rapid succession. They could have been dancing. In any case, they seemed to be gaining strength. We would lose any hope of victory if we allowed their summoner to fully manifest.

"Sir, Lydia, Cheryl!" Tina shouted. "Keep going!"

A massive azure Blizzard Wolf pounced on the crimson-haired girls, ignoring slashes and thrusts to pin them in place. Everything around it froze over. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the orb on Tina's rod radiating a hard, clear light, just like it had that day in the Howard greenhouse, when she had first used magic. Frigid Crane must have been in high spirits, because a second wolf of ice was already taking shape.

I held out a hand to the blonde princess racing along on my right. "Cheryl, take this!"

"A-Allen, what— What *is* this magic?!"

Lydia cut down any brambles that broke through the ice. I spotted the false goddess block Rill's shots with her black rose and leapt over a heap of frozen debris.

"I know you can use it!" I shouted.

"Allen, I... Yes! Yes, of course I can!" Cheryl put on a burst of speed, coming out ahead of Lydia and me. Brilliant blossoms cleansed baleful mana. She was parting the inky briar patch, blazing our trail forward.

And yet...

The false goddess ended the storm of spell-bullets with one swing of her sword, from which the thorny vines had started to peel away. She held the staff in her left hand high, and its obsidian orb began to turn, rolling like a great living eye. Whatever that portended, it wasn't good.

"Please!" Tina cried. "Lend me your strength! Lena!"

"Time to prove my worth, I think!" Rill yelled.

Their voices rang in my ears as a blast of icy wind drove me

onward. A second Blizzard Wolf, even mightier than the last, attacked the false goddess, freezing parts of the altar itself. Blades too quick for my eyes to follow hemmed in the faux divinity, all striking in unison. Had Rill transmuted her shots?

The midnight-haired girl swiftly lashed out with her staff, splitting the black rose into a new formation. The fearsome ice wolf and myriad flashing swords broke against it, releasing aftershocks of mana. Still, the false goddess had sacrificed some of her defenses. We had our chance!

"With Allen at my side..."

Lydia shot upward, planted her feet on the frozen ceiling, and plummeted straight down. No sooner had she conjured two Firebirds than she sucked them into her swords, invoking the Leinsters' secret Scarlet Sword with both weapons at once. She struck with all the strength in her body, roaring her absolute conviction:

"There's nothing on earth I can't cut!"

For the first time, the black rose broke—albeit in diffused form—and pale fire grazed the false goddess. The girl betrayed a flicker of emotion and jumped back—another first.

"You're not going anywhere!" The princess darted in, golden locks flashing. Moon Bright unleashed a point-blank blast of magic.

"Sir!" Tina started. "You didn't give Cheryl what I think you did, did you?!"

"Way to spoil her rotten," Lydia grumbled.

With a white flash, the supreme spell of light sprang to life. A colossal Shining Stag barreled into the false goddess as she stood with staff outstretched, making immaculate inroads into the dreadful midnight blue of her mana. We almost had her.

"There's more where that came from!" Cheryl charged right up to the distracted girl. Her sword took in a second Shining Stag and shone with an even more sacred aura.

Rill added a more reserved "Oh?" to Tina's shocked "What?!"

"See why I can't stand that scheming princess?!" Lydia snapped, incinerating brambles with her flaming sword as they tried to reclaim the altar.

With a short, sharp cry, Cheryl brought the House of Addison's

long-lost Shining Sword down on the false goddess's staff with all her might. Waves of shock and mana rocked the underground chamber as the weapon spun through the air. The midnight-haired girl tried to compensate with her sword, only to have it jerked back, throwing her off-balance. A broken blade lodged in the floor.

Was that Arthur's Lunar Cresset?!

"You have your opening, Princess!"

"Thank you, prince of the Lothringens! Here goes nothing!" The Lady of Light channeled all her mana into her sword and staff and struck a crushing overhead blow. It collided with a hastily deployed black-rose shield. White and midnight-blue mana vied for supremacy. All this, and we still couldn't break through.

"Can't you do anything yourself?!" Lydia darted in beside Cheryl, both swords swinging.

"Don't forget about me!" Tina added another Blizzard Wolf to the assault.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, cracks spread across the shield. The click of a trigger sounded, distinct, and a tornado of dark emerald shot through the altar. It pierced the weakened black rose and knocked the false goddess back all the way to the black door.

Tina, Lydia, Cheryl, Rill, and Arthur all shouted my name.

"Allen!"

Together, they had given me the last, best chance I would ever get. I couldn't let it slip through my fingers. Thrusting out Silver Bloom, I hurled a new great spell, powered by the Thunder Fox, Blazing Qilin, and Frigid Crane, against the midnight-haired false goddess.

"Divine Thunder."

