
17
Author
Riku Nanano
Illustrator
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The Celestial Spear, Successor to the Star


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Private Tutor to the Duke’s Daughter

Black Blossom, apprentice of Floral Heaven

Io Lockfield

A demisprite sorcerer and former second apostle of the Church of the Holy Spirit. He participated in a surprise raid on the imperial capital, only to be intercepted by Alice and confined beneath the palace.

Characters



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

Allen

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



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

Caren

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



Thunder Fox

Atra

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



Hero

Alice Alvern

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



First princess
Lady of Light

Cheryl Wainwright

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



"The kingdom's most viciously devious sorcerer"

The Professor

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



Allen & Co. head clerk

Felicia Fosse

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



Twin Heavens

Linaria Etherheart

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

Characters

The Northern Ducal House of Howard



Duke Howard
"God of war"

Walter Howard

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



Duke Howard's eldest daughter
Royal Academy student council president

Stella Howard

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



Duke Howard's second daughter
Little Lady of Ice

Tina Howard

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



Tina's personal maid
Little Lady of Wind

Ellie Walker

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

The Southern Ducal House of Leinster



Duchess Leinster
Bloodstained Lady

Lisa Leinster

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



Duke Leinster's eldest daughter
Lady of the Sword

Lydia Leinster

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



Duke Leinster's second daughter
Little Lady of Fire

Lynne Leinster

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



The Leinster Maid Corps's number three

Lily Leinster

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

Characters



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

The Professor ..... The kingdom's most dangerous sorcerer.
Once taught Allen and Lydia.

Fiane Leinster ..... "The Smiling Lady." Under-duchess Leinster.

Aster Etherfield ..... The Sage.
Prime apostle of the Church of the Holy Spirit.

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

Yuri Yustin ..... The aging emperor.

Moss Saxe ..... The empire's aging grand marshal.
Wields the enchanted sword Castle Breaker.

Shise Glenbysidhe ..... Floral Heaven.
Chise's younger sister and the teacher of Rosa and Io.

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

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

Elna Lothringen ..... Heaven's Sage. Bedridden after losing Arthur.

Rill ..... Dark Lord of the west.

Lena ..... The great elemental Frigid Crane.

Prologue

"That concludes the military report from Commander Owain and my bro—*ahem*, Sir Renown. They add that 'the entire royal guard has pooled its strength and will continue scouring the eastern frontier for the apostles who caused the disturbance.'"

The young knight's frank voice filled the chamber, which looked a touch old-fashioned despite the Bright Wings insignia inlaid on its walls. Another knight—older, though still in his prime and majestically whiskered—stood behind me with a dirty-blond young sorcerer. Both gave a slight start.

"I see." I glanced out the window at the workshop city of Tabatha, where reconstruction proceeded apace, and rubbed at my Leinster red hair. "And you made the trip back to fill us in. Much appreciated, Ryan."

"Thank you, Vice Commander, sir." Ryan Bor threw a gallant salute. The sheltered second son of an earl now cut a fine knightly figure.

Experience was the mother of growth, I reflected as I sank into an imposing chair. Each item of furniture displayed astonishing craftsmanship, even considering that Lord Oswald Addison, leader of the republic, had allotted us this villa. I could feel his eagerness to please the Wainwright Kingdom we represented. No doubt a certain emergency had played a hand in—

The whole house shuddered. I would suspend judgment on the matter until I had all the details, I decided, and speedily returned my attention to the papers on the table. Relations between the kingdom and the republic had been foundering since the Algren rebellion. The Lalannoyans couldn't have expected the bloody civil war that broke out in their capital just when a new peace seemed within reach. And to make matters worse, Miles Talito, Lord Addison's brother by adoption, had joined hands with the Church of the Holy Spirit to lead

the rebel forces. The church's apostles had even revived the legendary ice wyrm that the republic had used in its war for independence from the Yustinian Empire, forcing its lawful government into a temporary retreat to the former capital. Not even the republic's two greatest champions, "Heaven's Sword" Arthur Lothringen and "Heaven's Sage" Elna Lothringen, had been able to stop it. I had no doubt that the miraculous victory over first the wyrm and then a false goddess owed a lot to one man's efforts.

"So the apostles might have had a violent falling-out in what's left of a shrine in eastern Lalannoy," I mused, hand on my chin. "I wish Allen were here so I could pick his brain about it. Or that I'd gone with him to the empire so this wouldn't be my job."

People called Allen "the Brain of the Lady of the Sword." As for the Lady of the Sword herself, that title belonged to my little sister—the eldest daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster, which governed the south of the kingdom—who cared more for him than for anyone else alive. He and I were firm friends too, for all that he was younger. We had fought together in the eastern capital. But both Allen and my sister had made a hasty departure for the Yustinian capital.

"Richard, I believe you have duties to perform," the older knight behind me admonished, stroking his beard. "I realize that Allen has gone to answer the Hero's summons, but Princess Cheryl remains here by royal order, as does Lord Ridley Leinster, the Swordmaster."

"Stop preaching sense, Bertrand," I sighed. "Well, even forgetting my wayward cousin, I could never have gone off with my mother marching in from that port city."

Her Royal Highness, one of my sister's few friends, had appointed Allen her personal investigator. But while she'd seen them off with a mountain of gripes, she had still stayed behind in Tabatha. Our princess took her duties seriously.

For the time being, I turned to the young knight. "Sorry to keep you dashing from one corner of the kingdom to another these past few months, Ryan. You've earned a rest."

"Thank you, Richard," he said. Not many months earlier, he would have insisted that he wanted to go back to the front.

"I have high hopes for you." I tapped the sheathed sword beside me in heartfelt satisfaction. "Oh, and give me a private warning when you and Celerian pick a date for the wedding. The Ceynoths and the Leinsters go way back."

"W-We don't— I mean, it's a little soon for— I-If you'll excuse me, sir!" The minute I brought up his relationship with his fellow knight, Ryan blushed beet red and beat a flustered retreat. He even forgot to close the door behind him.

I take it back. He's still green as they come.

"Richard, try to keep your teasing within reason." Bertrand gave me a rueful grin as he followed Ryan out, no doubt to show him his way around. *He* remembered to shut the door.

Now...

"How does this business at the abandoned shrine strike you, Uri?" I asked the young sorcerer, whose robe reminded me of Allen's. "Oh, and have a seat."

The boy nodded and took a chair in front of me. I couldn't let his youth deceive me—he had studied with Allen and Lydia under the professor, one of the greatest sorcerers in the kingdom.

Uri smoothed his robes and looked me in the eye. "After a number of investigations, it seems clear that the girl who calls herself the Saint has appointed seven apostles in all, and that she also commands a formidable swordswoman and a vampiress. Five have been sighted in this city: the third through sixth apostles and the Saint's servant, who uses an unusual eastern sword called a katana." His pen sped across a sheet of notepaper.

• The Saint's servant, Viola Kokonoe. Enigmatic, black-haired girl who wields a long foreign sword.

• Third Apostle Levi Atlas. Linked to the Principality of Atlas? Her house name seems to suggest so.

• Fourth Apostle Zelbert Régnier. Allen's former friend. Dhampir. Once thought dead.

• Fifth Apostle Ibush-nur, aka the former Earl Raymond Despenser of the kingdom.

• Sixth Apostle Ifur, aka the former Marchese Fossi Folonto of the League of Principalities.

Viola and the greater apostles—those ranked fourth or higher—were the kind of freaks you couldn't overwhelm with numbers. Even the lesser apostles carried remnants of the great spells Radiant Shield and Resurrection inside them and commanded tactical magic that both human and demon forces had always considered taboo, even two centuries ago during the War of the Dark Lord.

The boy sorcerer removed his spectacles. "The corpse left in the shrine belonged to Sixth Apostle Ifur. According to Suse, who examined the scene, eighty percent of his body turned to ash. He had also been slashed to ribbons—by the blood-blades only vampires use. You can trust Suse's judgment on that. She's fought one."

A university student had fought a vampire and lived? Even for a demisprite, widely considered the mightiest spellcasters on the continent, I found that hard to credit. The creatures were a blight on anything mortal. But then, the professor's students were always a cut above.

"Val and Vil's sweep of remnant mana confirmed that Fifth Apostle Ibush-nur cast the spell that destroyed the shrine," the boy continued. "You can trust that result too. Allen shared his analysis of the lesser apostles' spell formulae with them before he left for the Yustinian Empire. Which means we can infer that..."

I suppressed the urge to interrupt.

Really, Allen? You cracked the apostles' formulae? And you found a way to share your results with those handsome elf twins—at least I think they're elves—by orb?

The young sorcerer, whose name reminded me of the aging emperor, slid his spectacles back on.

"A greater apostle purged two lesser ones in that shrine."

You could cut the tension with a knife.

Dissension in the church, then. Ironic that the first apostle we've confirmed dead fell victim to one of his own.

"Uri," I said, "how would you like to join the guard after you graduate? We'd love to have you."

"Your Highness overestimates me," he said, "but I appreciate the offer."

"'Richard,' please. That's what Allen calls me." I gave an

exaggerated shrug. I wasn't cut out to be a Highness, though my house had a right to the style. Apart from royalty and the eight grand dukes of legend, only the kingdom's Four Great Ducal Houses could claim that honor. "I'm glad you magic experts stayed to help. I was afraid you'd all leave with Allen. Still, I'm amazed the other three were willing to listen."

The lion's share of the royal guard were out chasing the apostles, along with any Howard maids left in Lalannoy, picked soldiers from the army of the republic, and three more of the professor's students.

"Allen asked us to stay himself." The young sorcerer lowered his eyes and frowned. "We owe him too much to refuse."

"Oh, I see how it is. Don't let him hear you talking about debts, though."

"I know. But what else can I say, Richard?" The eyes behind the boy's spectacles registered understanding, and he pressed his left hand over his heart. I knew that look. Like him, I owed a debt of gratitude I could never repay, but to the Leinster maids. "Suse nearly died in a gutter in the poor parts of the royal capital. Val and Vil were slated for sacrifice by a secret society of dragon worshippers. I was about to be killed by the Stinging Sea. Then Allen saved us. I think Suse and the twins lived in the same place as children."

The house shook harder than before, and I sensed a hint of mana.

Ridley?

The young sorcerer ignored it and turned slowly to the window. "I had just crammed the younger children at the orphanage into the cellar when I saw more spines than I could count raining down on me. I thought for certain I was done for. I'm sorry to say that even on the brink of death, I couldn't remember what my parents looked like or where I was born."

That last self-mocking sentence held no emotion. He had gone from that orphanage on the outskirts of the southern capital not just to the Royal University but to its most exclusive class. The rumor had made the rounds of the royal capital at the time, but I'd heard no more.

"But here I am, alive." The boy closed his eyes. "He made it so. It

wasn't long before Lydia arrived, but it seemed an eternity, and Allen held his ground against that mountain of a monster the whole time. I'll always remember his back as he fought to protect me, a stranger he'd never even seen before. Death couldn't make me forget."

Who knew a hidden drama played out while Allen and Lydia killed that millennium-old creature? Talk about coincidence. Or maybe it was fate.

"Repaying him is an uphill battle," I said, in earnest.

"I know. After I became one of the professor's students, Gil told me that Allen donates massive sums to orphanages everywhere, including mine. Including the scholarship money that got me to the university. But I feel lucky beyond my wildest dreams. I get a chance to follow the new Shooting Star." A sudden, heartfelt smile spread over Uri's face.

A bunch of brave kids rescued by a legend in the making, out to repay the savior they admire. You know, some of our maids have a knack for writing. Maybe I ought to—

The communication orb on the table flashed. I rose, longsword in hand.

"Sorry," I said. "A lady wants to see me, and I'm too scared to say no. Our own Valery Lockheart will be along with some papers in a bit. Would you receive them for me? They're about—"

"The 'Fields' and the 'Hearts'?"

"Right in one, Uri. Feel free to ask her any question that crosses your mind. I'm sure she'll cooperate once you tell her Allen wants to know."

"I understand, Richard."

I gave the slender sorcerer a thump on the shoulder and left the room. Now, what had that scary lady—my mother, Duchess Lisa Leinster—gotten out of Marquess Oswald Addison that had her so worried?

*

I'd heard that the villa's spacious courtyard had once served as a training ground. It had become a battlefield. Officers of the Leinster

Maid Corps surrounded it, maintaining a military barrier to contain the clash of flame and steel. That explained why the noise and mana hadn't reached me.

My cousin, Ridley the Swordmaster, fell back with a bitter groan. He'd swung his Devoted Blossom down with all his might, only for a rapier to turn the flaming sword aside. Holes riddled his sleeves and hem.

"My, my, my. Is this all your vagrant life has gotten you?"

His opponent, a petite beauty with scarlet hair just long enough to cover her ears, caught the light on her slender blade. Underduchess Fiane Leinster's expression lived up to her nickname—"the Smiling Lady"—but I'd rarely seen her don the full military uniform she now wore, and a phalanx of fiery rapiers hovered in the air around her. My aunt's famous smile didn't extend to her eyes.

Yikes. She means business.



“Mother!” Ridley pleaded while I shivered. “I only want to go rescue Arthur! Please just stand a—”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” my aunt chirped. “Not while my runaway son needs punishment!”

Her slender blades of flame all launched themselves at my cousin. Between the flame and the dust, I was quickly losing sight of the fray.

Live strong, Ridley. I know your future looks grim, but still.

I hurried on to the edge of the courtyard, where a lady wearing a uniform to match my aunt’s awaited me in a chair under a large sunshade.

“You called, mother?” I said with a slight bow.

Lisa Leinster, the former Lady of the Sword, tossed a report onto a round table. “It’s been such a long time, Richard. When did we last sit down for a private chat? The Algren rebellion?”

“H-Has it been that long?” I avoided meeting her gaze as I took the chair across from her. She had me at a disadvantage.

“You hardly ever come home since you joined the royal guard,” my mother said, lifting a teapot and pouring two cups. “Anna misses you, and so do I.”

“S-Sorry about that.” I instinctively sat up straighter at the sound of our head maid’s name. She had looked after me as a child, and I still wouldn’t dream of defying her. She didn’t seem to be in Lalannoy, but you never knew.

“I met Oswald Addison last night.” My mother sipped her tea and narrowed her eyes. “You’ve heard that Heaven’s Sword has gone missing?”

“Yes, although I’m still hazy on the details,” I said. The champion had been a pillar of the republic, and his disappearance represented the worst threat to its national security. Its western border had seen a century of fighting with the considerable forces of their old masters in the Yustinian Empire.

The barrier screeched under a sudden strain. An unfamiliar single-edged dagger lodged in the ground in front of us, flickering with fires that soon died—a mirror of its wielder’s chagrin.

“I-Impossible.” Ridley fell back, flummoxed. “My secret technique

worked on that elder vampire. How could you see through it at first —”

He didn’t even get a chance to finish his sentence. A storm of fiery rapiers fell on my cousin, pursuing as he scrambled to flee.

“A battlefield is no place for chitchat. And what did I teach you?” A sharp gleam entered the Smiling Lady’s lovely eyes. She hadn’t moved from the center of the courtyard. “Complacency invites death.”

In an instant, she was on him, sword thrust at her son’s throat in a whirl of fire flowers. Ridley just barely managed to block with his own flaming blade, but everything inside the barrier started to burn. The staggering display put a tense grimace on my face while my mother calmly continued our discussion.

“The situation looks grim. Fighting in the capital has dealt Lalannoy a major blow. We can’t expect much from them even if they ally with us against the Church of the Holy Spirit. Especially now that the elite forces they’ve been pitting against the Yustinians lack a commander.”

“You mean the rumors are true? Not only is Heaven’s Sword gone, but Heaven’s Sage is bedridden?” A chill came over me, and I swallowed a mouthful of tea. The core of the army had come through intact, but they wouldn’t amount to much without their champion and commander to inspire them.

“No!” Ridley had failed to weather my aunt’s lightning-swift thrusts. Devoted Blossom flew out of his hand and lodged in the ground.

“There! All done.” Aunt Fiane sheathed her sword with an elegant motion and produced a video orb. “Now, take a look at your would-be brides! You promised, remember? Don’t take too long choosing.”

“I...I know I gave you my word, mother, but I have no intention of marrying yet. I m-must master the way of the pâtissier before—”

“Oh no you don’t! Keep him surrounded, girls.”

“Yes, Mistress Fiane!” came the answering chorus. In the blink of an eye, our maids had Ridley hemmed in on all sides.

Yikes. The Smiling Lady is no laughing matter. Still, Ridley’s been dodging responsibility for a few years now. Maybe he had it coming.

"R-Romy!" My cousin's wails rang in my ears. "Not you too, Nico! And you, Jean! I...I'm begging you! Please let me through!"

"Master Ridley."

"Escape is impossible."

"You've gotta know when to give up."

He hasn't got a prayer. Live on, Ridley.

My mind wandered to my poor cousin's fate. Then my mother tapped her finger on the table.

"Arthur Lothringen, champion of Lalannoy, vanished under mysterious circumstances inside a church of the Holy Spirit in this city," she said. "Elna Lothringen, who for all intents and purposes was the supreme commander of the army of the republic, wore herself out pouring all her mana into a succession of tracking spells and now lies bedridden. She would have been in real danger if Cheryl hadn't been here. Almost no traces remained in the church, but we did find one clue—vestiges of a spell formula from neither the kingdom nor the republic."