Scarlet, violet, and azure intermingled. Whiteness filled my vision, blotting out all else. Strangely, I felt no pain. Perhaps I'd gotten used to it.

Amid the light, the girl with the black-rose hairpin smiled. The false goddess's presence rapidly faded, and a formula I'd never seen before started to unfold where she'd been.

Wh-What on earth...?!

"Allen!" Atra yipped.

“All fine!” said Lia.

Lena said nothing, but the three of them clutched my hands and the hem of my robe. Then, I felt the black door shut.

The next instant, I stood in a garden blooming with flowers of all kinds. From the sky shone gentle sunshine. A breeze ruffled my hair.

Two white-clad children released my hands and raced off, ears erect and tails wagging with glee, to embrace a beautiful woman with pale-blue hair. I recognized Marine Crocodile, the great elemental who had loved the principe of the city of water and still cherished his memory. A Great Tree towered beside the group, although not so large as those in the royal and eastern capitals.



I looked down at my right hand, and the ring and bracelet blinked repeatedly.

I see. This must be the world where the great elementals are meant to reside. I've been here before, and more than once.

Then, I gazed down at another child in white, who silently refused to leave my left leg. Lena the Frigid Crane had white plumage mingled with her long azure hair. Looking up, I faced an elderly man seated in an antique wooden chair. He wore a distinctive pair of small spectacles and black sorcerer's robes. The false goddess's sword rested in a black scabbard on the desk before him.

He noticed me and met my eye. His expression was mildness itself. "Oh, there you are. Hello. And don't worry about the false goddess. She's gone."

I hesitated. "And, um, who might you be?"

"Ross Howard," he said. "The folks you call the Ducal House of Howard are all descended from me."

The founder of the House of Howard?! But what is he doing here?

"Actually..." The old man narrowed his eyes and rested a wrinkled hand on his desk. "Maybe I'd better introduce myself as one of the people who built altars in *eight* spots around the world. I'm glad I worked my magic into the black gate when I died. That's what lets me bend the rules enough to exchange a few words with you...and an old friend."

"True enough," said a silver-haired girl, appearing without warning.

"R-Rill?!" I gasped. Kifune scaled my right shoulder, and the azure-haired child's gaze hardened.

"I don't know much about what your lot got up to back then," the Dark Lord said, "but it's given me no end of trouble."

"Forgive me," said Ross. "I know I ought to be ashamed of myself. How many times did my teacher warn me? 'What people deem evil didn't start that way. Most became reviled in retrospect.'"

A chill wind blew.

Ross removed his little spectacles and gazed at the children playing with Marine Crocodile. "When the age of gods was drawing to a close, my teacher devised systems to sustain a godless world

before he went to his eternal rest: the saplings of the World Tree, the seven dragons, eight grand dukes to preserve mortal society...and the Thinking Staff." The hand holding his staff trembled. "For a few centuries, it all worked smoothly."

These are the same ancient truths Arthur told me about! In which case, I'm about to hear the world's secrets.

Ross tapped the black scabbard. "Only, the World Tree saplings didn't grow as quickly as my teacher had planned. So I; the Sage; the then Hero; Tatiana, who was working for the Lothringian Empire at the time; and the Saint put our heads together in absolute secrecy and made the altars to speed the trees along. Of course, all our teacher's senior students were dead set against it, especially the Great Moon. Oh, and my wife, the Glacial Prison."

"You're tempting fate," Rill interjected casually. "Remember, she renamed herself 'the Lady of Ice' because she thought the old nickname 'lacked charm.'"

I see. So that's where Duchess Rosa's nickname came from.

"Our plan failed miserably," the old man continued, giving his shoulders a tired shake. "The three great empires of our day started using the altars to gather mana from the saplings. They can't have grasped what would happen. In the end, many brave warriors and I lost our lives in this land to prevent the emergence of a false god."

Arthur mentioned a great battle before the age of strife. This must be it. Which makes the weapons left at the altar relics of those fallen champions.

Ross watched Atra and Lia weave flowers into rings with the blue-haired beauty. I saw affection and regret in his gaze.

The edges of the garden were crumbling, consumed by white light. It didn't look like I'd have time to hear everything.

The old man replaced his little spectacles and closed his eyes. "The black gates have no wills of their own. There's neither good nor evil in them. But their power is too great for mortal hands. One of my teacher's junior students, the Gemstone, peered into the abyss, and she lived in fear of it to the end of her days. That's why we need those like you—'keys' that can lock the gates."

Atra and Lia ran toward us wearing flower crowns. The blue-

haired beauty nodded to me from where she stood.

"I have no right to say this, given I left the root of the problem." The elderly sorcerer who had once kept the world safe rose and took the sword off his desk. "But please, stop those who would use the altars, and shut the black gates, so that those children can laugh and play. My teacher and my fellow student didn't risk their lives for a world where the children of the divine staff come to harm."