A cold gust blew. My skin broke out in goose bumps. Allen had told me of Arthur's and Elna's skills before he left. "They each number among the finest on the continent," he had said. "Even by a conservative estimate." High praise. My sisters would sulk if they heard it. And now one was missing and the other an invalid? Almost as soon as Allen had left?

And then there was that trace of a spell—magic from neither the kingdom nor the republic. Given the circumstances, the church must have been involved. A greater apostle at the very least.

My mother steadied her scarlet hair with one hand, looking grim. "The republic has issued a gag order concerning Heaven's Sword and Sage, but other nations will notice their absence sooner or later. Oswald requested that we station troops from the kingdom in their capital, as a check against the Yustinians and the eastern powers under the church's sway. We're left with no choice but to divide our forces and fight battle after battle while the Knights of the Holy Spirit mass on our own eastern border. Yet again, our opponents have the initiative." She paused, then said slowly, "It reminds me of..."

"The military situation on the eve of the War of the Dark Lord," I

finished for her. Two hundred years ago, like today, the kingdom had spread its forces thin to put out fires in neighboring countries. I didn't want to jinx anything, but I couldn't help wondering what that might mean.

"We'll have to put little Al to work again, won't we? Everyone else has their hands full," a lilting voice interjected. My aunt had left Ridley to the maids and returned to join us. She poured her own tea with practiced skill.

My mother must have been thinking the same thing, because she let out a sigh—more weakness than I was used to her showing. "We ought to be ashamed of ourselves, always adding to that boy's burden. I must make a stop in the east on my way back to the royal capital and apologize to Ellyn."

An ordinary wolf-clan mother and a duchess famed throughout the west of the continent. The two of them had been corresponding for years, although their growing friendship remained a secret to all but an intimate few. I couldn't help thinking that my own mother handled it all rather awkwardly.

Then my aunt stopped drinking tea to lob a verbal bombshell.

"Oh, Li-li, I do wish you'd introduce me to Ellyn. I mean, we might be *family* in the not-too-distant future."

The very air screeched under the pressure of my mother's mana, and not metaphorically. The maids retreated as one and started raising a many-layered fire-resistant barrier. And they kept Ridley in custody all the while. I couldn't help but admire them. Though of course, I had missed my own chance to escape.

My mother lowered her hand from her hair. "Fia," she said quietly, "what exactly do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean? Well, my Lily *was* named our emissary to Lalannoy, and Al *did* go along as her aide, so I was thinking this little trip might just snowball into an engage—"

Flame collided with flame all around the sunshade, the two infernos snuffing each other out. I froze still as a statue, quaking in my boots. My mother ignored me and adjusted her hat.

"Out of the question," she said. "Allen is going to be *my* son-in-law."

"Really? But Liddy's *such* a late bloomer."

"Don't pretend Lily's much better."

"Oh, but she *is*."

"You're fooling yourself."

The two ladies, "Bloodstained" and "Smiling," shared a laugh, then stood up in unison and strode out into the courtyard. Flames were already licking over the ground, reducing it to a scorched wasteland. And by process of elimination, it looked like Ridley and I were going to have to stop our mothers. I let out a long sigh.

Well, Allen, I guess neither of us can ever catch a break.

Watching my mother and my aunt gleefully draw their swords and start weaving spells, I stuffed one of Ridley's bird-shaped cookies in my mouth.

Chapter 1

"Sir! There it is! That's Jardin, the Yustinian capital!" a girl shouted, standing up to point on the black griffin flying to my left. Tina was the second daughter of Duke Howard, one of the Wainwright Kingdom's Four Great Dukes, as well as my student. Despite the spells mitigating headwind, her blue-tinged platinum hair and her cloak still flapped around the long rod strapped to her back.

Shafts of sunlight slanted through breaks in the clouds, shining on the dazzling circle of the imperial capital. The towering, cathedral-like building at its center must have been the palace. It had stood as long as the empire, I'd heard, surviving so many civil wars.

"Just a little farther. I'm counting on you to get us there," I said, stroking the white neck of Luce, the sea-green griffin that had once borne Shooting Star, the wolf clan's greatest champion. But all else aside...

"Allen, we need to talk. Come to the imperial capital."

Why had the Hero summoned me? Something to do with the capture of the Second Apostle Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield, I supposed. But still.

I glanced down at the cloth bag lashed to my saddle, which held the light-wyrm sword I'd received from Tina's distant ancestor. Supposedly, it had originally belonged to the Alverns. I felt I ought to return it.

While I pondered, the young woman holding the black griffin's reins looked disapprovingly over her shoulder. Duke Howard's elder daughter, Stella, had long platinum hair and wore a cloak to match her sister's.

"Hold still when you ride, Tina," she said. "I don't care how well the Skyhawk Company trained these griffins; it's still dangerous. Now sit down."

"Yes, Stella. I'm ever so sorry." Tina briefly stuck her tongue out at me and clung to her sister's back. We had made the right call when we put them on the same griffin.

"What a gorgeous city. Don't you think so?" said the wolf-clan girl behind me, swiveling her ears. My little sister Caren wore a floral military beret and a foreign jacket patterned in shades of purple.

"Yes," I said. "I've always wanted to visit it."

"I'm glad we could come together. I wish I could have shown Atra this view, though." Caren cast a lonely glance down at the back of her own right hand. No mark shone on it. The three great elementals in our care—Atra the Thunder Fox, Lia the Blazing Qilin, and Lena the Frigid Crane—had gone to sleep shortly before we'd left Lalannoy. Aiding us in battle after fierce battle must have taken its toll on them. Certainly, it was a shame. Still...

"We can always show them when they wake up." I gave my sister a pat on the head.

"You're right." Caren nuzzled happily against my back.

Instantly, another black griffin swooped down from above with a rush of air. Such sharp maneuvers bespoke astonishing skill at the reins. The rider, a lovely young woman, wore a black ribbon in her long scarlet hair, a jacket like Caren's, only in red, and leather boots, and she was giving me a petulant glare. Her floral hair clip and silver bracelet actually seemed to radiate a murky miasma.

"Allen, I really think we'd better take turns riding Luce," said Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps's number three, bringing her griffin almost dangerously close before I could recover.

What now? She means business. I can tell by the look in her eyes. And she almost never keeps her tone so serious.

Before I could answer, the Howard sisters joined the fray.

"Sir, I'm in favor of taking turns too! It's not too late to start now."

"Mr. Allen, I'd also like to, well, share a griffin with...um..."

Tina I expected, but Stella? Hmm... What should I tell them? They ought to know why Caren and I are riding Luce as well as we do.

Another gust struck before I could make up my mind.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as Caren tightened her grip on me. Looking

to my right, I saw a third black griffin return from the upper air, a young beauty with long scarlet hair at the reins. My partner since our Royal Academy days, Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, looked back unperturbed. Her cloak swayed gently, as did Cresset Fox, the enchanted sword hanging at her hip.

"That's enough of that, Lily, Stella. And you too, Tiny. You know Luce doesn't want to carry anyone but Allen and Caren, so stop wasting your time."

Lydia's commonsense retort seemed to flummox Lily and Stella, who murmured her name with questioning concern. Only Tina flew into a rage.

"What?! Wh-Why do you call everyone by name except me?! I protest! I most firmly protest!"

Lydia scoffed at the young noblewoman who housed Frigid Crane and flashed an impish grin, confident in her victory. She eyed me for a moment, and I felt my heart sink.

"And remember," she said calmly, sweeping her long, lustrous hair aside, "we must pay our respects to the old emperor. Anything less would be a breach of etiquette. Lily, Stella, Tiny, all three of you had better be ready. Caren, you'll stand by outside the palace."

Cries of surprise burst from Tina and Caren. Lily and Stella went saucer-eyed.

Lydia never parted from me if she could help it, as a rule. Since our Royal Academy entrance exam, we had only spent multiple months apart once, when I'd gone to the northern capital to tutor Tina and Ellie Walker, who was currently back in the royal capital attempting to break the spells on the Sealed Archive. She had relaxed a little now that a magical pact on our right ring fingers let us locate each other as long as we stayed in the same city. Still, I felt taken aback.

"It...it's bizarre. Downright inexplicable," Tina muttered, cowering astride her griffin. "Keeping Mr. Allen all to herself is Lydia's religious creed. How could she agree to leave him in the heart of a country we were at war with until just recently, even if it won't be for long? I...I can't make sense of it. We'll have a thunderstorm *and* a blizzard tomorrow! I just know it!"

"I see how it is." Caren bristled, on high alert. "You begged him to do something for you before we get there while we weren't looking, didn't you? You're shameless. But it won't do you any good! I won't leave Allen's side until we get back to the royal capital! Not for one minute! Except when he's with Alice."

I waved my hand to dispel the snowflakes and sparks that had started flying and surreptitiously cast the intermediate spell Divine Lightning Detection. I'd been told to expect a welcome. While tempers flared, the levelheaded Stella spoke up.

"Tina, Caren, don't you think you're being, well, a little unfair?"

"No!" her sister snapped. "You're being too polite!"

"Sometimes, a girl has to take a stand and fight," added her best friend. "Now, tell us how you really feel."

"Wh-What?" Our newly anointed "saint" glanced at the supremely confident Lydia and admitted, "W-Well, it does strike me as a little odd."

Her Scarlet-Haired Highness gave her right ring finger an unaffected kiss and sighed. "Deplorable," she said. "Look. Here comes the welcoming committee."

We all squinted ahead at an isolated field on the outskirts of the city. A bespectacled gentleman waved to us from its center. I recognized the professor, who had shepherded Lydia and me through the university. He must have caught my spell and lowered his perception-blocking wards and other precautions. Hardly any other sorcerer in the kingdom could match him, for all that he dressed like a dandy. I'd heard that he'd come to the imperial capital to arrange an alliance against the Church of the Holy Spirit. For a chronic idler, he'd been working hard lately. He didn't even have Anko along to keep him in line.

"Everyone descend slowly, each at your own pace," I said, raising my right hand in answer. My ring and bracelet flashed in the light. "Lydia, I'm impressed you spotted the professor."

"Of course I spotted him," Lydia replied. "You sent him a signal first."

"What, you noticed? I tried awfully hard to keep that spell stealthy."

"No hiding things from your mistress. I forbid it." My scarlet-haired lady giggled, then hummed as she masterfully guided her griffin down ahead of us. I couldn't fathom what had put her in such a good mood.

As for the girls left hovering...

"Oh, jeez!" Tina wailed. "Jeez, I say. Jeez! You're too soft on Lydia, sir! Even Cheryl grumbled that you've 'been letting her get away with murder since the Royal Academy'!"

"I entirely concur," said Caren. "And you corresponded with me the whole time, so I have physical evidence."

"We'd better hold a trial tonight," chirped Lily.

None of them were pulling their punches.

H-Have I really gone that *easy on her?*

Only Stella abstained. Covering her mouth with her sleeve and blushing faintly, she murmured something I couldn't catch over the beat of wings. ("I wish *I* corresponded with Mr. Allen.") Still, a flurry of shining snowflakes fell on the field below. We landed our own griffins amid the enchanting spectacle.

The Howard maids who had guarded our flight from Lalannoy formed a protective cordon. Chitose, the corps's number five, commanded them. Her soft black braid and deadpan expression stood out among her colleagues. I would need to thank her later.

I dismounted, helping Caren down by the hand and taking the bag from my saddle. Luce bent down to assist us, and we were still thanking the griffin when the professor sauntered up, hat in hand.

"You must be tired, Allen, traveling with such an entourage," he said, flippant as usual.

"Thank you for your concern. I originally suggested that Luce and I should come alone, but you know how it is." I scratched my cheek and glanced at the trio beside me.

"You think I'd send you off alone?" Lydia demanded, arms crossed. "Not in a million years."

"I concur," Caren said, assuming the same posture.

"Do you *want* me to denounce you to Cheryl?" Lily added, palms together.

Cowed, I forced a shaky laugh.

I'm powerless. Utterly powerless.

While I moped, Stella landed her and Tina's griffin a short distance away. A uniformed maid whose flaxen hair curled outward rushed up and hugged them both.

"Lady Stella, Lady Tina!" she cried. "I'm so glad you're safe!"

The sisters goggled.

"Wait, Mina?"

"What are you doing here?"

Evidently, the Howards had dispatched agents to the empire as well as the republic. In which case...

"Lady Lydia, Lady Lily, how I've longed to see you! I have fresh dresses ready for you both."

Sure enough, a familiar voice reached my ears. I turned to see a slender, chestnut-haired woman: the Leinsters' head maid, Anna. The professor had written me that three skeletal dragons had attacked the city. Now I saw how it had come through unscathed.

"I...I am *not* a lady!" Lily protested, arms flapping. "I finished my mission to Lalannoy, and I'm only going to the palace as the young ladies' body— Huh?"

Lydia patted her on the shoulder in mid-rant. "Give it up, Lady Lily the envoy," she told her stunned cousin. "You might be just the person to address the emperor."

"What?!" Lily wailed, then turned to me. "A-Allen, please."

I'd rarely heard her sound so pitiable. Under the circumstances, my answer went without saying.

"I wish Your Highness the best of luck," I said, sweeping a bow with an ear-to-ear grin on my face.

"Oh, why do you have to be so *mean*?!" The maid—my senior—fumed like a child, her hair clip flashing. Now that I thought about it, we had known each other a long time—since my first summer vacation at the Royal Academy. I had fond memories of that station in the southern capital.

"Graham was here too, you know?" The professor winked, enjoying his role as spectator. "But he's gone to Lalannoy. You just missed him. He asked me to give you his best."

"To Lalannoy?" I repeated. "Now there's a coincidence."

Graham “the Abyss” Walker was my student Ellie’s grandfather and head butler to the Ducal House of Howard. I couldn’t imagine what would prevent a man of his peerless devotion from waiting to welcome Tina and Stella, but it filled me with foreboding.

“Suse and the others are in the city of craft too,” I added. “I hope you’ll commend them once you’re all back in the royal capital. And I have something for you.”

“Oh? May I ask what?”

“My report on what transpired in Lalannoy.” I reached into my robe and produced a bundle of papers I’d written on the journey after my companions went to sleep at night. “It contains a fair bit of speculation, and I’d like your opinion on a few points concerning—Y-Yes? Is s-something the matter?”

Three young women sighed in unison and started grumbling as they poked at my cheeks.

“Why didn’t you stop him, Caren?”

“I don’t know, Lydia. Why didn’t *you*?”

“Do you have some kind of condition, Allen? Would it literally kill you to stop working?”

The Howard sisters didn’t seem to have caught on. Mina still had their full attention. Anna, however, pulled out a notebook and started jotting furiously.

D-Don’t tell me she plans to report me to Lisa! Th-That could get serious.

The professor put his hat back on and chuckled at my panic. “Attaboy, Allen. Your feet are barely on the ground, and already you’ve done wonders for my stress.”

“Spare me the mockery,” I said. “Don’t you realize that your student’s life is on the line?”

“You’ll live, although I can’t deny that you risk abduction to parts unknown.” My former mentor spread his arms and glanced at Lydia, blatantly enjoying himself. He must have heard her expound on flight to the city of water a million times.

“I’ve already been abducted once,” I pointed out.

“But only to parts *known*.”

That was the problem with the professor—he had a retort for

everything.

Lydia caught my eye and cheerfully mouthed, "The southern isles, the commonwealth, and the Thirteen Free Cities are all in the running for next time."

I hoped there wouldn't *be* a next time.

The professor took one smooth step toward me. "Tabatha fell silent after you left."

"Silent?" I repeated, incredulous. The recent battle had dealt the Lalannoyan capital a serious blow. It seemed natural to attribute any trouble with communications to the aftermath. And yet...

"I don't know the details." The professor shook his head. "Lisa and Fiane marched from the port of Suguri, and Graham should send word once he arrives. Just bear it in mind."

"I understand," I said. I couldn't help worrying. Still, the city of craft had the Lady of Light, the Bloodstained Lady, and the Smiling Lady, not to mention the Swordmaster, the best the royal guard could offer, and my former underclassmen. The Leinster and Howard maid corps maintained a presence there as well, and who could forget Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage? Surely not even the church's false Saint and her apostles could get past all of them. I would wait until I had more to go on.

"Now, shall we be on our way?" Having said all he meant to, the professor strode to the center of the clearing. The Howard sisters entrusted their griffin to the maids and rushed to join us.

"Lydia, Lily, Stella, you will accompany me to call on the old emperor in his palace," my erstwhile mentor instructed, left hand raised. "Tina and Caren, you will go with Allen to Lady Alice's—"

"Not so fast," Lydia interrupted, just as Lily exclaimed, "Wait just a minute!"

"Won't my sister be coming with us?" Stella asked hesitantly. "And I thought Caren was to wait outside the palace."

"Oh? Did something get lost in transmission?" The professor smirked and flicked dust from his coat. "Unfortunately, this is a formal request from the Hero, Grand Duchess Alice Alvern. No one in the west of the continent can refuse, except possibly the Dark Lord, so I hope you'll make your peace with it."

The three noblewomen fell silent, although they made no effort to mask their displeasure. Under some circumstances, the Hero outranked emperors and kings.

"I knew my comrade wouldn't let me down!" Tina crowed, hair swaying. She threw in a smug laugh for good measure. "Leave everything to me, sir. I'll protect you."

"If Alice says so, who are we to argue?" Caren stood proudly, ears erect and tail wagging.

The girls bound for the palace said nothing but radiated mana. Flaming plumes, fire flowers, and ice shards spun madly about the field. Anna's manner conveyed a swift "Stop them, if you please," so I clenched my left hand and dispelled the wayward magic. My ability to pick apart spells was improving, if nothing else.

"Th-That hurts, you know?" I ventured when the trio responded by silently jabbing me in the arm. We were getting nowhere fast, so I took two steps back and made myself the very soul of courtesy. "May I suggest my ladies begin with a change of clothes? Anna, if you please. Tina, Caren, may I presume on you to help as well?"

"Leave everything to me!" the head maid crowed. "Now, my ladies, step right this way."

"Of course, sir!"

"I'd be happy to."

Anna, Tina, and Caren herded the grumbling trio toward a nearby tent, leaving me behind with my grinning old mentor.

"You set me up," I said after a moment.

"Hardly. Oh, and as for your guide..."

An azure butterfly of ice circled us and landed on my shoulder. I knew demisprite magic when I saw it.

"She'll show you the way. The eastern cities were one thing, but you don't have leave to fly over the capital." He paused, then added, "Be on your guard. Even in the War of the Dark Lord, the Hero never summoned outsiders to her stronghold in the old church. You can trust Lady Alice and her predecessor, Lady Aurelia, but the House of Alvern isn't so different from any other on the inside."

Politicking over who will be the next Hero, I suppose. Alice complained about that in the café with the sky-blue roof.

"Don't worry," I said, touching the butterfly as I watched my student and my sister follow Lydia, Lily, and Stella with a spring in their step. "I'll have Tina and Caren with me if the worst happens."

"I see," the professor said slowly. "That's that, then."

Luce had finished resting. The griffin spread its wings and flew off with a screech I took for a "See you later."

The professor made himself comfortable on a bit of nearby debris. "Well then, Allen," he said, raising his left hand with his back to me, "I'll visit you at the old church later."

"Till then, Professor," I said. "I hope you'll keep an eye on Lydia and company."

*

"Wow, look at this fog. I wonder what keeps the spell permanently active. The formula is positively ancient, and something about it reminds me of what I saw of Floral Heaven's Maze of Mist in the city of craft," I mused aloud as I walked a narrow track after the icy butterfly. Heavy white fog blanketed the primeval forest on all sides. The glow of my levitating mana lamp seemed cold comfort. I felt as though I'd stepped into *The Old Western Capital in the Mist*, an illustration I recalled from an old picture book.

Who would have guessed I'd find a place like this just north of the imperial capital?

I could picture the diminutive Hero standing proud. "Mm-hmm. You should give me more credit," she seemed to say. She might well have a point.

I repositioned the sword bag slung over my shoulder and reached out to inspect a nearby plant more—

"Don't dillydally!" two voices snapped. Tina and Caren had turned back to point at me in almost perfect unison.

I drew back with a sheepish "S-Sorry."

"Oh, jeez!" The young noblewoman pursed her lips. "You do this every time you spot anything or any spell remotely out of the ordinary!"

"You never change," Caren added, equally disapproving. "You

ought to be enjoying this special moment with your sister."

All of a sudden, I could hear the fog freezing into flakes of ice.

"Would you care to repeat that?" Tina asked, hand on her rod.

"I merely asserted my natural rights as his one and only sister," Caren replied, taking my left arm and leaning her shoulder against it as though nothing could be more natural. She seemed even more eager for attention than usual, perhaps because Lydia wasn't around to challenge her.

"N-Normal sisters don't have any such rights! And besides, you're...you're playing dirty! T-Take your hands off him!" A chill wind tore through the forest, rattling branches as Tina shouted. The mark of Frigid Crane appeared on the back of her right hand.

Caren, however, merely cocked her head in a charming simulation of puzzlement. "What, don't you think you can guard Allen on your own? I thought I could trust you with his safety now, but I suppose I was mistaken. Do forgive me."

"What?! I...I had no idea you thought so well of me." The young noblewoman froze; then a blush colored her cheeks, and a lock of her platinum hair swayed from side to side. Her arsenal of funny faces never failed to soothe my nerves.

Caren must have felt the same, because she briefly stuck out her tongue, then stepped away from me and patted her underclassman on the head. "We'd better pick up the pace, Tina. I wouldn't put it past my brother to start some kind of trouble if we linger."

Tina considered, then gave a start. "Y-You make a good point, Caren. Understood."

"That's better." My sister nodded indulgently and patted the girl's little back.

Something wasn't right. I felt as though I'd had the rug pulled out from under me. "You know," I ventured, "I don't think I'm quite so prone to kicking hornets' nests as—"

"Oh yes you are!" came the emphatic duet, followed by giggles at my shameful groan.

The girls beat me every time, I reflected as my pupil and my sister cheerily strode off. I shifted my burden again and followed them.

How long had we been walking? I didn't know, but the fog had begun to lift. Our butterfly guide launched itself skyward and out of sight. A moment later, a vista opened before us.

Tina and Caren, still walking in the lead, stood stock-still and gasped.

"It's beautiful."

"I don't believe it."

We beheld a vast field of flowers, blooming without regard for the season. It reminded me of the sanctuary in the city of water—the sacred ground I'd given to Lydia. While my companions exclaimed, I studied our surroundings. The sun's position suggested that our walk hadn't taken as long as it had seemed to. A stone-paved path threaded between flower beds toward a structure atop a low hill, which I took for the old Alvern church that the professor had mentioned. I could sense Luce's mana, albeit faintly. Alice must have been inside with the griffin.

I was just about to call to my companions when a storm of petals kicked into a whirlwind, catching all three of us off guard.

"So you've come," snarled the handsome young man who stepped out of it. He had long dark-brown hair and wore purple swordsman's garb. He had teleported, most likely using a talisman like those the apostles were so fond of. Still, I thought that his employed subtler formulae. A sword hung from his belt in a purple scabbard that matched his clothing. He looked a little younger than Lydia, Cheryl, and me, and he glared at me with undisguised hostility, although I felt certain I would have remembered meeting anyone with looks as good as his.

"Good afternoon," I said, raising a hand to halt Tina and Caren, who had already assumed combat stances. "My name is—"

"Allen," the mystery youth spat, resting a hand on the hilt of his sword. "The name of the Hero's brother, the exalted successor to the star, who gave his own life for the world in this godless age. I think I'd better test"—his jet-black eyes narrowed, and he stomped a flower underfoot—"whether the likes of you is fit to bear it!"

He drew his sword and launched himself at me with a vengeance.

A blinding electric flash crackled through the air, scattering petals. That took uncommon mastery over the element of lightning.

Could he be—

"Sir! Get back!" Tina shouted, multi-casting the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances with a sharp swing of her rod. She struck without mercy.

But the youth barked, "Child's play!" and kept charging, carving through the barrage of frozen javelins with his electrified blade. His swordplay was spectacular, but it paled in comparison to my experience of the technique.

I see.

"Don't stand there thinking, Allen!" Caren snapped, girding herself with Lightning Apotheosis. The young man had broken through a wall of ice lances with only his sword and his magically enhanced body, but she whipped out her lightning-wyrm dagger to catch the lunging slash he aimed my way and flung him back into the field with a sharp "That does it!"

While the remains of more blameless flowers filled the air, Tina and Caren kept alert and furious.

"Who are you?" the former demanded.

"That was no feint," said the latter. "I don't know who you are, but I know an enemy when I see one."

Ice crystals and sparks raged, reaching out to surround the young man. Supreme spells were already taking shape on one girl's rod and on the cross-shaped head of the lightning spear that the other had conjured. Their growth delighted me. I couldn't have been happier with it. Their hotheadedness, however, gave cause for misgivings.

Where did I go wrong teaching them? I thought I'd learned my lesson after Lydia and Cheryl.

While I grappled with ambivalence, the ring and bracelet on my right hand twinkled as if to say that I reaped what I sowed. The witch and the angel cut me no slack.

The youth dispelled both ice and lightning with a sweep of his sword. "Can't you do anything but cower behind little girls?" he demanded, clicking his tongue. "There's no way you deserve to be called 'Shooting Star,' but you could at least try to live up to the

legacy."

The response was immediate.

"Watch what you say about my tutor!"

"I'll blast you to cinders for that."

"Tina, Caren." I stopped the pair before they could charge and looked the young man in the eye. I wouldn't fight here, if I could help it. "I'd like to be clear on one point. Are you and Alice—"

"Don't you dare speak her name!" His rage took me aback. A staggering quantity of mana flashed into electricity, covering his body. Like Caren, he had entered Lightning Apotheosis.

"Sir!" Tina cried, while Caren yelled, "Allen, use your ro—"

At nearly the same moment, the young man kicked off the ground so hard he left a dent in it. He became a ray of light that outstripped even sound as it bore down on me...only to stop short when a familiar girlish voice called, "Igna." All his magic scattered to the winds. I couldn't keep a smile from my face.

On the paving stones stood a dainty slip of a girl whose beauty would have been at home in myth. She had tied her long platinum-blonde hair with the gold ribbon I'd given her in the royal capital, and she wore clothes of spotless white. An antique sword—fashioned from a lightning wyrm's fang, or so I'd heard—hung by her side in a glossy black scabbard.

I held up my bag by way of greeting.

"Mm." Alice Alvern, the Hero, nodded and stepped lightly down the path toward me.

"Y-Your Highness?!" The young man hastily sheathed his sword. "Wh-What are you— I thought you had taken to your rest."

The Hero gave no answer. "Move," she said in a tone colder than a far-northern blizzard, brushing the youth aside with a slender hand. Igna paled and bit his lip as she continued straight past him.

Hmm... Why do I find myself remembering our first meeting in the royal capital?

The platinum-blonde beauty disregarded the petrified youth and stopped in front of me. She looked up, and her gaze softened slightly. "Welcome home, Allen. Hug."

Exclamations burst from Tina, Caren, and Igna as she wrapped

her arms around me.



"I don't know if I'd call it 'home,'" I said, scratching my cheek and dispelling a burst of ice and sparks. "Still, it is good to see you again, Alice."

"Even though I'm glad you came home to me?" Alice blinked her big eyes, nonplussed.

H-How am I supposed to say no to that?

While I fumbled for a reply, the lovely Hero stood on tiptoe and reached out a hand. "Mm. You're a good boy," she said, starting to tousle my hair.

That tickles.

"C-Comrade! Get away from him!" Tina shouted, getting over her shock and flying into a panic.

"You too, Allen!" Caren joined in. "Get away from her!"

But Grand Duchess Alice Alvern could even make sport of Lydia. Her eyes commanded me to bend lower. When I complied, she embraced my head and gave a smug chuckle.

She wasn't always such a mischief-maker, I reflected while Tina and Caren did more wailing. *I wonder if Lydia has rubbed off on her.*

"Try not to tease them so much, Alice," I said, hoping to mend bridges. The flowers seemed destined for even greater harm if things kept escalating.

With a contented "Mm-hmm," the platinum-blonde girl finally released me.

"I brought you a souvenir," I said, holding out my bag. "A highly knowledgeable young lady called it a light-wyrm sword. A false goddess used it last, but I hope you'll take it off my hands. It's more than I can handle, and I hear it belonged to your house in the first place, anyway. Now, may I ask why you called me here all the way from the city of craft?"

Alice left my question unanswered, taking the bag in silence. She untied the cord and slowly withdrew a sword in an ebony scabbard.

"You expect us to believe *that* came from a light wyrm?" the young man demanded, incensed by the sight of the battered blade, devoid of its former radiance. "Nonsense! Such things only exist in legend! Do you mean to insult Grand Duchess Alice?!"

"Igna." An icy word from the girl checked his outburst.

"I b-beg your pardon," he said. Still, I sensed no magic in the blade myself.

Alice resheathed the sword and planted her left hand on her hip. "I'll hold on to it," she said gravely. "And I summoned you for a reason loftier than the World Tree and more profound than the Water Dragon Deep."

What could be that important?

I tensed, and so did Tina and Caren. Alice levitated the light-wyrm sword, planted both hands on her hips this time, and stood tall.

"I got a craving for your homemade cheesecake," she said. "I call on you to keep your word!"

We froze in slack-jawed amazement. Only after a few moments did we manage a collective "Pardon?"

I know I promised to make her dessert sometime in the city of water, but she can't be serious. Can she?

I stared hard into the more-than-mortal loveliness of the Hero's face.

"Kidding," she said, grave as ever. "A lady counts playfulness among her accomplishments."

"Alice," I sighed.

Of course. How could I forget her penchant for outrageous statements? I mean, she did *demand that I "teach her love" at our first meeting.*

"I have a serious reason for summoning you." Alice gave a limp-wristed wave. "But I can't say it now. The witness isn't here. I'll tell you when Shise gets back from tuning the lonely demisprite's cell under the palace."

"Shise?" I said.

"A prison under the palace?" murmured Caren.

"And a 'lonely demisprite'?" mused Tina.

We exchanged looks. We'd heard of the second apostle's capture. Now it sounded like Black Blossom was held under the emperor's feet. And his jailer was the legendary Shise Glenbysidhe, called "Floral Heaven." The great sorceress had taught Tina and Stella's mother, Rosa Etherheart, as well as Black Blossom himself, and was

the younger sister of the renowned Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe, the Flower Sage. I also suspected her of deep ties to the mysterious cult of the Great Moon. Arthur had told me something of her in the city of craft, but I had hardly expected to cross paths with her here.

I don't like where this is going, and that includes whatever Alice wants me for.

Alice ignored my misgivings, hugging first Tina and then Caren. "Mm. A little growth, but nothing to worry about." She nodded several times, evidently satisfied. About what, I couldn't imagine.

"Good to see you, comrade, Violet Growly. You'll feel right at home." Alice slipped behind Tina, and the corners of her mouth quirked upward. "Allen will make sure of it. Don't go until my business is done. Stay now, and I'll throw in his home cooking and baking every day."

Tina gasped. "Mr. Allen, waiting on *us*?"

"That doesn't sound so bad," said Caren.

Just like that, Alice had won them over. I smiled in spite of myself. Had they all forgotten that I was a guest here?

The ground shook.

"Your Highness! How can you think of housing the likes of them on sacred—"

Igna had raised his head just in time for a blade of lightning to pass by it, clipping a few long dark-brown hairs. Not one of the flowers behind him came to harm—an astonishing display of magical finesse.

"I allowed it," Alice said dispassionately, brushing her platinum-blonde hair aside. "I won't need a guard while they're here."

Igna's eyes widened. "As you wish. My most humble apologies," he said, forcing the words through trembling lips, then knelt and vanished in another whirl of petals. Our eyes met an instant before he teleported. His betrayed despair and a bottomless envy, directed at me.

I glanced at Alice.

"A relative," she explained. "He comes when Aurelia's out."

According to what Lydia and Cheryl had told me in Lalannoy, the previous Hero, Aurelia Alvern, was currently visiting the royal capital.

It occurred to me that I had never met an Alvern other than Alice before today.

The girl in question secured her hair with a dainty hand, squinting forlornly into the distance. “Igna is the strongest apart from Aurelia and me. But he couldn’t recognize Bright Night, the mate of my Dark Night. Or your strength.”

The girl hailed as quite literally the mightiest person on the continent spoke matter-of-factly. I supposed the professor had been right to say that even grand ducal houses had their problems. And, my own qualities aside, did she mean that the swords formed a pair? Ross Howard had foisted quite a parting gift on me.

Alice scooped up a flower that Igna had trampled. “He can’t carry on the Hero’s legacy. It ends with me.”

The tinge of desolation in her voice left us at a loss for words.

So I’m looking at the last Hero, am I?

Alice glanced at Tina and Caren, who had instinctively latched on to my sleeves, and decided to change to a lighter subject.

“Shise will be back soon. Maybe tomorrow. But first...” She jabbed a fair finger at the tip of my nose. “I want the world’s tastiest coffee and cheesecake. Well? I’m waiting.”

When I met her in the royal capital, she was practically a machine. But now?

A flower-perfumed breeze washed over me as I dropped to one knee and bowed. “My lady’s wish is my command.”

“Mm-hmm!”

*

Scorch marks marred the opulent splendor of the imperial palace. The skeletal dragons must have done more damage than I’d imagined, and over a far wider area. Could that explain the lack of guards? Hardly likely for an audience with the emperor, even an unofficial one. Marble, polished to a mirror shine, gave me a view of myself in my white-and-azure dress.

I would really rather have gone to Alice’s house with Mr. Allen. Tina and Caren must be having such fun chatting with her by now.

I was still fretting when the professor raised his left hand. He had been walking ahead of us this whole time, explaining the affairs of the court.

"So you see," he said, "I'm having Graham, Anna, Mina, and the other maids investigate the source of the artifacts used to summon the skeletal dragons. The Hero and Stella utterly annihilated the one that appeared at Rostlay, and Allen did the same for another in the city of water. This time, however, they lavished three of the constructs on us, so a few scraps survived. We have plans to interrogate Black Blossom as well."