My right ring finger flashed.

I know. I gave you my word at the bottom of the Four Heroes Sea.

I placed a hand on Lena's head of azure hair and nodded. "I understand. Anyway, I have a promise to keep."

"Thank you. Take this with you." The old man proffered the sword in its black scabbard. I took it without a fuss.

Atra and Lia, newly returned, latched on to my hands. Lena strengthened her grip. The light was drawing close now.

"Much hangs on the houses whose names end in 'field' and 'heart.'" Ross Howard's voice washed over me. "In particular, Ashfield the Sage and Ashheart the Moon Fiend."

I felt my heart caught in a vise.

Th-Those names! This is what Lady Elna was talking about!

"These houses share no slight connection to my teacher," Ross declared amid the crumbling garden. "They know the roots of the world. The Shiki archive in the north should hold records as well, assuming it survives."

"Shiki," I repeated. Wasn't that the name of the Yustinian hinterland we'd just annexed?

"And ——!" a young man's voice snapped at the Dark Lord out of the light. "Try not to give Allen too much trouble! You'd better stop using my wife's name too. You're tempting fate."

So Rill's been using the Lady of Ice's name? Too bad I didn't catch her real one.

"I...I know that. She never lets anything go, not even from beyond the grave." The Dark Lord pouted, toying with her silver hair.

"If you have a problem with that, take it up with my teacher you so adore, O Empress of Lumiria. Or would you rather go by your

magnificent old title as—”

“Enough! Silence! Begone back to Rill, why don’t you?!”

The Dark Lord was the Lumirian empress?! That seems like one hell of a revelation to drop in parting.

Atra and Lia stared enviously at the hand I’d left resting on Lena’s head.

“Allen, may the black wolf bless your path,” Ross Howard said, raising his own hand slightly. “Do with the sword as you see fit.”

“Kifune and I will go back to where we belong as well. Allen, when next we meet, let it be in my dark realm. Oh, and one other thing.” A weight vanished from my right shoulder. The white cat’s voice overlapped Rill’s. “I asked Fugen for a little something. Pass word on to me when it arrives. You can reach me through—”

“Margrave Solnhofen,” I said. “But how do you know Master Fugen?”

“I changed his diapers.”

In an instant, the world crumbled away.

I found myself touching the black gate as a covering of vines crept over it. The Great Moon’s staff and the swords of the Lothringens lay lodged in the ground beside me. Petals poured into the now roofless cavern; the breathtaking flower dragon winged its way across the far blue heavens. Three children clung to my legs, and my left hand clutched the black-scabbarded sword.

So I didn’t dream it, then.

Tina and Cheryl raced toward me, shouting.

“S-Sir!”

“Allen!”

Arthur was on his feet and staring skyward.

Thank goodness. It looks like we all made it.

“Is it over?” Lydia asked, planting herself beside me. She had sheathed her swords.

“Yes,” I said. “Rill and Kifune went home, by the way. She said that next time I see her, it’ll be ‘in her dark realm.’”

I could sense mana clearly again. The battle outside seemed to have ended as well—and without casualties. Thank goodness!

“So, who’s she?” Cheryl asked, hugging Atra.

The white-clad child with feathery azure hair groaned, trying to make herself smaller without letting go of my left leg. I gave her a pat on the head.

“Meet our bashful savior...”

“Lena!” Atra and Lia finished in song.

Tina clapped a hand to her mouth. “You don’t mean...?!”

I watched the rain of petals and smiled. “Now, let’s get a move on. This place will become sacred ground if what we’ve seen in the city of water and the royal capital is anything to go by. And everyone outside is liable to charge in after us if we don’t leave soon.”

Epilogue

"So, Ellie and Felicia are in the royal capital, while Lynne, Teto, and the rest are still in the south?" I asked.

"Exactly. I assigned the professor's students who didn't come with us to Ellie, so we can probably expect results by the time we get back. Now scooch over," Lydia said, sinking onto the bench set in the garden of the Lothringen residence in the city of craft and pressing her left shoulder against my right. She was dressed for sword fighting, as she'd been at the conference we'd left with Arthur and Elna.

One white griffin and several black ones flew sportively in a cloudless sky.

"You're making it hard to write," I said.

"Tough." Her Scarlet-Haired Highness giggled, then hummed, wiggling her feet. At least one of us was in a good mood.

Two days had sped by since the battle for the city. I hadn't collapsed this time, but Lydia and Cheryl had still prevailed.

"You rest," the former had said. "We'll handle any trouble."

"This is a royal order, Allen!" the latter had added.

They wouldn't let me so much as touch work, so I'd explained to everyone about Rill and Kifune and spent all my time since writing letters. I wished I'd gotten a chance to speak with Master Fugen before he'd left the city.