"Oh really?" Lydia, in a dress of bright scarlet, evinced little interest.

Lily, who wore a lighter shade, kept uncharacteristically quiet, her gaze roving nervously.

I do sympathize. But you must forgive me! We drew lots to choose who will greet the emperor, and you lost.

While I made my mental apologies, I ventured a hesitant correction out loud. "Professor, *Alice* defeated that skeletal dragon. I didn't do a thing."

"Stella, every person in the empire knows that you cleansed all of Rostlay," he said. "I'm pleased that you take after Allen, but don't emulate his few faults."

"Oh, well, th-thank you," I said, although I could hardly believe my ears.

Every person in the empire? O-Oh dear. Perhaps Mr. Allen can advise me.

Meanwhile, the end of the corridor came into view. A lone young knight stood, fully armed, before a door I took to be steel. It seemed that the professor had been right to suppose that we would see the emperor in his private courtyard rather than his audience chamber.

"Carl," the professor said. "Thank you for troubling yourself on our account."

"Sir!" The knight saluted and touched the door. An intricate spell formula appeared, and it swung open without a sound.

"Here we are," the professor announced. "Which of you will be paying our respects to His Imperial Majesty?"

"Lily," Lydia and I answered without hesitation.

Satisfied, the professor stepped into the sun-dappled courtyard, and we followed him.

"Oh, h-how did I end up in this fix?" Lily grumbled, bringing up the rear. Given the occasion, I decided to forgive her breach of etiquette.

The courtyard seemed far plainer and far older than I'd expected. Moss grew on the stone roof and the eight pillars that supported it. Small birds darted to and fro among a haphazard profusion of trees. An elderly knight awaited us near its center, muscular despite his gray hair, an enchanted sword belted over his uniform. He was no common soldier.

"Moss," the professor called brightly. "So sorry to keep you."

Could this be Moss Saxe? The imperial grand marshal?

"We've been expecting you, Professor." The aged knight smiled. "Allow me to thank you again for your assistance the other day. Our people suffered no deaths—a miracle you made possible. Might your lovely companions be...?"

"Daughters of our kingdom's dukes. They've come to pay their respects to His Imperial Majesty, as I informed you."

Lydia seemed busy inspecting the old stone columns, and Lily held her peace, so I gave a flustered nod. I feared the venerable campaigner would think us rude. If he did, he gave no sign, merely stroking his white-bearded chin.

"We've had word from the cities they passed, but I'm relieved to see they've arrived safely," he said. "His Imperial Majesty might be taking his rest at this time, but oh well. He won't mind. This way, please."

The reports I'd read made Moss over seventy, but I would never have guessed it from the way he strode off into the heart of the courtyard. I permitted myself a sigh of relief.

Honestly! Can't Lydia and Lily remember their manners without Mr. Allen around to watch them?

I cast a withering glance at my scarlet-haired peers, who showed no sign of reform.

"You've probably guessed," the professor whispered in my ear,

“but that’s Grand Marshal Moss Saxe. The sword is his famous Castle Breaker. He’s crossed blades with no lesser warrior than Heaven’s Sword on more than one battlefield.”

“You mean he held his own against Arthur?” I whispered back, startled. I hadn’t seen the blond champion of Lalannoy fight seriously with my own eyes, but his prowess was beyond doubt. Recalling how Mr. Allen had sung his praises on our flight to the empire, I couldn’t suppress a twinge of jealousy. The aged knight striding ahead of us must have been a Yustinian champion in his own right.

“Your Imperial Majesty!” Moss boomed as we followed a stone path. “Emperor Yuri Yustin! Where are you?!”

While startled birds took flight en masse, a chair in the courtyard’s center turned. In it sat a little old man, formally dressed.

“We can hear you, Moss,” he said. “You needn’t bellow every single time. The fright will shave years off our life. But wait. Perhaps that has its benefits. We could cede our throne to Yana so much more easily with one foot in the grave.”

“I regret to inform you, sire, that I have been lacing your tea with an even more potent longevity elixir than before,” said the grand marshal.

“A-Again?! Again our minds run in parallel?!”

“I shall retire before death claims me. Fortunately, my son shows promise.”

“N-Nonsense! We shall never allow it!”

The two old men went on arguing as though we weren’t there. They certainly didn’t *look* like people who had brought an end to bloody civil wars and only recently purged much of the empire’s nobility—including its crown prince.

“Have you ever seen better friends?” the professor said, noting my astonishment.

At once, all movement ceased. The aged emperor waited until Moss had taken up a position behind him, then made a sweeping gesture with his wizened left hand.

“Humph. So you’ve come too, Professor,” he said. “And bearing unwelcome news, we don’t doubt.”

"Please don't be so cold, sire. You know me better than that," the professor replied, unruffled, and produced a slender volume from an inner pocket. "Oh, but I have brought the first edition of the guide you commissioned: *Confectioners of the Imperial Capital*. For your inspection."

Is this *how he's been spending his time as our envoy?*

"You scheming spell-weaver!" the emperor spat, even as he accepted the booklet. "Now, what do you want?"

"Lily," the professor said.

"Of course." The older of my scarlet-haired peers stepped forward at the sound of her name. Lydia, who had evidently finished her inspection, mouthed something behind her.

"I should have brought a video orb"? Oh, honestly!

While I shot Lydia a reproving look, Lily launched into a most elegant greeting.

"It is a pleasure to make Your Imperial Majesty's acquaintance. I am Lily, eldest daughter of Under-duke Leinster. I hope you will permit me to express my most sincere gratitude for granting us leave to enter your lands and to cross them by air on such short notice. My master bids me convey the same."

Lydia and I gasped. She was startled out of her complacency, and I, out of my relief at not having to speak.

D-Did she just say her "master"? Sh-She can't mean...

The old emperor arched an eyebrow. "Your 'master'?"

"Yes!" Lily chirped, puffing out her imposing chest. "I've dedicated myself to Al—"

"Not another word," Lydia said as we clamped our hands over her mouth.

"We'll have words later," I added, securing Lily with icy vines—sans thorns, of course. Informal audience or not, some claims were not to be tolerated.

We made our introductions to the nonplussed old emperor as though nothing had happened.

"Lydia, eldest daughter of Duke and Duchess Leinster. Forget my cousin's ravings. She's not well."

"Stella, eldest daughter of Duke Howard. I fear Lily is suffering

fatigue from our journey."

A pleasant northern breeze blew past us, carrying only the laments of a traitor. "M-My ladies, how could you?" she wailed, but I hardened my heart against her.

The old emperor touched his brow and let slip an amused chuckle. The professor and the grand marshal shrugged, no doubt used to such things.

"So, you are the renowned Lady of the Sword and the 'saint' fast drawing a following in our realm," the emperor said. "We wondered, but a visit from *three* daughters of dukes seemed too improbable. See what we get for living too long?"

"M-Me, a saint?" I was nothing so grand. Even my purifying spells were really Mr. Allen's handiwork. But before I could venture to set the record straight, the professor interjected.

"Four, actually. Duke Howard's younger daughter, Tina, has gone ahead to the old church at the Hero's request."

"Where is the sport in tormenting an old man, sorcerer? *Four* daughters of dukes? Why, it's unheard of." The old emperor leaned back in his chair, then made his own introduction. "We are Yuri Yustin. Our empire and your kingdom are now allies, so we shall make you welcome during your stay in our capital."

I felt myself relax. We had paid all the respects we needed to for the time being. Lily seemed pleased as well—she had freed herself from my vines and now laid her hands on my shoulders. I started turning toward Lydia to—

"Now, when will we have a chance to meet the rest of you?" the old emperor asked. "Our reports mention four griffins. Even accounting for the younger Howard, the numbers don't add up."

I froze. Tina was one thing, but I'd never dreamed that anyone here would ask after Mr. Allen and Caren. Neither, apparently, had Lily. Even behind me, she couldn't mask her confusion.

"I'd like to clarify one point first." The professor held up his left index finger and turned back to the grand marshal. "Moss, may a foreign subject without title or office set foot in the palace?"

There it is. That's the problem. Caren is a marvel, and Mr. Allen goes without saying, but they're both of the wolf clan. Most

countries bar beastfolk and the houseless from occasions of state. I doubt the empire is an exception.

Sure enough, the grand marshal frowned and folded his barrel-like arms. "They may not."

A chill pervaded the air.

I knew it.

Then the old emperor snorted. "They're guests of the Hero, are they not?" he demanded, tapping impatiently on the arm of his chair. "Why invent difficulties?"

"The donkeys will start braying again," warned Moss.

Lily and I exchanged looks that spoke volumes. It seemed that our kingdom wasn't the only nation troubled by a hidebound old guard.

"Let them," the emperor said flatly, donning a pair of spectacles from his table. "It may help smoke out a few nincompoops who managed to keep their heads down through the last purge. If you *must* give a public reason, then... Yes, say that they're to witness Black Blossom's interrogation in our spell-gaol. Of course, he may well die before the opportunity arises. If it must wait, say that we wish to question them about affairs in the city of craft, now that it's fallen so inexplicably silent."

I gave a start. The second apostle, at death's door? The demisprite sorcerer had stormed the Fortress of Seven Towers and assassinated its commander, the famed Robson Atlas of the Principality of Atlas, single-handed. What could have reduced him to such a state? And when had the Lalannoyan capital gone silent? What could have caused that? My mind was awhirl with questions.

I must tell Mr. Allen.

Meanwhile, the old emperor leafed through his new booklet. "We hear so much about this 'Brain of the Lady of the Sword'—or the new Shooting Star, as we believe they now call him," he said offhandedly. "We have often thought how we would like to see him face-to-face before we die. His adoptive sister the 'lightning wolf' intrigues us as well. A reversion to her ancestors, apparently."

Lily and I goggled.

"Well now," Lydia murmured as her gaze turned sharp.

The emperor knows all about Mr. Allen! And he's investigated Caren too!

"I think you'll need something more to tempt him." The professor shook his head. "He digs his heels in when his sister is involved."

He had a point. Mr. Allen cared deeply for Caren. In fact, I sometimes suspected him of being a little overprotective. If the emperor invited him to the palace without her, he would certainly refuse.

The emperor pondered, jotting notes in his booklet. "In that case __"

"What about this place?" Lydia suddenly cut in. The mark of Blazing Qilin blazed on her right hand as she steadied her scarlet locks with it and bluntly confronted the emperor. "It's overgrown, and the details don't match, but I've seen something like it in our southern capital. How do you explain that?"

A place like this in the southern capital? She can't mean...

Lily nodded and mouthed the answer: "The ruined chapel Lady Lynne is off investigating."

The booklet slammed shut, and the old emperor stared Lydia in the eye. "The Eight Great Elementals and the Eight Heresies," he said.

Even the professor looked shocked. The elementals I knew—Atra and her little friends. But what on earth were the "Eight Heresies"? Lydia, Lily, and I looked at each other. Belatedly, I remembered that Yuri Yustin had ruled a vast land plagued by internal divisions and external threats for more than fifty years. He was an extraordinary man, and not to be underestimated.

"Relay those words to Allen of the wolf clan," he continued languidly. "He'll wish to speak with us in person *then*. Oh, and see that he comes to court suitably attired. His sister too. We appreciate your efforts on our behalf. All but Moss may leave us."

*

Once a spell-stone of fire brought the griddle to temperature, I poured pale-golden batter—a mixture of flour, eggs, milk, and sugar

briefly rested in the icebox—onto its round, butter-coated surface in a clockwise motion. Left to sit, it would soon burn, so I set about shaping a circle of batter with a spreader tailor-made for the purpose. I had never seen one outside of the royal capital's bazaars.

I still can't believe that the old church can fit so many rooms and such a fine kitchen, but anything seems plausible next to me making crepes in the emperor's backyard. And is it me, or was this copper griddle made to order?

Perhaps the previous Hero, Lady Aurelia, liked to cook. She *had* gone to the trouble of leaving us a pair of aprons with note cards reading "for Allen" and "for Caren."

An appreciative "*ooh*" rose from Alice and Tina. Both had changed into everyday clothes with beast-eared hoods—another of Lady Aurelia's gifts. Beside me, an aproned Caren smiled tenderly at our audience while she prepared ingredients. Outside the window, Luce lay curled up in the shade of a tree, deep in pleasant slumber.

Ah, peace.

Alice's cheesecake would have to wait until at least the next day—we had run short of the vital ingredient that gave the dessert its name. Still, I congratulated myself that crepes might turn out to be just the thing for this gathering. The edges of the batter looked done, so I flipped it with a long, thin wooden spatula.

Tina and Alice cheered.

"They smell delightful, sir!"

"Was that magic? What spell?"

"No magic, Alice," I said. "I've just had a little practice." The batter had cooked through, so I swiftly transferred it to a plate and set that to one side.

"Caren, if you please," I added, coating the griddle in fresh butter and starting a second crepe.

"Of course." Beside me, Caren went to work with her own slim wooden spatula, folding the fresh-cooked crepe into a neat triangle. We often made them at my lodgings in the royal capital. Honey, jam, preserved fruits, fresh cream, candied walnuts, and more stood ready on the table.

"Now, what would you like?" my sister asked, with a confident

grin. “I’ll add anything you care to name—including ice cream.”

Tina groaned. “What a conundrum.”

“A real puzzle,” Alice agreed, equally grave, and they launched into a debate.

Lady Aurelia really must *be fond of cooking*, I reflected as I kept the crepes coming. Then I felt something latch on to my legs and looked down.

“Allen!” A fox-eared little girl with long white hair beamed up at me. Her companion wore an identical white dress, had pale feathers poking through her azure locks, and looked a little uneasy.

Awake at last.

“Good morning, Atra, Lena,” I said, plating a second circle. “We’re making crepes now. Would you like some?”

“Sweet things? Yes!” Atra jumped for joy.

“Oh, I d-don’t know.” Lena twiddled her fingers, sneaking furtive glances. I could feel my worries melt away.

Alice left Tina still deliberating to stare, cocking her head first to one side, then to the other. At last she gave a soft clap. “The Thunder Fox and the Frigid Crane. Allen?”

“Yes?” I said, starting crepe number three. They did smell scrumptious.

Alice took a step toward the children, fingers wiggling. “Details later,” she said. “Can I pet them?”

The children froze, then took shelter. Only their heads poked from the cover of my legs.

I flipped the crepe, then turned to give the Hero a light chop on her platinum-blonde noggin. “No, you may not.”

“Th-That should go without saying,” humphed Lena, while Atra sang a note of relief.

“Hmph. Then I’ll make do with Violet Growly’s ears and tail for now.”

“Kindly don’t make me your fallback plan,” Caren said with some asperity, returning from the icebox with a glass container of ice cream. Deftly adorning a crepe with the frozen dessert, candied walnuts, and mint, she added a final warning. “Or would you prefer yours plain?”

The Hero quailed, so shaken that her hair swayed. She cast a beseeching look at Tina. “Perfection!” the young noblewoman declared, too caught up in her own crepe to notice.

Alice let her shoulders droop and closed her eyes. “Honey and wild strawberries.”

“That’s better. Now sit down,” said Caren. “Atra, Lena, show me what you’d like on yours.”

“I...I’m not really hungry,” Lena demurred beside an eager Atra. “But if you insist...”

What can’t *my sister do?*

Alice watched the great elementals make their selections as she retreated to a wooden chair. “Allen won’t let me have anything,” she grumbled, poking Tina’s cheek. “You haven’t raised him right, Comrade.”

“I object,” said Tina. “Mr. Allen has had a mean streak as long as I’ve known him.”

“Hmph. Fair point. He was mean to me in the royal capital.”

“What’s this? It almost sounds as though the two of you don’t realize who’s making your crepes.” I wiped the copper griddle with a white cloth, then flicked my wrist, adding mana to the spell-stone. “You know, I feel awfully tired. I think I might not make seconds.”

“A-Allen, how could you?” the Hero demanded, knife and fork in hand.

“Y-You never play fair, sir!” grumbled the noblewoman. Yet all protest died the moment they started eating. Fortunately my handiwork seemed to meet with their approval.

I lifted the teapot and started pouring.

“Bam! Bam!” Atra cheered as Caren’s spatula folded another crepe.

“Well done, young lightning wolf,” said Lena. “I desire that white and fluffy substance there.”

Adorable.

Tina was happily lifting a bite to her mouth when she spotted a little glass bottle on the table and set her fork on her plate. “Wait, I know this honey.”

Alice sipped her tea, murmured, “Passable,” and returned her cup

to its saucer before answering. “Made in Galois. I ordered it from your duchy. I told the emperor to try some too.”

Tina had told me about the honey she was helping to develop in the north.

“Comrade! Oh, thank you!” the platinum-haired noblewoman cried, trembling with delight, then eagerly threw her arms around the Hero beside her.

“That tickles,” Alice groused. “I only said what I thought.”

Two more plates had reached the table, so I levitated Atra and Lena into chairs. The children, unable to contain themselves, set upon the ice-cream- and fresh-cream-laden crepes at once.

“I’m glad to see you getting along so well, Tina, Alice,” I said, pouring fresh batter onto the griddle. “What will you have, Caren?”