"Wh-Why not?!" a girl wailed from the kitchen. "Why won't you let me bake cookies?! This is tyranny! I most emphatically protest!"

"Tina's right!" cried Ridley. "Such villainy will never stand!"

"None of that, Tina," Stella chided.

"Ellie's *Caring for Lady Tina, Fifth Edition* clearly states that any form of cooking is 'out of the question,'" added Caren.

"Do keep that pen moving, my lord Swordmaster," Lily chimed in. "You have a very contrite letter to send home. And don't forget the

royal guard and all the other houses with a claim on you!”

Two groans followed. Ah, peace.

I closed my eyes while the young woman beside me stroked my hair. We had scraped a narrow victory in the battle for the city of craft. The southern blockade had been broken, restoring communications with the kingdom. But Miles and Isolde Talito remained missing. The royal guard, Cheryl’s bodyguards, and a group of Lydia’s and my old schoolmates led by Suse Glenbysidhe were still pursuing the apostles Ibush-nur and Ifur, but capture sounded unlikely. As for Zel and the greater apostles, we couldn’t even track them.

If only we could take even one alive.

Atra and Lia burst into song in the center of the garden, where they had prevailed on Chiffon to play with them. For reasons I couldn’t fathom, the children wore Howard maid uniforms. The mystery made them no less lovable. I noted that a black-braided maid, Chitose, was keeping an eye on them—and on a third child hiding her plumage and her long azure hair behind a tree—before I set down my pen.

I had already reported Mr. Fosse’s rescue to the royal capital by magical means, but I would still need to write to Felicia before the day was out. And to Lynne, who had negotiated with the president of the Skyhawk Company on our behalf.

“By the way, about that sword.” Lydia ran her fingers over the black-scabbarded weapon on the table. I had a sinking feeling. “It’s officially yours now. And you’ve been granted what used to be the independence memorial too, now that the flower dragon’s sanctified it,” she said as if discussing the weather and handed me a hair tie. “The Lalannoyans approved everything.”

“What?! I don’t approve of these strong-arm tactics!” I sputtered. “I know! I’ll give the sword to Caren and—”

“She told me she’ll get your parents involved if you try to palm it off on her. Speaking of which, I’d love to stop in the eastern capital and visit them on our way home. Now, start tying.”

There goes that plan. I can’t win this one. Wh-What’s my best move now?

I was doing Lydia's lovely hair when a young woman with golden locks returned from a council session.

"I see *someone's* enjoying themselves," she remarked. "It's good to see you, Allen."

"And you, Cheryl," I said. "I was just gearing up to tear my hair out."

"Excuse me?! What could you possibly have to complain about when you're busy serving your incomparably lovely mistress? I think you mean—"

The princess calmly seized the fuming noblewoman by the hand. The next thing I knew, Lydia was airborne. She landed on Chiffon's furry belly with a stunned "Eek!"

Cheryl raised a many-layered defensive barrier and took a seat beside me. "Here you are: the details of your latest acquisitions."

I gingerly turned over the proffered envelope. It bore the official seal of the House of Addison. Even Artie had signed it.

"H-Hey, Princess Knife-in-the-Back!" Lydia shouted. "When did you learn to make a barrier this tough?!"

Atra and Lia were enjoying the show. Chitose watched with equal interest, as did Lena from behind her tree.

"Tell me, Allen." Fair fingers brushed my cheek. The scarlet-haired noblewoman let out a silent scream. Then came the question, reserved and a little nervous. "Did I make myself useful?"

Oh, is that all?

I knelt to the dazzling princess and bowed with overblown ceremony. "But of course, Your Royal Highness. I could not be more grateful for your aid."

"Oh, good. But no more 'Royal Highness.'"

My old schoolmate broke into a relieved grin. She took everything so seriously.

"Silly me. I almost forgot. Allen, I'd like to ask a favor of you." Cheryl rose and squeezed both my hands. The future queen blushed faintly, making puppy-dog eyes. "Say, 'Well done, Cheryl. I don't know what I'd do without you.' Come on. What are you waiting for?"

"W-Well..."

"It... It'll take more than this to keep *me* out!" Lydia roared and

started weaving a last-ditch Firebird.

Cheryl, however, kept her nervous gaze fixed on me. She had worn the same look when we'd first spoken in the café with the sky-blue roof. "Allen of the wolf clan," she had asked then, "would you be my friend?" Then and now, our princess had always been a straight arrow.

I conjured a white flower and tucked it into her hair. "You did great, Cheryl. I'm counting on you. Really, I am."

"I...I see. That's all right, then." Her voice sank to a whisper. "Good! It looks like I haven't lost yet!"

"That's enough of that!" Lydia burst through the barrier with the force of a gale, seizing me in her arms and pinching my cheek. "Why, you two-timing—"

"I...I don't see what I could have done differently," I said, while Cheryl snapped, "Lydia! Did you forget it's my turn now?!"