A delicate hand darted in before I could use the spreader, creating a thin, perfect circle. “Since you asked,” its owner said, “I’ll let you choose for me.”

“As you wish. How about something a little more grown-up?” I plated the freshly cooked crepe and folded it, but into a square with a divot in its center, not a triangle. I dressed it with unsalted butter and honey and finished with a pinch of salt.

Tina and Alice blinked in surprise, although they didn’t stop hugging.

“Salt, sir?”

“Is it good?”

“We’ll have to ask Caren,” I said. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you, Allen.” My sister briskly removed her apron and took a chair. She cut her crepe with a knife and fork, then took an elegant bite. A gentle smile spread across her face.

“Delicious,” she said. “The best ever.”

“You love to exaggerate,” I demurred, pouring tea into a spare cup and cutting a thin wedge of fresh citrus to garnish it. “You have crepes all the time in the royal capital.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Is it, though?”

“Yes, it is.” Caren primly sipped her tea and gave her ears an emphatic twitch.

Tina and Alice had already finished their first crepes and resumed their deliberations. I overheard "What shall we try next?" and "Want to share whatever looks good?" They certainly thought alike.

Lydia and the others should be here any moment now.

I was wiping Atra's and Lena's mouths with a white napkin when, out in the garden, Luce looked up as a girl landed. Gravity seemed to have no hold on her, but she had a tired look. A jade-green ribbon secured her long lavender hair, crowned with a floral beret. To my consternation, she wore a Royal Academy uniform. Her mana marked her as a demisprite.

The girl stroked Luce's long neck, then opened the door and stepped inside. There she came to a sudden stop and locked eyes with Alice.

"Visitors?" she asked in a gruff tone that belied her youthful appearance. "Where'd you find such an odd bunch of—"

The newcomer fell silent in mid-question, staring at...Tina. She removed her beret and squeezed it in both hands as she began to shake. Hardly a normal reaction.

"Y-You," she mumbled. "But y-you can't be..."

Tina and Caren rose, looking as confused as I felt, and stood beside me.

"Excuse me. Can I help you with—"

The young noblewoman's question ended in a shriek. The girl vanished—then she was hugging Tina. Her beret fell a moment later. She had teleported with a precision that beggared belief.

"Rosa! Rosa! Rosa!" the newcomer wailed. "Forgive me. Please, forgive me. If I hadn't been such...such an unutterable fool, you would never have died. You *should* never have died. Oh why, *why* did I ever talk to you about succession?"

She sobbed for some time before she at last fell silent.

"She fell asleep," Tina murmured, holding her.

Caren and I looked conflicted but said nothing. I levitated the girl onto a sofa before seeking confirmation.

"Alice?"

"Mm-hmm. Shise Glenbysidhe," the Hero replied.

"A sprite?" Atra chimed in.

"She takes after her ancestors, no doubt," Lena added.

Do they mean she's not a demi*sprite?*

"She must have mistaken my comrade for her student," Alice murmured sadly, eyes narrowing. "Rosa Etherheart, the Lady of Ice. She still takes up a big part of Shise's thoughts."

Tina's fingers tightened on my left sleeve. "She thought I was mother?" she asked, big eyes widening.

"She showed me a video orb from their travels, just once," Alice answered. "Rosa looked a lot like you."

"Did she really?" The noblewoman's platinum-haired head drooped, and she buried her face in my arm. Her little shoulders shook. I couldn't blame her, after she'd had her late mother's name sprung on her like that.

"She's been busy keeping Black Blossom alive lately." Alice sounded shrewd as she sized up additions to her next crepe. "We can't get anything out of him if he dies. She needs two or three days of sleep. The fake Sage and the fake Crescent Moon abandoned poor Black Blossom and ran."

"I understand," I said. The two highest-ranking apostles and the fearsome vampiress I'd encountered in the city of water must have constituted the greatest force our enemies could commit without abandoning the war in Lalannoy. Yet they had still found themselves hard-pressed against the Hero and Floral Heaven. And those "fakes" gave me food for thought.

Alice finished her tea and sullenly propped her head on her hand. "Here already," she grumbled. "Leave it to the scarlet crybaby."

"Pardon?" I said as the wooden door to the hallway flew open. Caren and I looked up. Tina dried her eyes and followed suit.

"Allen! Lia here! For dessert!"

A beast-eared girl with long scarlet hair burst into the room. Lia, the great elemental Blazing Qilin, wore white just like Atra and Lena. Hot on her heels, I heard young women talking in the corridor.

"Talk about tense," one said, with a sigh. "Maybe I should take him shopping in the city tomorrow."

"Lady Lydia, at least *try* to be fair," said another. "*I* did most of the talking, so if anyone goes shopping, it should be—"

"You also tried to steal a march on us, Lily," interrupted a third. "Your crimes and contributions cancel out."

"H-Have a heart, Lady Stella!"

Just like that, the gloom dispersed. Alice gave a little left-handed wave.

I guess we're done here, especially with Shise sound asleep.

Tina nodded to me, looking relieved. She had gained so much strength, mentally as well as magically. Girls never ceased to amaze me.

Watching Lia frolic with Atra and Lena, I gave my sister a wink. "Would you mind helping me whip up a few more crepes, Caren?"

"Of course not, Allen."

*

"I've lost track of Io's mana," muttered Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield. The "Sage" had been performing long-distance detection from the edge of an old township outside the imperial capital, where the forest devoured streets abandoned during the civil wars. His hooded, azure-trimmed robe hung in tatters. Even his wooden staff bore deep wounds.

I, Alicia Coalfield, the one and only partner—romantic and otherwise—of the great Shooting Star, watched him from my seat on a nearby heap of rubble, closed parasol in hand.

"Floral Heaven's doing, I suppose," I said. "I suspect she's reinforced the palace barrier, so I don't believe he's dead."

Two days earlier, Aster, Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield, and I had set three skeletal dragons on the imperial palace while we launched a surprise attack on the Hero's home in the old church. Our objective: a forbidden tome of the Bibliophage, the first ever to break the Star Oath and revive the dead. The Hero wielded powers from the age of gods, making her a force to rival the Dark Lord and the seven dragons even in these days of magical decline, but our intelligence had indicated that she would be away from home. If only she had been, we would have succeeded. But no, she had routed us. We had been played for fools.

I had not spent more than two hundred years a vampiress without knowing defeat. Still, those two heirs to musty old titles stood in a class of their own. I couldn't begin to count how many times they had forced me to regrow a limb lost to a blade, lightning bolt, or razor-sharp plant. Judging our odds unfavorable, we had managed to extricate ourselves—except for Io, who had refused to flee in the face of his erstwhile mentor and gotten himself captured.

"So, Aster, what shall we do about it?" I asked, touching a crescent earring.

"The two of us could rescue Io," the man said, looking even grimmer than usual. "But one of us would likely perish in the attempt. Yes, even if the Hero stays out of it. The palace is crawling with Howard and Leinster agents led by the Abyss and the Angel of Death, in addition to the Castle Breaker, his elite guards, and worst of all, the professor. And if the capricious Floral Heaven gets involved... It's not worth the risk. We would need more people, but the Lalannoyan contingent have completed their missions and withdrawn to the pontiff's domain."

"And you already used those dragon bones," I added.

Aster frowned under his hood and dismissed his tracking spell. "I would not hesitate to give up my life for our ultimate goal," he said, turning on his heel and starting down a night-dark track. "But our immediate goal, the Bibliophage's tome, has eluded us. It is time we withdrew. I didn't anticipate an encounter with the Hero, but it allowed me to ascertain Alice Alvern's *condition*. That will suffice."

"Then we'll abandon Io to his fate?" I asked. "I wouldn't call him bright, but he does work hard."

The second apostle was an endearing boy. He also had considerable skill with magic and a head for plotting. With his teleportation magic, he had raced to and fro across the continent, contributing invaluable reconnaissance, raids, and assassinations to our cause. Yet deep down, a part of him had never grown up. It was why he had been unable to ignore Floral Heaven's challenge—why he had tried to fend off the Hero's lightning. If not for that, he could really have become "the greatest sorcerer of the continent," as he was so fond of calling himself.

"I'll admit he served us well. He made a fitting second apostle...and a convenient pawn," Aster replied without feeling. He stopped and waved his staff, and a magical design like a flower appeared in the air. "But I've already completed my copy of Phantasmal Falling Star-Blossom, the strategic teleportation spell that the demisprites guard so closely. Its scope and precision fall short of the original, but it will suffice for the present. Alicia, you will take his place as second apostle. And remember that Io is a seasoned sorcerer in his own right. He stands every chance of escaping that lightless spell-gaol without our help, remnant of the divine age though it is. He might even wipe the city from the map if he rages without stopping to worry what will become of him. He bears the brand of Stone Serpent along with the great spells, and he carries a piece of the Great Tree's most ancient bud from the royal capital embedded in his heart."

"Well, I've no particular objection to taking his place. Still." I let my words trail off, twirling my black parasol.

Aster looked back at me. "Do my orders displease you?"

"Not at all. Only, I don't see why you're in such a hurry. Has something gone wrong in Lalannoy?" I said, raising the brim of my black hat. The question had been plaguing me for the past several days.

A brief silence followed. I saw Aster's stony face twist with displeasure in the hazy glow of mana.

"Heaven's Sword, Arthur Lothringen, has gone missing," he said. "I suspect he is...no longer among the living."

That explains it. I would panic too, if I were him.

We could perhaps have exploited the unrest we'd stirred up in Lalannoy to eliminate the champion. But Aster wouldn't hear of it. He had preserved Heaven's Sword for a future sacrifice, contending that no one and nothing in the west of the continent would serve better than a scion of the Lothringens.

"Goodness," I said. "The champion who slew old Idris? I suppose there really is always someone better."

Aster's scowl deepened. "We should be going," he said and stepped through his magic circle.

I opened my parasol and squinted back over my shoulder at the imperial capital. “So long, my brave, foolish little demisprite,” I murmured. “I hope you put up quite a fight. Truly I do. If we meet again, you may grouse and grumble all you like. And then...I’ll tell you something not even the prime apostle knows, something to do with the *other* great elemental you believe you branded yourself with.”

A chill night breeze gusted from the north, and my words vanished, swallowed by the still darkness.

Chapter 2

"They should be here any minute."

I set my bird-patterned teacup on its saucer and breathed a nervous sigh. I would be representing my dear brother today, albeit only in informal talks. After much deliberation, I had chosen a martial ensemble, but perhaps I should have worried less and gone with something more casual.

At least the weather is nice, I reflected, straightening my red hair and gazing up at the sky. *The birds singing in the garden seem happy with it.*

Winter had yet to touch the southern capital. I could—and had—set a table and chairs out of doors without feeling a chill. My dear brother would need a coat away north in the Yustinian Empire, as would my friend Ellie in the royal capital. I had better pack one for my return journey.

While I contemplated anything but my immediate reality, a maid with long milky-white hair sauntered up, teapot in hand.

"Relax, Lady Lynne," chirped Cindy, the Leinster Maid Corps's number six. "How would you like another cup?"

"Fairly well," I answered stiffly.

"Here you go, then!" Hot black tea splashed into my cup.

A month or so had passed since I'd returned to my family home, tasked to investigate the ruins of a chapel to the Great Moon on my dear brother's behalf. Then, spurred by reports of unrest in Lalannoy, I had consulted Else, president of the Skyhawk Company, in a local café and obtained a loan of precious black courier griffins. In exchange, I was to connect her with Allen & Co., as my house's joint commercial venture with the Howards was generally known. I had yet to inform my dear brother of the arrangement but felt certain, reasonably confident, or at least hopeful that he would approve. His head clerk, Felicia, would dance for joy.

On a more personal note, Else had also proposed we pool our efforts concerning the cult of the Great Moon. However...

"I can understand Teto's group racing back to the royal capital as soon as their guard duties were done," I murmured, bringing a hand to my cheek. "They couldn't very well ignore the professor's instructions. But what are we to do without the Nitti brothers? To be frank, I don't have the brains to puzzle out how this all connects or why. Perhaps I should ask Sida to join us."

The maid in training was a devotee of the Great Moon, and seeing her perpetual state of panic might help me maintain my own composure.

"But Mr. Allen will have *such* good things to say about you if you manage to strike a good deal," Cindy pointed out, snagging a bird-shaped cookie from the tea tray. "'Oh, thank you, Lynne! However can I repay you?'"

"Stop impersonating my dear brother," I said. "You sound nothing like him."

"Aw, come on."



The communication orb on the table flashed, cutting our chitchat short.

"L-Lady Lynne," a voice said, "your guests have arrived."

"Thank you, Sida. Tell Saki too," I replied, reigniting my resolve. Soon, I would speak to the person who had come closer to the Church of the Holy Spirit's dark secrets than anyone else alive.

Stormy footfalls heralded the first arrival, a finely dressed man with dirty-blond hair. I recognized Carlyle Carnien, the marchese who had betrayed the League of Principalities and aided the church for the sake of his bedridden wife. He had supposedly been avoiding the public eye since the upheaval in the city of water.

"Your Highness!" he barked, striding up beside me. "My wife is still convalescing. I insist that I be allowed to accompany—"

"Oh, dear!" called a woman's voice.

Saki—a bird-clan maid and, with Cindy, the corps's joint number six—appeared supporting a woman with aquamarine hair, leaning on a cane as she hurried after the marchese. The stranger's emaciated limbs seemed in danger of snapping at any moment, and what skin her long-sleeved garments showed had a sickly pallor. Marchesa Carlotta Carnien had paid for touching dark secrets of the church with a protracted coma, the result of an incurable curse. My dear brother's analysis had saved her life.

The marchesa took the irate Carlyle gently by the hand. "I'll be fine," she said. "I'm not important enough for the church to bother coming after me anymore. But thank you so much for thinking of me."

"Carlotta." The marchese held his wife's hand as though afraid he might break it, then seated her on a nearby sofa before I could offer to help. Then he bowed deeply to me, significantly his junior. "Please, Your Highness. My wife is in your care."

"On the honor of the Ducal House of Leinster," I said, "no harm will come to her."

Marchese Carnien withdrew with a look of heartfelt relief. I could appreciate the feelings of a nobleman who had sacrificed everything to aid the woman he loved.

Once I sat alone with the marchesa, introductions were in order.

"I am Lynne, second daughter of Duke and Duchess Leinster."

"And I am Carlotta, wife of Marchese Carlyle Carnien."

I poured tea into a spare cup as Saki and Cindy had taught me. "My sincere apologies for asking you to travel so far from the city of water," I said as the fragrance of leaves grown in the southern principalities wafted over us.

"Teto and her companions were a great help, and I've always wanted to make a train journey," the marchesa demurred. She seemed bolder than I'd expected. I thought that she and Else might hit it off.

"Would you like to touch our griffins later?" I offered, only partly out of courtesy.

"I'd love to!" Carlotta seized my hand, eyes shining.

So, this is the great lady who dared the dark side of the church alone, I tried to tell myself, but I couldn't help feeling disconcerted. *It's like I'm talking to Tina.*

Recalling my friend journeying in the distant empire, I opened my notebook and took up a pen. "Carlotta, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Of course, Your Highness," Carlotta said. "I'll tell you everything I know."

Saki and Cindy ringed us in many-layered wards of silence. I nodded to the marchesa, and she continued.

"I began by researching the ancient history of the city of water, mostly to satisfy my own curiosity. Legends like the tragic love of the principe and the great elemental Marine Crocodile or the Great Tree said to have grown in the city. In the process, I uncovered the church's schemes to use the great elementals for evil. I ultimately traced them to the self-proclaimed Saint and her eight apostles."

"Eight?" I repeated slowly. "Are you including the false Saint herself?" We had already identified the ranking apostles by name, and they numbered only seven.

"No." Carlotta shook her head emphatically. "Eight excluding the false Saint, the Kokonoe swordswoman she took under her wing, and the artificial vampiress. I'm certain of that. I found it in a pontiff's journal roughly two centuries old."

"Two hundred years ago? You mean the order of apostles dates back that far?" I asked, so stunned that I forgot to take notes. No history book mentioned any such thing. "I'm amazed you were able to find records. I've heard that the pontificate keeps its papers under lock and key."

"I have my ways," the marchesa replied, allowing her intellect to shine through for a moment. "The Church of the Holy Spirit can do as it pleases out east, but not so much in the commonwealth or the Thirteen Free Cities. And being married to a lineal descendant of the principe's own House of Primavera opens doors in both countries. My, these cookies are delightful."

She used Carlyle's name, then?

"Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield betrayed the cult of the Great Moon, an esoteric eastern religion," Carlotta continued casually, as though she were not divulging secrets. "They call him 'the Apostate.' I never learned how he won over the church, but I believe he had a hand in a major incident that took place in your royal capital and the southern isles roughly a century ago."

I gasped.

A "major incident" that spanned both countries? Could it be?

Carlotta added milk and sugar to her tea and leaned back in her seat. "I don't know where or when he met the false Saint either," she said. "But I do know she cursed the royal capital with 'ten-day fever' fourteen years ago."

"I had no idea you'd uncovered so much," I said, head spinning. "But how can you be certain?"

"Because I saw." A glimmer of fear crept into Carlotta Carnien's eyes. "The Carniens keep a private archive in the old city, and I found the formula it was based on there—a petrifying spell from the age of gods. It requires the aid of the Stone Serpent, and only one being in the west of the continent can invoke that great elemental's power. Only the false Saint. Most of her miracles are genuine. She's cured children of untreatable illnesses, cleansed lands of deadly poison, and turned barren ground to flowering fields in a single night. But I suspect Your Highness knows more of the great elementals than I do."

"I might," I admitted, though I couldn't very well tell her that at least two of them accompanied my dear brother in the guise of children. She would never believe me, for one thing.

Carlotta added yet more sugar to her tea and finished her cup. "My ancestor the first principe, the calamitous Bibliophage, and the founder of the cult of the Great Moon created the archetype of ten-day fever. They meant it as a deterrent against war. The cult seems to have taken charge of it ever since. As for why it was used in the royal capital... I'm sorry. I never found out."

I resisted the urge to tear my hair out.

Dear brother, I knew I didn't have the brains to make sense of the big picture!

While a breeze ruffled my hair instead, a question tumbled unbidden from my lips.

"Carlotta, what led you to start investigating the church and the false Saint?"

The marchesa dipped a cookie in tea and took a bite. "Simple curiosity at first. I've always loved reading. The biggest reasons were my discoveries about ten-day fever and a message from the distant past."

"What kind of message?" I asked, nonplussed.

"I found a scrap of paper tucked between the pages of a banned book I read in the Carnien archive," Carlotta explained brightly. "'My descendant reading this,' it said, 'I pray that you will do your duty. Do not make the gentle Marine Crocodile weep.' I believe the first principe wrote it. I have a few drops of Primavera blood in my veins too, you see."

I blinked. "That's all?"

"Yes, that's all. If I wanted to make it sound grander, I could say — Easy does it." Carlotta raised herself and took a few steps with the aid of her cane. Turning, she pressed a bony hand to her heart and said, "Carlotta Carnien learned the meaning of honor."

I saw plainly why the false Saint had singled her out as a threat. Like my dear brother, Carlotta would maintain her common decency in the face of any hardship. Having experienced war, I could now appreciate what a feat that was.

At last my tension left me, and I sank back in my seat. "I believe we have much to gain from these talks," I said. "What a relief it will be to send my dear brother another favorable report after my meeting with President Else of the Skyhawk Company."

"Oh! You mean the Emissary of the Water Dragon? I've heard so much about him. He's well on his way to being deified in the city of water, you know. And I've been dying to thank him for the garden."

"Please, tell me more."

Dear brother, my next report will be fruitful indeed!

I glanced up and spied a griffin soaring high overhead.

*

A pot of chicken-and-vegetable soup simmered over a spell-stone of fire. The windows of the old church's excellent kitchen revealed not a cloud in the morning sky over the imperial capital. The sunshine also felt warm for a northern winter. I had stopped to greet Luce when I went into the courtyard for my morning practice and found the griffin stretching and flapping its white wings, frolicking with the birds and the strange blue-ice butterflies.

Lydia and the others should start getting up any moment now.

Wearing an apron over my white shirt, I sampled a mouthful of soup with a small bowl. "More salt and pepper," I decided and turned to search shelves well stocked with seasonings from every corner of the world.

The professor let out a sinister laugh. He had arrived with Lady Aurelia late the previous night and now manned a frying pan to my left, wearing not only an apron but his own personal chef's hat.

"What's the matter, Lily?" he sneered. "Surely the proud Leinster Maid Corps can do better than that. I'm about to start on the omelets!"

"H-How was I supposed to know he was *this* good a cook?" the maid groaned. She had donned an apron over her usual ensemble, determined to make breakfast. "B-But I can't lose with Allen watching! I just *can't*!" Her fighting spirit blazed as she carved a thick slice of ham.

What on earth are they even competing for?

While I added salt and pepper to the soup, a lovely lady in purple with long white hair entered the room. Alice's second cousin, Aurelia Alvern, looked to be in her late twenties—but as the previous Hero, she must have been a fair bit older.

"What have we here? Lily, you're chopping those vegetables in such a rush that they're coming out uneven," the professor said. "You can hardly hand them off to Allen in that state."

"Ps-Psychological warfare is playing dirty!"

The professor chuckled. "Victory is all that matters! A win is a win!"

They certainly seem to be enjoying themselves.

Embarrassed, I bowed to the white-haired woman. "P-Please excuse us. We didn't mean to make so much noise so early."

"I don't mind," she replied. "You've reminded me of my childhood for the first time in quite a while. Only the present Hero and I live here in the old church, you see. This land is sacred to our house, and not even our relatives who bring us goods from the city or Igna, the boy who bothered you, can stay long. Shise tells me that there are 'too many elementals.'"

No wonder the light-wyrm sword started glowing last night.

The memory also reminded me of a whispered assurance from Alice. "Normal people can't stay here," she had said. "But you'll be fine. The great elementals like you all."

Lady Aurelia turned. "I'll stand by in the present Hero's room. She must have been thrilled to talk to you all yesterday evening, and I doubt a dragon could wake her until afternoon today. Please don't hesitate to call me if anything comes up."

"Oh, in that case..." I quickly buttered several slices of the bread I'd baked earlier, adding ham and fresh vegetables to create two sandwiches which I then wrapped in paper. Lifting the lid from the pot, I ladled soup into a deep porcelain dish painted with black and white swords and deposited it on a wooden tray along with a silver spoon. "I know it isn't much, but please take this. I'll set some aside in the icebox for Alice."

"Th-Thank you." Lady Aurelia looked taken aback, but she took

the tray away with her.

So she won't break her fast until Alice wakes up.

I stirred the soup, reflecting on the internal politics of the Grand Ducal House of Alvern, until two new sources of mana approached and peered around the doorframe.

"Good morning, sir," Tina drawled as she trotted over to me.

"I still crave sleep," Lena mumbled, following. They hadn't even bothered to don cardigans over their nightgowns, although they sported drowsy looks—and bed head—so nearly identical that they could have been sisters.

"Good morning," I said. "I take it you only just woke up?"

"Yes, but something smelled so good we couldn't resist," Tina replied.

"I crave sustenance," added Lena. Kitchen aromas evidently held more appeal for both girls than fixing their hair.



"It won't be long now." I winked at them. "But I think you'd better brush your hair and get dressed before—"

"Tina, Lena."

The girls jumped, and I shivered. I hadn't felt such a chill since I'd faced the false goddess in Lalannoy, if then. The sounds of the—ostensibly—heated duel between the professor and Lily filled my ears as I turned toward the doorway.

"S-Stella!" Tina exclaimed.

"S-Saint!" Lena cried.

Both girls clung to my legs, shivering like leaves.

There stood Stella with a frosty smile. She had taken the time to arrange her own platinum hair, and she wore a buttoned shirt, a skirt, and a pale-azure sweater. All the girls apparently had matching sweaters, identical except for color. She looked perfectly ready to face the day.

I take it someone *snuck out of her room.*

Stella's sky-blue hair ribbon bobbed more than usual as she strode straight across the kitchen and glared down at the girls attempting to shelter behind me.

"Do you expect to eat breakfast still in your nightgowns, with your hair in that state?" she demanded. "Get back to your rooms this instant."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" The young noblewoman and the great elemental took off like a shot.

Stella watched them go before taking a step toward me. "Good morning, Mr. Allen," she said. "I hope you'll pardon the disturbance. A-And I'm so sorry I can't help with breakfast. As soon as I get them presentable, I'll come right back and—"

"Here, Stella."

I interrupted the increasingly rapid apology by offering her a small bowl of soup. Our resident saint blinked in surprise but sampled it without argument.

"What do you think?" I asked, sandwiching fresh vegetables and just-cooked ham between layers of bread.

"It tastes delicious. Simply wonderful," Stella answered shyly, scattering pale snowflakes and feathers. A lock at the front of her

hair swayed from side to side, as Tina's so often did.

"There's no need to rush," I said, winking. "It wouldn't hurt to take it easy once in a while."

"I quite agree." Stella left the room with a spring in her step. I could practically see white wings unfurl behind her.

No sooner had she gone than the pitter-patter of tiny feet filled the corridor.

"Allen!" came a musical cry as a child threw her arms around me. She was fully dressed, and her long white hair was free of tangles.

"Good morning, Atra." I scooped her up in my arms, and she nuzzled her cheek against me, ears up and tail wagging. Adorable. I deposited her in a chair and added, "Good morning, Caren," as my sister came through the doorway. "Thank you for taking her last night. I wouldn't have gotten a chance to speak with the professor otherwise."

I normally took Atra to bed with me and got her ready in the morning. The previous evening, however, I had needed to exchange information with my erstwhile mentor and so asked to put her in another room.

"Good morning, Allen. And don't mention it. Any sister would have done the same," Caren said placidly. She wore a buttoned shirt, a skirt, and a pale-violet sweater.

"Thank you anyway. And have a seat. Breakfast is almost—"

"I'll help." One brief electric crackle later, Caren stood next to me.

Was that limited Lightning Apotheosis?! I know I put it in her notebook, but when did she find time to practice?

My sister's expression betrayed no change, but her ears and tail stood proud as she started whisking plates off the shelves and onto the table.

"What am I going to do with you?" I sighed.

"Little sisters help their big brothers. It's the way of the world," she said. "You want to help too, don't you, Atra?"

"Help!" The child raised her little hands atop her chair.

We could use more mornings like this after all the fighting we've done lately, I reflected, watching Caren and Atra buttering bread for ham-and-vegetable sandwiches. Then the professor fell to one knee

with a theatrical groan.

"I-It can't be. How could I—*I*—taste defeat?"

"Professor," said Lily, "you were a worthy foe. Even more formidable than my silly brother who ran off to bake pastries. But I'm a maid, and a maid can't let anyone out-cook her. It just wouldn't do."

It appeared we had our winner.

"What were you even competing over?" Caren grumbled. "And you made too many omelets."

I couldn't agree more.

The professor shed his apron, neatly folded it, and leveled an index finger at the maid. "Well, Lily, it appears I've underestimated your resolve. But remember this! Stalwart veterans of the Howard Maid Corps are gathering in this city as we speak. Their skills, honed under the legendary Shelley Walker, far surpass mine!"

"N-No!" Lily gasped. "But I...I can't give up!"

Flashing mana clashed behind them.

What good friends they've become.

"That aside, what do you say we prepare tea?"

"Oh, great idea!"

Or maybe they just think alike.

I almost felt impressed, though I went on portioning omelets, ham, and salad onto each plate. I was getting out soup dishes when the last of our party arrived.

"I see you haven't gotten tired of acting out skits first thing in the morning," said Lydia, whose sweater was pale scarlet.

The scarlet-haired, beast-eared child she carried waved to me. "Allen! Lia's here!"

Good. That makes everyone except Alice and Shise. And it looks like Stella is on her way down with Tina and Lena. Of course, Lydia could be in a better mood. We slept in separate rooms, and *she didn't get to make breakfast with me.*

"Good morning, Lia," I said.

The child laughed. Like Atra, she had rushed to hug me the moment she got Lydia to put her down. I set her on a chair next to Atra and gave Caren a look that said, "Watch her for a bit."

She responded with an unspoken "You owe me one." As if I needed a reason to do my little sister a favor.

Lydia glanced at us and strode up to the soup pot. "Mm."

"Here you go," I said, proffering a little bowl for tasting.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman stroked her chin, skeptical. "Isn't this sweeter than usual?"

"For the children," I explained.

She pressed up against me, shoulder to shoulder, and bumped her head against mine. "I like it better with more pepper."

"Yes, I know you do." Lydia and I went back a long way, and this soup was one of our old standbys at my lodgings in the royal capital.

"Really, Lydia? You show up last and start complaining?" Caren let out a sigh from the seat where she was still assembling sandwiches. "Will you *ever* learn manners?!"

"Oh? *You* must be so sleepy you forgot how to speak to your sister-in-law." Lydia took up the usual friendly argument as she cast a levitation spell. Silver spoons and forks began arranging themselves neatly on the table. She was making clear progress of her own. "He's mine. In this life and any other!"

"You're not making sense. And I'll never have a sister-in-law. Oh, look." Having finished the sandwiches, Caren returned fire by flashing her necklace. I'd given it to her on her birthday, and it had proven a potent weapon in the past. Yet although Lydia lurched in the act of taking a glass from a shelf, the blow did no worse.

"H-How artless," she said, forcing a chuckle. "As if I'd mind a little thing like that after all this—"

"Okay, that's enough of that," I interrupted, clamping a hand over Lydia's mouth. I also shot the puzzled Caren a look, calling for a truce. The moment, I thought, had arrived.

I clapped my hands loud enough for the professor and Lily to hear too.

"Now, take your seats," I said. "Stella, Tina, and Lena will be here any moment. I'll serve the soup."

"So, what do you have planned for today, Allen?" the professor asked after breakfast, lounging on a sofa with teacup in hand.

Lydia and the others were chatting happily at a table a short distance away. They'd had plenty of time for talk the night before, but girls would be girls.

"I have nothing to occupy me until Alice wakes up," I said, leaning back in my chair and watching fondly as the children played with Luce in the courtyard. "And Lady Shise is still sound asleep as well, so I don't suppose I can visit the palace to question Black Blossom."

"True. It's a miracle he's still alive," the professor said, as if that were no cause for concern. "Since you have no pressing business, I suggest you seize the opportunity and see the sights of the imperial capital. And take this—it might prove useful." He produced a booklet from an inner pocket. Its title: *Confectioners of the Imperial Capital*.

"Professor—"

"Spare me your praise. Though it turned out rather well, if I do say so myself!"

Who does he think he is, taking time out of a diplomatic mission to indulge his hobbies? This calls for a student inquiry as soon as we're back in the royal capital. I know Anko will approve.

"But we can hardly *all* go sightseeing and leave Alice and Lady Shise asleep here, even with Lady Aurelia to watch over them," I said, flipping through the booklet. "I doubt the apostles would strike again now that the city is reinforced and alert, but you never know."

"You have a point. In which case..." The professor adjusted his glasses. The lenses took on a sinister gleam as he announced loudly, "You should go out with one companion. I believe the Hero asked you to make cheesecake, did she not? No doubt the House of Alvern would deliver any ingredients you requested, but you've been working yourself too hard. The occasional stroll will do you a world of good."

At the table, all ears perked up. A strangled cry escaped me.

That's just adding fuel to the fire! Why would— H-He set me up! Again!

I glared at my erstwhile mentor—to frustratingly little effect. And his proposal was already gaining traction.

"CComing from you, Professor, that's not a bad idea," said Lydia.

"N-Not bad at all!" Tina agreed.

Stella stared into space, murmuring, "M-Mr. Allen and me on a..." The thought ended prematurely in a giggle.

Only Caren fixed her gaze on me. Her voice said, "Well, Allen?" but her eyes said, "Return that favor you owe me. Now."

Lily, who had been boiling water over a spell-stone of fire, clapped her hands. "Let's do this fair and square—with a lottery! Professor, please do the honors."

"Why, certainly," the professor replied as a sudden tension filled the air. Each girl rolled up her sleeves and focused her will. The professor magically shredded a sheet of paper and dyed the tip of one strip red. Lots in hand, he rose and presented them to the girls at the table. His left hand gave the signal.

"Ready, go!" the group shouted in unison, hands reaching for the paper. As one, they drew their lots.

*

The empire's capital ranked among the oldest cities in the west of the continent. It couldn't boast the city of water's thousand-year-old history, but it had maintained its preeminence through the storms of numerous wars. The series of civil wars that had subsided mere decades ago had contributed to the somewhat jumbled quality of the cityscape that had formed around the imperial palace. Many older buildings seemed to bear the scars of battle on their walls and columns. Even the widest avenues ran narrower than the streets of the royal capital, and only horses traversed them. I had yet to spot an automobile.

Nevertheless, the people's faces seemed cheerful, and the shops and markets bustled with life. Emperor Yuri Yustin had been in his teens when, with only his then attendant Moss Saxe for an ally, he had emerged the ultimate victor in the bloody wars of succession. The Ducal House of Howard had given him a taste of defeat, but he had taken and kept the upper hand against both the northern tribes and the Lalannoy Republic. No doubt he steered internal affairs with a shrewd hand.

Lily's laugh cut short my musings on local history. "Aren't you glad we found that cheese? It looks scrumptious," she said, turning. She had been walking in the lead and humming to herself while I followed, my arm around a paper sack. The floral clip in her hair and the bracelet on her left arm blazed in the sunlight.

"We have the professor to thank," I said, waving *Confectioners of the Imperial Capital* in my right hand. "The royal capital has more than its share of gourmands, but not many of his caliber. Only the headmaster and the president of the Royal Capital Cat Lovers Association can compare. He roped Lydia and me into plenty of editorial work on his guide to eateries there. We couldn't refuse—not with Anko waiting on the finished product."

We had left my former mentor in the old church, being silently menaced by Tina, Stella, and Caren as well as Lydia. No doubt he would have gained a few gray hairs by the time we returned.

Lily cocked her head first to one side, then to the other before hopping close to me. I recognized her floral scent from our first meeting.

"I've been wondering for a while now," she whispered gravely in my ear. "Is Anko really a cat?"