"Oh, be quiet, Your Royal Slyness!" Lydia sniffed. "Look at you, bright red after one little compliment. Not even Tiny is that childish."

Oh dear.

Sure enough, Cheryl broke into an unsettling chuckle, all the while trembling with rage. Blooms of light collided with fiery plumes as the princess sank into a combat stance. "I won't stand for this. Not today. Now, unhand my personal investigator, Lydia Leinster! Officially, you have nothing to do with him!"

"I—*I*—have nothing to do with him?!" Lydia echoed. "Fine! If that's how you want it!"

"Please," I said, "try to keep it within reason."

While the former schoolfellows started roughhousing, I turned to Lena, who had come out of hiding. "If Atra and Lia interest you that much, I really think you ought to play with them."

The child who had finally materialized—whether due to Tina's growth or some other reason—hastily crossed her arms and turned her face away. "I...I am *not* jealous!" she snapped. "Show some respect! You stand before the great elemental Frigid Crane!"

"Yes, yes, I know. Atra! Lia! I think Lena wants to play with you."

"Play!" the children cheered.

"H-How dare you!" cried the azure-haired child as I levitated her

and gave her a push in their direction.

Perfect!

I was still contemplating a wholesome job well done when a door opened and a girl emerged from the house. Her platinum hair had returned to normal, and she wore an apron over her everyday clothes.

"Sir!" Tina made a beeline for the bench and flounced down beside me. "You wouldn't believe how they've been treating me! I've as much right to bake you treats as—"

"Allen!" A shout from the newly returned Arthur Lothringen drowned out the girl's complaint. Seeing her grab my left arm with a start, while the children took cover behind Chiffon, the champion added an awkward "Sorry" and rubbed his blond hair. A common, nameless sword hung from his belt.

"Mr. Allen?"

"Allen?"

Stella and Caren came out, also wearing aprons and out of uniform. The noise must have surprised them too. Lily and Ridley seemed busy arguing, but I could always fill them in later. Prompted by a gesture from Lydia and Cheryl, who had paused in their sport, I said, "Arthur. Has something happened?"

"I'll say it has!" he replied. "Three nights ago, church apostles raided the Yustinian capital and did battle with the Hero, and with Floral Heaven, who happened to be staying with her."

We all gaped.

The night before we fought the false goddess, then? I had no idea.

"Following a ferocious battle," Arthur continued gravely, reaching for an inner pocket, "they forced the prime apostle and a vampiress to retreat"—my ring, my bracelet, and the sword on the table registered a slight reaction—"and captured Io 'Black Blossom' Lockfield. This came from the imperial capital, addressed to you."

Silence fell over the Lothringen garden.

Black Blossom, in custody?!

I took the paper Arthur proffered. Sparks crackled under my fingers—the mana of the Hero, Alice Alvern. I charged the sheet

with my own mana, and words appeared.

"Allen, we need to talk. Come to the imperial capital."

"Comrade," Tina murmured, just as Stella whispered, "Alice." Both sisters knew her well enough to look troubled.

"What now?" Caren asked severely over both of them.

What else? I need to go. But is that really the right choice? Could this be another one of the false Saint's pitfalls?

A roar of laughter interrupted my brooding. "What's the matter, sister mine?! You call yourself a Leinster maid?!"

"I...I haven't lost yet! I'm...I'm going to be Allen's maid!"

A chorus of barely suppressed laughs lightened the mood. It sounded as though, somehow or other, brother and sister had started baking.

Worrying won't get me anywhere. What we need is action.

"Over here!" Lia said as she and a humming Atra ran over, leading Lena by the hands.

"D-Don't you dare pull me," complained the azure-haired child.

I had so much to ask Alice about: the seven dragons, the Thinking Staff, the eight grand dukes, the great elementals, the altars, the Shiki archive... Ross had added the Ashfields and Ashhearts to my list. And of course, the "keys." The time to confront her had come.

I took out my pocket watch, setting its violet ribbon swaying. It would be a while longer before I saw my parents again.

*

"No, Ifur! I refuse to even consider it!" I cried in the ruins of a nameless shrine on the eastern fringe of Lalannoy.

"Ibush-nur," mumbled my friend. He had propped himself against a stone wall and proven unable to rise again. But could I abandon him, even at his own insistence? Never. We had finally shaken off our pursuers. I couldn't let this be his end.

Our retreat from the city of craft had pushed us to the limits of desperation. Our foes had been few but skilled—handpicked crack troops, Howard maids and students of the professor among them.

Olly Walker and Owain Albright had proven freaks beyond my wildest nightmares. Injured as we were, they had forced us into a bitter struggle.

"Raymond," my friend groaned with grim humor, "do you think I want to end up a monster like your ex-prince?"

"Of course not! But—"

"I need a favor. Lend me your ear."

I leaned closer and found my left hand caught in a painful grip.

"When I'm dead..." he whispered. A mark took shape in my hand.

A sign from the cult of the Great Moon?!

I waited, nonplussed, and Fossi's grip weakened.

"See that this reaches the president of the Skyhawk Company," he went on brokenly, on the edge of hearing. "Tell Else...who killed *her*."

"What do you— Fossi? Fossi?!"

My friend's arm fell limp. He closed his eyes. Spell formulae were spreading over his body. He had begun to lose control.

"Damn it all!" I yelled. "There must be some way!"

"It's too late for him," came an icy voice from above. A young man with white hair and crimson eyes gazed down at me from atop the wall.

"Régnier! You're unhurt?!"

The fourth apostle might have access to magics or arcane arts unknown to—

A bloody flash transfixed Ifur beside me. My friend's body crumbled, and the wall with it. Black blood writhed as with a life of its own.

"Wh-What have you... What have you done?!" I screamed, wide-eyed.

"Put him out of his misery." Régnier landed and pushed his spectacles up his nose. "And while I'm at it, we'll do the same for you."

I twisted, narrowly evading a sanguinary blade aimed at my back. Piling magical enhancement on my limbs with no thought for the consequences, I pulled my single-edged dagger free and roared.

"Isolde Talito!"

"Dear me. I missed." The vampiress clad in the white robes of an apostle gave me a puzzled look from the air, one hand over her mouth. She inspired terror and revulsion in every fiber of my being.

"Don't draw it out," Régnier said. "You're only making my job harder."

Bitterly, he flicked his left hand. Blades of blood bore down on Fossi as his body tried to piece itself back together, shredding him through his dark shields. The mana dispersed.

"You know your man the ex-earl? Rupert, I think?" Régnier continued. "He did good work for us. Who would've guessed Ifur was an apostate? And you're Ifur's best buddy. That's a good enough reason to purge you too. I hear Isolde and Miles—"

"My father goes by Yz now!"

"...will fill your spots in the apostles."

Fossi, an apostate?! We witnessed a miracle together, with our own eyes! But then...then, what did my friend join the ranks of the apostles for?

"See that this reaches the president of the Skyhawk Company."

I thrust out my dagger, striving to mask my turmoil. "I betrayed my own country in Her Holiness's service!"

"Seriously? You know better than that. Or do I have to remind you how harsh the greater apostles can be? Anyway, you'll get a second chance once they get Resurrection right, so give up and get martyred."

The dhampir spoke far too cavalierly, without a drop of reverence for Her Holiness. A bird alighted on his shoulder. He stroked its head, then conjured a new blade of blood in his hand.

"If you don't like it, run, Raymond Despenser. See how far you get. You never know—life's full of surprises. I feel for you. Now, let's get this over with."

*

"Master Gregory, the apostles have begun fighting among themselves. How shall we proceed?" I asked my liege, Lord Gregory Algren, as waves of mana made collateral damage of several magical

creatures I'd conjured for reconnaissance. The abandoned shrine stood more than a safe distance from our location, a watchtower half consumed by forest, and I had done my utmost to render us imperceptible and to set decoys. Against apostles, however, my best offered cold comfort.

My lord hesitated a moment. How he had matured since the Algren rebellion. "Ito, we'll keep our distance from—"

"A bird."

Instantly alert, I assumed a combat stance in front of my lord. A figure emerged leisurely from the darkness.

My lord narrowed his eyes. "An old fox-clan man in a tattered cloak. I see. You must be the one the Dark Lord spoke of."

The beast-eared and tailed elder raised his white eyebrows. "Gather mana from the little bird flying around that lot. The one who calls herself the Saint might have conjured it." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "I'm Fugen of the fox clan. Much to my displeasure, I'll be joining you on your road. You'd best be prepared to put up with at least that much to get back at the church, *former* Algren lordling."

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been six months. I won't make excuses—I really struggled with this one. Shaving about a hundred pages off my first draft sure was a challenge, and I ended up adding pages to the book anyway. I decided I just couldn't do without them. After all, volume sixteen is special—just look at the final illustration!

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although I've made revisions. You heard me: revisions.

Now, on to the story. Saint Wolf ran wild last volume. Now it's Her Royal Highness's turn to rampage. In the end, she even snagged a spot on the cover. Excuse me, but weren't you supposed to be a character we all feel sorry for? I can never let my guard down with this series—the false Saint is just about the only character on my side.

As for a certain someone who followed up her boyfriend-shirt look in volume nine with a boyfriend-coat look in this one, I think we need to talk. Do you realize that was your little sister's scene back before I even had a first draft done?

Who knows what will happen in volume seventeen. I hope you're looking forward to it.