"Anko is Anko," I said, tucking the booklet back inside my robe to mask my loss of composure. "Lydia and I wondered too, at first, but we decided not to let it bother us. Anko has done so much for us, in any case."

No ordinary black cat ordered people to turn the pages of a book or worked teleportation spells, much less commanded dark magic sufficient to hold off a raging Lydia. The magnificent familiar was currently working alongside our former schoolmate Teto Tijerina, the Star Fiend and stubbornly self-proclaimed "normal person." I wouldn't need to worry about her so long as she had Anko for company.

I adjusted my grip on the paper sack, casting sidelong glances at streetlights more utilitarian—some might say less artistic—than those of the royal capital or the city of water. Then Lily, who had moved between me and the road, tugged my right sleeve and cried, "Oh, Allen, Allen! Look there!"

I stopped and turned to an edifice larger and more imposing than its neighbors. Several of its large glass windowpanes had broken—victims, I supposed, of the recent skeletal-dragon attack.

"It looks like they're building a station!" Lily did a half pirouette. Her long scarlet hair, black ribbon, voluminous sleeves, and skirt billowed in a gentle breeze. The maid, my senior, pressed her palms together and looked up at me with puppy dog eyes. "Do you remember? We first met at a—"

"Lily, come here."

The young woman squealed as I cast a quick levitation spell on my sack and pulled her by the hand. A carriage careened wildly down the road behind her.

"Are you all right?" I asked, looking down into the face of the great lady who had grasped her dream—and who had now gone rigid in my arms.

Come to think of it, hasn't something similar happened to us before?

Lily blinked her big eyes...and giggled. "You saved me the same way back in the southern capital! I just remembered."

"Did I really?" I said, releasing my grip and turning away from her. I felt vaguely embarrassed.

"What, you mean you don't recall?" she pressed. "Really? I remember that cute little boy at the station—and at his wit's end—as if it were yesterday."

O-Of all the high-handed highborn— Of course, I can't pretend Lydia isn't just as bad in her own way. And she did *help me back at that station.*

I started walking again, thinking back to that sweltering summer of my thirteenth year when I'd met Lily.

*

The midsummer sun beat down on the red brick of the grand station building in the kingdom's southern capital. Passengers disembarked trains from the royal capital, some exchanging greetings with familiar faces come to meet them, others briskly

departing the magnificent brick edifice. In their midst, I stared silently from a billboard bearing a big map of the city—put there, presumably, for the benefit of tourists—to the map in my hands. Utterly at sea, I checked the address on a note I carried one last time and prepared to tear my hair out.

"The southern capital's all hills and alleys," its author, one of my few friends, had told me before summer vacation. "Anyway, Allen, if you visit this summer, you'd better stop by my grandpa's shop. No excuses!"

I don't want *to disappoint you, Amara. But even though I made it to your hometown, I honestly can't see myself finding a way through this maze.*

I rolled up my shirt and jacket sleeves and wiped the sweat from my forehead. I'd never dreamed I would find myself in the southern capital, but I shouldn't have been surprised to find it so much hotter than my home out east. Then I fished out of my pocket a letter from a soon-to-be fourteen-year-old girl.

Dear Allen of the wolf clan (who abandoned his mistress and ran home to the eastern capital),

*You unbelievable, heartless idiot! Haven't you ever heard of gratitude?! I'll even excuse your choice to visit home. I can be generous. But why—*why*—didn't you take me with you?! What on earth were you thinking?! You know I would have loved to meet your parents and your little sister.*

Come south the minute you get back. (I left a check for your traveling expenses in the safe.) And don't think I don't know you were planning to take odd jobs to help pay for your sister's education while I'm away. Don't let the scheming princess or the bespectacled fraud sweet-talk you into anything. Especially *not the scheming princess!*

If you don't come after reading this, well...you can look forward to a surprise at the end of summer vacation.

Yours truly,

Lydia (well and truly sick of family events)

PS: My mother and Anna are also disappointed you didn't come

to stay with us.

I took a drink of now lukewarm water from my canteen and sat down on my suitcase. My partner sounded furious, and she was going to inherit the title "Lady of the Sword" on her upcoming birthday. But really, what choice had I had? Lydia Leinster was a "Highness," one of the highest-born ladies in the kingdom. And she had saved the royal capital from the black dragon's wrath around the time the Royal Academy had let out for the summer, even inflicting a wound on the creature, albeit with the Hero's help. The endless parade of functions and ceremonies had never let up long enough for me to coordinate schedules with her.

We had passed an intense few months together since meeting during our entrance exam, but a vast social gulf separated a duke's daughter from one of the houseless. How could I stop feeling self-conscious when some of our classmates intimated that I breached protocol by so much as speaking with her? But my diffidence seemed to rub her the wrong way. In her letter, I read not so much anger as heartfelt sulkiness. That, more than anything, had spurred me to refuse invitations from our classmates Princess Cheryl Wainwright and Baron Zelbert Régnier and to hop aboard a third-class railway carriage bound south from the royal capital. And yet...

"How was I supposed to know the streets would be *this* confusing?" I sighed, fanning myself with air from one of several devices installed to cool the station's interior. Should I try to get in touch with Lydia? No—in my rush to get here, I had neglected to warn her of my coming. And besides, a ducal house must be busy. I would hate to intrude. She might even be out of the city.

Yes, I'd better head to Amara's grandfather's shop for now. Then I can find a maid I know to leave Lydia's present with, although it's still a little early for her birthday. After that—

"Excuse me."

An unfamiliar girl's voice derailed my train of thought. I stood and turned around, only to be briefly dazzled by the sun. She wore a white cloth hat and a light-scarlet dress. Her hand gripped a well-worn suitcase. A pretty, buxom girl, taller than me and with

glistening scarlet hair down to her shoulders, came a few steps closer, staring at my face with undisguised curiosity. I smelled flowers.

"Are you having trouble finding the way to your destination, by any chance?" the mystery girl asked.

"W-Well," I began, flustered and trying not to look straight at her. She didn't seem to mean me any harm, so what did I have to lose by speaking honestly? "Yes—as much as I hate to admit it, that's exactly my problem. I'm new to the southern capital, you see."

"Oh, I knew it. I mean, you've been staring at the signs and muttering to yourself for *ages*. There *are* an awful lot of hills and little side streets, aren't there? Especially in the merchant quarter. It's practically a maze!"

The girl nodded sagely to herself. She looked more than a little like Lydia, but that had to be a coincidence.

"Oh, I know!" She dropped her bag and clapped her hands. "Why don't I show you the way to wherever it is you want to go?"

A moment of stunned silence followed. Then I managed to croak a "Pardon?" A real shock seemed to preclude any more thoughtful response. What was this girl suggesting?

"Yes, that's a brilliant idea!" she continued, approving her own plan, whatever it was. Then she slid even closer, all smiles. "You look as though you're traveling without companions. And wouldn't you know it, so am I."

"Y-You don't say," I mumbled, still trying to make sense of the situation.

"The southern capital has a reputation as one of the safest cities in the kingdom. Even so, a delicate young flower shouldn't really risk a stroll without an escort." The scarlet-haired girl started walking, twirling like a dancer. "So I'll lead you to your destination, and in exchange, you will accompany me around the city for the rest of today. How does that strike you?"

I didn't answer at once. How did that strike me? Well, I could see three girls glowering at me in my mind's eye. "Refuse. You shouldn't even need to think about it," said Lydia. "Allen, don't you know a trap when you see one?" said Cheryl. "Don't do it," said Caren.

Then there was Zel, who said, “Sounds like fun. Go for it!” I recognized the look he got when he was about to gamble and lose.

I picked up my suitcase and smiled at the girl. “I appreciate the offer, but I must de—”

“Then it’s settled. Off we go!” No sooner had the girl picked up her own bag than she seized my left hand and started for the exit. A conjurer’s trick, if ever there was one.

“P-Please don’t pull!” I protested. “I can walk on my own!”

“I can’t call you ‘little lost boy’ forever, can I?” she said, ignoring me. “What’s your name?”

Wait, this might be my chance. Once she learns I’m beastfolk...

“Allen of the eastern capital wolf clan,” I said.

The girl released me, looking puzzled.

I knew it. Who would want—

“Wh-What are you doing with your left hand?” I asked timidly, retreating a few steps. The pretty face in the shade of her hat brim had taken on an unsettling look as she waved her hand through empty space.

“I was just thinking how nice fluffy ears and a tail must feel to pet,” came her lilting reply.

“I...I’m adopted, so I don’t have either!”

“What, you mean you’re *not* just hiding them? What a shame.”

Wh-What a strange girl. But not a bad one, I think. Just strange.

I exhaled. “Would you please tell me your name? I don’t know what to call you either.”

A sudden gust of hot air blew through the station. Perhaps someone had opened a door.

“My name is Lily.” The girl held her left hand to her chest, scarlet hair fluttering. “I’ve come to the southern capital with a grand ambition in my heart. I aspire to—”

“What are you waiting for? I’ll take your bag,” I said, suiting action to word and walking off before she could finish.

Lily soon caught up, fixing me with a cold stare. “How old are you, Allen?”

“Thirteen. Why?”

“I’m fifteen!” She darted ahead of me, crossed her arms, and

confidently declared, “That means I’m older than you—like a big sister! And you have to be nice to your big sister. I give all my little brothers and sisters the finest education there is!”

“But I’m not your little brother,” I rebuffed her, checking the exit sign overhead. Yes, we were going the right way.

The older girl stamped her foot. “You’re a tough nut to— Ah!” Another hot gust whisked her white hat up nearly to the ceiling.

“Whoops!” I levitated both our bags and cast a surreptitious wind spell. The cloth hat fluttered down to land safely in my grasp, and I handed it to the saucer-eyed Lily. “Here. You dropped this.”

“Th-Thank you.” She pulled the hat low over her pretty face, then turned from me, took several deep breaths, and seemed to murmur something I couldn’t catch. (“That spell formula. I knew it.”)

But I had barely begun to wonder before Lily turned back to me with a smile. “Well then, my little lost Allen,” she said, holding out her hand, “I do hope you’ll be my escort for the day.”

I couldn’t detect anything odd in her manner. Perhaps I had imagined it.

“I’m not a stray child,” I said, taking her hand, “but I would appreciate your help, Lily.”

*

“Wow, Allen! So you ended up getting dragged around by a pretty older girl you don’t even know? I panicked and thought you were cheating for a moment there! Lady Lydia won’t be happy if she ever finds out.”

“Amara,” I said, “please don’t even joke about it. Do you have any idea how many hills and alleyways I had to wander or how many stalls I had to shop at before we finally made it here? We’d still be out there looking if I hadn’t conjured birds to scout ahead.”

Amara Vaubel let out one of her distinctive snickers. The tall dwarf girl was leaning on the sales counter, head in her hands. Her hair was a dusty shade of dark brown, and she wore a buttoned white shirt and a pair of shorts, presumably chosen for ease of movement. Despite bearing the house name of the dwarven

chieftain, she was one of the few other students at the Royal Academy who would deign to speak to a beastfolk by adoption. Admittedly, she claimed to come from a cadet branch of a cadet branch, and she had an unhealthy obsession with "interesting" things.

We were practically alone in the shop, for all that the sun was still high and magnificent pieces adorned the walls and counters. Perhaps its location was at fault. Riga's Jewels lay in the most labyrinthine part of the merchant quarter that sprawled along the east side of the southern capital. Still, at least Lily was inspecting the rings, necklaces, and earrings with evident interest.

I glanced over my shoulder at her and shrugged. "I haven't even informed Lydia that I'm in the city yet. She must have more important things to worry about."

"Even if she does, I bet Her Highness would put you first. Of course, you've got a Firebird in your future either way. Your fate was sealed the moment you went for a stroll with any girl but her!" Amara said, deftly but carefully boxing up the birthday present I'd just bought Lydia. The future she described sounded only too plausible.

"Please, don't breathe a word that I was here," I pleaded, closing my eyes.

"Don't worry. No lady of the Ducal House of Leinster would come anywhere near this tiny little jewelry shop in the merchant quarter. Not that I'd want her to." Amara slipped a white floral hair clip into a little cloth bag, looking less assured than before. She had made it herself, for practice.

"She's not so bad," I said, carefully stowing the box in my suitcase. "She's just a little quicker to swing a sword or hurl a spell than she is to talk things out."

The dwarf girl responded with an unreadable expression and a hollow laugh. "Here." She brandished paper in front of me. "Try one of these inns for tonight. And since you bought something off the shelf on top of my apprentice work, I threw in my favorite sightseeing spots around the city. Only the best advice for a valued customer."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." I took the bag and both sheets of notepaper and deposited them in an inner pocket, then checked the stately clock on the wall.

I'd like to settle on an inn before evening.

"But what will you do if you can't see Her Highness?" Amara asked. "I don't want grandpa's jewelry going to waste. He makes each one specially and imbues it with mana. Not a lot, but still."

"I'll try to call on her tomorrow," I said. "I'll leave the present with a maid I know if I can't see her myself."

"Oh, right. I guess you wouldn't get to the duke's mansion until after dark if you left now." Amara's voice dropped to a murmur, drowned out by the noise of someone cutting jewels in a back room. ("Not that you'd ever get away with letting someone else deliver it.")

I cast a spell to dampen some of the sounds and turned to the scarlet-haired girl. "Thank you for waiting, Lily. I'm sorry this took so long."

"Don't be. I've never been to a shop like this before, or like the stalls on our way here, and I'm enjoying every moment of it!" Her face bloomed into an ear-to-ear smile.

So she came from such wealth and status that she had never set foot in a shop before. I'd begun to suspect as much, but her words confirmed it. And now that I thought about it, Lydia hadn't known how to order a tart in a café until a few months ago either. But while Lily might have the Leinsters' scarlet hair, no scion of a ducal house would be found loitering at a train station—alone, no less.

"Thank you again, Amara," I said, picking up my bag. "I'll see you at school."

"Yup! Good luck thinking up an excuse for Her Highness! Oh, wait a second." My schoolmate stood and turned to the passage that led into the back of the shop. "Grandpa! Allen's leaving! At least say hello!"

"Pipe down, Amara. My ears work fine." A gray-haired and bearded dwarf of advanced age popped into view. Muscle corded his limbs, and I would never have guessed he was a jeweler from the force of the glare he fixed me with. "Riga Vaubel. I hear you've done all right by my granddaughter in the royal capital."

"A-Allen, at your service," I said. "Amara has done more for me than the other way around."

The old dwarf stroked his beard with a burly right hand and shifted his gaze to Lily. "That hair. That mana," he murmured, still as a statue. "Don't tell me..."

"My name is Lily," Lily said. "Thank you for this opportunity to view your wonderful selection."

"I...I see."

Was I hearing things, or did Riga sound intimidated? Before Amara and I could get over our shock, the older girl dipped a perfect curtsy and added, "I'd like to bring my mother and sister to see it next time. You won't mind, will you, Mr. Vaubel?"

With Amara's note for our guide, we extricated ourselves from the maze of streets and climbed to the top of a long, ancient slope. Passing through an arch of trees onto a high point near the road, Lily and I gasped in unison. A breathtaking view of the southern capital unfurled below us, with its many hills and countless alleys, colorful roofs and white stone avenues, and rows of buildings climbing like terraced fields. We could even look down on the merchant quarter we'd just left.

"I must admit," I said, "this was worth the climb."

"It certainly was," Lily agreed, touching her dazzling scarlet hair. I might have been looking at a painting, I thought—a beautiful girl pausing in the shade of a verdant grove with the city spread out behind her.

Then Lily noticed my stare and grinned. "What's this?" she said, sitting on a wooden fence. "Is *someone* smitten with my beauty?"

W-Was I that obvious? How embarrassing.

"No, nothing of the kind," I said, lowering the temperature with a surreptitious spell.

"Humph! That was your cue to blush and bring out that little-boy charm! That's how it goes in novels. I can see you won't win many hearts, Allen."

Wh-What a thing to say! Has she no mercy?

I spread Amara's note, nursing a wounded heart. I needed to

choose an inn for the night.

"Lily," I said, "is tormenting me as much fun as you make it seem?"

"It enriches my life."

"Y-You call that fair?"

She almost sounds like Lydia.

While I stood disconsolate, the beauty let out a musical laugh. She did a few twirls, practically dancing, her cloth hat perched atop her scarlet hair. Then she joined her hands behind her back and...

"Huh?"

"Lily!" I cried as a car barreled over the hill. Acting on a snap judgment, I yanked the older girl toward me and turned my back to it. The car didn't stop, speeding on down the slope.

Wh-What reckless driving!

"Are you all right?" I asked the girl in my arms.

"Y-Yes. Th-Thank you very much." Lily nodded several times and slowly pulled away from me. She must have suffered a shock.

I dusted off my robes and leaned on the fence. "I guess you get cars even up here. That one gave me a fright."

The ever-cheerful Lily made no reply. She fidgeted, removed her hat, then spoke as though she had made a difficult decision. "You see, Allen, the truth is that I, well, I've never been to the southern capital before today."

"Yes, I know."

"H-How could you?" Lily demanded, saucer-eyed. What did she take me for?

"How could I not? Do you realize how many detours we took on the way to Riga's Jewels? No one would believe you knew your way around the city after that."

"I...I'm sorry." The older girl groaned and hung her head. She looked genuinely contrite.