Announcement time. Thanks to all of your support, *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter* is getting an anime! I don't expect to see my work animated often, so I want to savor the wait until it airs.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. I know I owe you an apology for all the trouble I've caused you.

The illustrator, cura. The cover looks awesome!

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. Don't forget to turn the page.

Riku Nanano

The Moon Fiend

"I really don't see anything amiss. Arthur, I'd better get back to the house soon."

"I see. Forgive me for dragging you out here, Elna," I answered my cousin and fiancée, who stood with her staff in the church she'd been inspecting in the western district of Tabatha, the workshop city, capital of the Lalannoy Republic. Reports made the apostles and Miles Talito frequent visitors to this building.

I could see a glorious moon through the antique stained glass. Mana lamps on the walls cast more pale light. "Please go over that place with a fine-tooth comb," Allen had said before his abrupt departure a few days ago. "They might have left magics behind them to invoke later." I had dutifully dragged Elna away from the furor of postwar cleanup, to no avail.

I looked about me. The pulpit and the pews that should have sat in neat rows had been cleared away. The barren church looked horribly bleak.

Elna hugged my left arm—an automatic gesture. "Are you thinking about Allen and everyone who went with him?"

"Yes." I looked into my fiancée's silver-gold eyes, more beautiful than any jewels, and smiled. "The house has been awfully quiet since they hauled Ridley off with them."

The center and largest stained glass window reflected the glow of the mana lamps. It appeared to depict the Saint raising a dragon from the dead. I touched my sword hilt. I would need to find replacements for Lunar Cresset and Lunar Fox.

"You and I know something of ancient history, and not even we could comprehend the altar that birthed a false god into a godless world," I said. "The Church of the Holy Spirit is a threat. We can't afford to sit idly by. We'll need to rush through peace with the Yustinians while we converse with the royal capital in secret."

"I suppose you're right," came the muted reply from beside me.

What's this?

I turned to look at Heaven's Sage and found the great sorceress pouting like a child.

"Elna? What's—"

"Arthur." She moved in front of me and jabbed her staff at my chest. "When the next battle comes, *I'll* protect *you*. I can't let Allen show me up!"

Casting Floral Heaven's magic and taking command of the army had kept her from the front lines of the recent battle, and she evidently still resented the fact. We had been together since childhood. No doubt we always would be. Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage formed a pair. Together, we would never know defeat.

I knelt on the spot, took Elna's left hand, and kissed it. "I'll hold you to that, my lady love."

The mighty sorceress let out a muffled squeak as her face and neck rapidly reddened. "Honestly!" She turned on her heel, cradling her left hand in her right. "You should hurry home too. I'm cooking tonight, and I'll hold dinner for you."

"I'll follow you as soon as I've taken one last look around," I said to her slender back. "You have my word."

Elna gave her staff a few swishes without answering and vanished in a blaze of light. She had cast a teleportation spell.

"Now then." I reinspected the church alone. Lord Addison had instituted a curfew in and around the capital until the turmoil subsided. No sounds reached me but the wind and the clack of my own army boots.

I reached the center of the church and touched a finger to the eight-petaled magic circle drawn on its floor. Nothing happened.

I suppose even Allen misses the mark once in a while.

"Good evening, Lalannoy's guardian angel. Isn't the moon lovely tonight?"

A girl's voice, calm and unfamiliar, carried through the church. I hadn't sensed her. And how had she failed to trip Elna's web of detection spells?

"Who are you?" I asked coldly over my shoulder, hand on my

sword hilt.

Before the church's closed front door stood a diminutive girl in a hooded robe of pristine white. An old pendant hung from her neck, but her hands were empty. The long pale-gray fall of her hair seemed to soak up the moonlight, setting off alarm bells in my head.

"An apostle?!" I drew my sword without hesitation.

To think that they would strike again so soon!

"My, what a scary face." The girl's lips curled into a sneer. "You'll start a feeble woman like me shaking with a glare like that. Let's adjourn to somewhere else."

To my consternation, obsidian darkness flooded from the circle at my feet, swallowing me whole.

The wind brushed snow against my cheek. Stones of all shapes and sizes lay strewn about me, giving off a faint, magical glow. A dusting of snow coated the ground. I couldn't spy a tree, let alone a building.

"Where on earth...?"

I heard the creak of an opened door and turned to find the girl emerging from a black gate.

"A nameless plain at the planet's end, my lord champion," she said, a twisted smile playing on her lips. "You could count the mortals who have made it here since the gods walked the earth on your fingers."

Each step she took toward me brought an eruption of mana. Dark brambles spread from her as well.

The false goddess's power?!

"Might you be—"

"Isn't my Allen a marvel?" she asked, ignoring me. "He makes the impossible possible. But..." She stopped and lifted the edge of her hood. I froze. Unfathomable evil lurked in the depths of her golden eyes. "You're in the way."

The almost charming note in her voice made it all the more terrifying.

"I knew my Allen would quell that false god." The gray-haired girl brought her hands together, smiling. "And that the Shikis' faux sacred sword and the bothersome Lothringen originals would be

useless by the time he was done."

Something didn't add up. I might have been teleported, but the moon still hung in the sky and still gave light. I could make out our shadows with ease. Yet the girl's seemed too large.

"But in the middle of it all, a thought struck me. What if you survived too? I can't have things going according to Aster's plan."

Aster Etherfield called himself the prime apostle and Sage. Who could take this attitude toward the effective leader of the church forces? Only the "Saint" herself!

"Then I had another thought. 'Oh, of course. I can just kill Arthur Lothringen myself.' So I set a trap in the church. I couldn't count on you fools, but I knew my Allen would order it searched."

"You think it will be that easy?" I retorted, giving my sword an edge of light.

"Of course. I mean...*we're* so much stronger than you."

The coldest chill of my life shot up my spine. I sprang backward as far as I could, retreating to the top of a boulder before the brambles covered the whole area.

The girl's vast shadow swelled and pounced into the air. I gaped as it blotted out the moon.

"The black dragon?"

Three jet eyes sat on either side of one central orb. A scar from a blade marred the middle eye. Three wings loomed where there should have been four. Thorny black vines from the girl's shadow coiled around its neck, restricting its freedom.

What could do this to one of the seven dragons, guardians of the planet's law?!

"Now, struggle for all you're worth, Heaven's Sword, Arthur Lothringen." Lips contorted in ecstasy, the girl held out her right hand to one side...and clenched it tight. "All the people you've sworn to protect might die unless you slay me with that sword in your hands."

Staggering mana and dark winds blew back her hood. Beast ears and a bushy tail echoed the pale gray of her hair.

The church's so-called Saint is of the fox clan?!

Gray brambles slithered from her shadow, taking on the shape of

a colossal, blade-winged snake—the great elemental Stone Serpent, I presumed.

"I am the younger sister of Atra the Saint of the eastern-capital fox clan, come from the age of gods and from the land at the planet's end..."

Shadows wavered in her right hand, and a pitch-black rod appeared. It looked almost identical to Allen's, but I knew a cursed thing when I saw one. No ordinary sorcerer could have wielded it. It would have taken one of the witches of legend to— Of course! The girl before me must have used an altar somewhere to renounce her own mortality. In which case, this had all started with her. No wonder she had known the spells of creation.

The eyes of the false goddess who had deceived the world turned crimson as the mark of Stone Serpent pulsed on her right hand and cheek. "Iria Ashheart, the Moon Fiend. Now, shall we begin?"





"Cheryl Wainwright has come to render Allen of the wolf clan her aid!"

First princess

Cheryl Wainwright

The "Lady of Light" attended the Royal Academy with Lydia and Allen. A flawless princess, she equals Lydia in ability.

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter 16


“I-Isn’t this Mr. Allen’s, um...?”
“Don’t go telling anyone, now. It’s our little secret.”
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.
Fashion-forward maid
Lily
The Leinster Maid Corps’s number three is extremely quick-witted despite her usual carefree attitude. Named diplomatic envoy, she sets out for Lalannoy with Allen.


Tina's personal maid
Ellie
Tina's maid is the granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants of the House of Howard. Her talents blossomed while she received lessons from Allen alongside her mistress.
"Do you know how many times you've asked that question since this morning?"
"You look amazing!"
Allen's younger sister
Caren
This wolf-clan girl achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits. She acts as a second tutor to the younger girls.
"I don't look weird in this, d-do I?"
Allen & Co. head clerk
Felicia
Stella's and Caren's best friend possesses a rare gift. To aid Allen, she enters negotiations with a western margrave.


“Try to keep me entertained, Lady of the Sword, Lady of Light!”
“We’ll be sure to tell Allen you turned tail and ran!”
“There won’t even be ashes left when we’re done with you!”
Allen’s erstwhile best friend
Zelbert Régnier
Allen’s only male friend at the Royal Academy. He lost his life in battle but rose again as a dhampir and became the Church of the Holy Spirit’s fourth apostle.


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Riku Nanano
Illustrator
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The False God That Deceived the World





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“Work hard, now, Allen. Keep fighting your way to *us*.”



She who reigns over the church

The False Saint

She shows great kindness, and her miracles have saved many people in need. In reality, she belongs to the fox clan, concealing her ears and tail with magic. She sneers at the church’s faithful adherents and despises the world. Her obsession with Allen knows no bounds.

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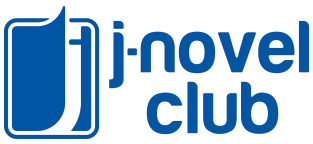
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 16
by Riku Nanano

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2025
Premium E-Book for cbg