I looked around and spotted a bench under the trees, so we both took a seat. I gave Lily a drink from a bottle of fruit juice I'd bought at a stall, which seemed to calm her down enough to tell her story in fits and starts.

"I ran away from home," she began.

"Did you really?"

Lily nodded weakly and clenched her hands on her lap. "My father called my dream 'a pack of nonsense.' I tried to argue, but he wouldn't listen."

A parent out to dictate his child's future? Yes, I can believe that, especially if Lily comes from major nobility or wealth. They can't all be like Zel—a landless baron with no vassals is about as irregular as it gets.

The older girl set the bottle and her hat to one side and abruptly stood up. "I...I..." She looked me straight in the eye, pressed her left hand to her heart, and shouted:

"I r-really want to be a maid!"

A scorching wind set her scarlet hair waving, but she pressed on with her confession regardless. "I've looked up to the main house's head maid ever since I was a little girl. No one supported my dream except her and my mother. So I feel like I've got to become an amazing maid and repay her kindness! But then my father started picking out a fiancé for me, and..."

"And you ran away from home?"

She wilted again. "Yes."

I see.

"I don't know anything about your family circumstances," I said, standing up with her hat in my hand. The girl gave a start as I moved beside her and placed it on her head. "But I think you'll have plenty of time to give up after you've tried everything else. You'd be surprised how many things work out if you only take action. Just look at me. I made it into the Royal Academy."

"But that's because you're special," Lily countered, taking a tack I hadn't seen coming. She turned her back to me, keeping a hand up to steady her hair. "I saw your spell formula at the station. It was so pretty—no, gorgeous! I've never seen anything like it. But I couldn't guide you around the city, and I don't know how to buy ice cream from a stand or anything about shops. I can't even pour my own tea at a café."

This sounds worse than I thought. Hmm... I wanted to give it to her when we said goodbye, but needs must.

"Lily, hold out your hand."

"What for?" the dejected girl asked. But despite the suspicion in her voice, she turned around and extended her arm.

I drew a little cloth bag tied with a ribbon from an inner pocket and set it quietly on her palm. Lily jumped. Her eyes asked, "May I open it?" so I answered with a nod. Her eyes grew even wider when she hesitantly untied the ribbon and removed the bag's contents.

"Hair clips?"

The bag had disclosed a handful of accessories modeled on white flowers.

"Amara made them for practice," I explained, shifting my bag with a levitation spell. "She said this 'must be fate' and foisted them on me. I hope you'll accept them as a thank-you for today."

"I...I couldn't possibly! I was nothing but trouble." Lily scrambled to return the gift.

"I had a great time," I said, raising a hand to forestall her. "It was like an adventure. Didn't you think so?"

"W-Well..." Lily faltered, hesitating. I glanced at the city behind her, bathed in summer sunshine. Then she stood straighter and said, "I quite enjoyed myself."

"I'm glad." I conjured a little bird and released it into the sky, bound for the Leinster mansion. Even if it failed to find Lydia, it would reach some maid of my acquaintance.

"How pretty," Lily murmured, looking after it with her hands together as if in prayer.

I smiled at her. "When I met Amara, she had trouble doing delicate work with magic, and she worried that she'd never be able to craft something as small as those hair clips. But she practiced every single day, and she slowly but steadily improved. So even if you can't do a maid's work now, you can learn it a little at a time. I know you can!"

The scarlet-haired girl looked down at the floral ornaments in her hand. "But *should* I become a maid? Is it really all right?"

"If abandoning your dream means letting your heart die," I said, thinking of a girl who had barely been able to cast a spell despite her high birth and who had spent a long time crying alone inside

because of it. I would have hated to see Lily end up like her.

"Why don't you try talking to your parents again?" I offered. "And discuss things with an adult you can trust too."

"An adult I can trust?" she repeated.

"Yes. There's no shame in asking for help—not that I'm one to talk." I briefly stuck out my tongue.

The older girl carefully packed the cloth bag and ribbon into her suitcase, as though arranging her thoughts as well as her belongings. Then she held out a dainty hand. "Allen, would you put this clip in for me?"

I hesitated. "Touching a girl's hair hardly seems—"

"You have my permission." She swiftly cut off my retreat.

Sh-She doesn't mess around. I'd better come up with another excuse quick, or—

"I think it would look nice in the front," she lilted.

Oh, to hell with it!

I removed Lily's hat and gently fixed the clip in her hair. She giggled, then flashed a smile that took my breath away.

"I'll treasure it," she said. "And if I *do* become a maid—"

"Allen," a different girl's voice, devoid of feeling, called from behind me.

I broke out in goose bumps, not wanting to turn around but even more afraid of what would follow if I didn't. I cursed my coward legs, willing them into motion. Then I shrieked.

"L-Lydia?! B-But what...? How...?"

Atop the wooden fence stood another girl with the same red hair as Lily, a pretty smile on her face. She wore a scarlet dress as well, with a sword belted at her hip. Lydia, the eldest daughter of Duke and Duchess Leinster and the future Lady of the Sword, gripped the hilt of her weapon.

"I got a report you'd been spotted at the station and in the merchant quarter. So I slipped out of tea with my grandmother just to check, and what do I find?" She giggled, and a storm of fiery plumes filled the air, dancing in time to her rage. The supreme spell Firebird took shape as she drew her sword and declared, "Death to the unfaithful! I'll slice you, burn you, dice you, then slice you some

more. Just like I did to that runaway car full of spies from the league on my way here."

"W-Wait! I can explain! And anyway, if you cut loose here—"

"No excuses." The furious girl leaned forward, poised to charge...

"Oh, Lydia! Long time no see."

And literally lurched to a halt. To my horror, her first step forward had already left a massive crack in the paving stones.

"Lily?" Lydia gaped at the older girl who had just poked her head out from behind me. "Wh-What are you doing with him?"

"We had a grand adventure in the city together," Lily answered. "It was such fun!"

"Oh." My partner's anger lost its target in the face of such carefree frankness. She settled for giving me a cold stare. "Well?"

I let out a nervous laugh in lieu of an answer and closed my left hand, extinguishing her Firebird. Lydia sullenly sheathed her sword, and I gave her a look that said, "How do you know each other?"

"She's my cousin," her eyes responded. That made Lily a daughter of the under-duke who defended the kingdom's southern border. I could hardly believe it. What were the odds of me just happening to run into another young "Highness" here?

While I sighed at the vagaries of fortune, Lydia seized custody of my left arm. I thought I heard my bones creak. But while I suffered in silence, a parasol opened to shade Lily.

"My lady, I've been searching for you," said the dark-skinned, dark-haired, bespectacled maid who held it. The Leinster Maid Corps's number four had arrived without a hint of sound or mana.

"Thank you, Romy," the runaway replied. "Listen, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk some things over with you later."

"It would be my pleasure to listen," Romy responded without hesitation, then took Lily's bag and nodded to me. I immediately returned the greeting. I would need to fill her in on the day's events later.

Lily inclined her head graciously in the shade of the parasol. "Thank you for today, Allen. I thoroughly enjoyed myself."

I bowed low, conscious of mounting pressure from Lydia right beside me. "I pray Your Highness will forgive my improprieties. I had

no idea—”

“Stop! None of that.” The older girl darted up to me, magically augmenting herself with an alacrity I would have felt justified calling graceful.

Wait, is it me, or did she use some of my *formulae just now?*

I had no time to arrive at an answer before the scent of flowers enveloped me and a voice whispered in my ear.

“I, Lily Leinster, will become a maid. And not just any maid—the *head* maid to the Ducal House of Leinster. That’s my dream. Don’t you forget it, even if everyone else does. It’s a promise.”

“L-Lily!” Lydia snapped. “Get away from him!”

“Oh, all right.” The troublemaking noblewoman obeyed and set off down the hill with Romy. No doubt a carriage awaited them not far ahead.

She’s really something, and in a different way from Lydia and Cheryl.

The remaining scarlet-haired girl tightened her grip on my arm, pouting like a child. “Jeez! You really are unbelievable!”

“Ow! That hurts! No biting!”

My pathetic wails faded into the southern sky.

*

I pulled my mind back from fond memories of that summer to the solemn corridors of the old church, which I walked weighed down with paper bags. We had bought too many souvenirs for everyone.

And my trouble didn’t end there, I reflected. *Not by a long shot.*

Marched to the Leinster mansion without a right to refuse, I had gotten a lecture from Lisa on the importance of giving advance notice next time I visited. Lydia and I had done everything together for the remainder of my stay. I had also met Lynne for the first time, come to think of it.

The next time I saw Lily, she had been wearing a gown—and, what with one thing and another, I had ended up teaching her magic. Lydia had outdone herself in her show of displeasure. On reflection, it almost seemed that I had been at the mercy of the

maid beside me as long as I'd known her.

"Yes, Allen? Do I have something on my face? Or..." Lily skipped a few cheery steps ahead with her own armful of bags, her floral hair clip glinting just as it had on that summer's day. Unburdening herself with a levitation spell, she brought her left index finger to her jaw in a calculated gesture, clearly enjoying herself. "Have you *finally* discovered the charms of an older maid?"

"No, not in the least," I said.

"Oh, don't play coy! Your fondness for maid uniforms is already an open secret."

Why can't any of the Leinster maids leave well enough alone?!

"I won't deny it," I said gravely, "but you aren't wearing a maid uniform, now are you?"

The noblewoman reeled, knees trembling. Yet she still raised a hand to her foreign jacket with its pattern of interlocking arrows and attempted to argue the point. "I...I m-most certainly am. In a land to the east, this outfit serves as proper—"

"We're in the west," I interrupted. "Try to face facts."

Lily groaned and windmilled her arms like a child. The bracelet on her left wrist turned red. "Why do you have to be so mean?!" she demanded, crossing her arms and pointedly refusing to look at me. "A bully like you has no business tutoring anyone! And no one likes a younger boy who toys with girls' hearts!"

"Yes, yes."

"One 'yes' is enough. Honestly." She resumed walking in a huff, muttering under her breath. ("Some master I picked to serve. Would it kill him to show a little kindness?")

Did she forget the bags she left floating? As usual, our resident maid's not always as on the ball as she likes to think.

I grinned in spite of myself, watching her long scarlet hair swish off down the passage.

A mass of white fluff arrested my attention on my return to the kitchen and its attached living space. Luce had curled up for an afternoon nap on a carpet near the door to the courtyard. Pillowed on the griffin's flank lay Tina, sound asleep, although she mumbled,

“Stop that, sir,” as I came in. Atra, Lia, and Lena slumbered with her, clutching the sword that had started glowing faintly the night before and evidently hadn’t stopped since. I didn’t see the others. I suspected I would find them in the courtyard, but I had more pressing concerns.

“Lily,” I said, “you know what to do.”

“Coming right up!” The maid whipped out a video orb and started recording. She knew her business.

I was just setting the paper bags on a table when a bespectacled man returned through the courtyard door. “Hello, Allen, Lily,” he said. “Welcome back.”

“Where is everyone, Professor?” I asked, opening the icebox and inserting the cheese and other perishables. We had plenty of supplies for the time being.

Lily let out a sinister chuckle, murmuring that she “might have just won this year’s Maid Video Award.” The villain act didn’t suit her.

The tired-looking professor sank onto a sofa and spread his arms. “Outside. Igna Alvern came after you left. He insisted on sparring with Stella, Caren, and Lydia. I threw up some of my best barriers.”

“You don’t say,” I said slowly.

“You mean the gentleman who picked a fight with Allen out of nowhere? I want to join in!” Lily finished recording and blinked over, planting her hands on my shoulders. It appeared she had fully mastered Black Cat Promenade. I made a mental note to share the improved formula, tuned for consecutive teleportation, with her later.

“I don’t know.” The professor gave the eager maid an inscrutable look. “I doubt it will come to that. Allen, I assume you take my meaning. I’ll keep an eye on the children, so I suggest you go out and watch.”

“Well...”

“Yes, sir!” Lily responded, shoving me toward the door.

We stepped outside to find Igna and Caren inside the professor’s many-layered barrier. Both armored in lightning, they crossed sword and spear at speeds too fast for the eye to follow. Stella hung back, rapier and staff ready to intervene at the first opportunity. Lady Aurelia seemed to be acting as referee.

Someone had brought a sofa into the courtyard. Lydia and Alice silently observed the battle from it, both in their everyday clothes. Chunks of ice dotted the ground, as did holes I took for the marks of lightning magic. Yet the center of the arena remained unscathed. Judging by residual mana, the pair had met Igna's lightning and stopped it head-on. The way things were going...

For just an instant, my gaze met Caren's. She roused her lightning to new fury, sending violet bolts coursing over the battlefield as her crackling cross-headed spear swelled to immense size. Igna must have let his guard down, assuming he was out of range, because he reacted a split second too late. His sword broke, and the blade spun high into the air. He nonetheless reached for his dagger to continue the fight, but gasped to find it frozen in its scabbard. Stella's ice magic had done its work.

"Stop. Caren and Stella have won," Lady Aurelia declared, raising her pale left hand. The broken blade landed point-first in the ground and froze there. My sister's ears pricked up around her floral beret, and her tail waved proudly. The neatly dressed noblewoman looked equally pleased.

Igna, meanwhile, stood rooted to the spot, still clutching the hilt of his broken sword. "I-Impossible," he murmured. "I...I *lost*? Me? Igna Alvern, the Hero's heir?"

For all the issues I took with his attitude, I couldn't suppress a twinge of sympathy. Igna's lack of real combat experience betrayed itself in little ways, while Caren and Stella had been honing their skills through battle after fierce battle.

"Igna," Alice called without rising from the sofa.

"M-Ma'am?" The distressed boy sheathed his broken sword and went down on one knee.

"Start your training over from square one. If you can't beat Violet Growly and Saint Wolf..."

Igna's shoulders twitched with anger. His mana leaked in a crackle of electric flashes, but Alice dispelled them all merely by raising her index finger. His technique couldn't begin to compare to hers.

"You wouldn't stand a chance against my Allen and the scarlet

crybaby," she concluded. "And of course, you can't succeed me."

The chill in her voice forbade any of us to interject. The Hero was the world's guardian, master of the great spell Thunderbolt and wielder of a blade passed down since the age of gods. It demanded far more than ordinary ability to hold such a post.

Igna gritted his teeth. He raised a teleportation talisman—but not his head—and vanished with a strangled "By your leave."

Will he get over this, I wonder?

"I think you mean *my* Allen," Lydia said to clear the air. "Stop distorting the truth, pint-sized Hero."

"Your ravings don't bear listening to," Alice retorted. Caren and Stella joined in, talking over each other.

"Brothers belong to their sisters."

"B-But he's *my* magician."

The very air strained as the young women's mana collided within the barrier. Then Alice turned her demanding gaze on me.

"Allen! Cheesecake!"

"We'll all make it together," I said. "Starting now."

"Mmm!" The platinum-blonde girl closed her eyes, presumably satisfied with my response.

Lady Aurelia lifted Alice as though afraid of breaking her. "The Hero will take a short rest. She enjoyed the bread and soup you made for her."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "I plan to keep cooking as long as I'm here."

"Please do." The former Hero tenderly stroked the girl's head, then entered the old church.

A nap after all that sleep? Perhaps Alice isn't feeling as well as she—

A lively clap jolted me back to the present. "All right, everybody!" Lily called. "Get ready for the tastiest cheesecake the world's ever seen! Just leave it to a maid!"

"I'll help," Stella immediately volunteered, and they both started walking. No doubt they meant to be considerate, but I felt a little uneasy leaving them to their own devices.

"Lydia." I turned to my partner, who had come up beside me.

"Leave it to me. I know everything there is to know about your recipes." Almost as an afterthought, she added, "You'd better make it up to me later, unless you'd rather burn."

"I know."

"Good." Having secured my pledge, Lydia set off after Lily and Stella. She hadn't been any kind of baker when we first met. Now, however, she could equal or better the average pastry shop.

My sister sheathed her lightning-wyrm dagger and gave me a hug. "Welcome back, Allen."

"It's good to see you too, Caren. And you beat Igna! I always knew my sister would go far," I said, giving her beret a pat. I meant every word. Igna Alvern was no pushover, but Caren and Stella had made short work of him. Once she started at the university, she would leave me in her dust.

But while I reflected on her bright future, she nervously lowered her eyes. "No, I'm nothing special. And I had Stella on my side. But, um, about Alice..."

"Yes, I know."

I squeezed Caren's shoulder and closed my eyes. Alice wasn't well. Something was wrong with her—a malady so severe that she could only fight in short bursts. That explained why she had summoned me from the city of craft.

Opening my eyes, I gazed up at the lowering clouds and wrapped an arm around Caren's shoulders. "Come on. Let's go in. It's gotten a bit chilly."

*

A pitch blackness that rejected light dominated the invisible spiral staircase down to the spell-gaol beneath the palace, overwhelming even the reek of blood and death. The feeble mana lamp in my hand gave small comfort. Even so, I wrestled my fear into submission and descended, step by step. I had come too far to turn back. My late mother had vied with Lady Aurelia for the title of Hero to the bitter end.

"Igna," I remembered her telling me, "you must become the

Hero, become Grand Duke Alvern. I leave everything I know to you—darkness as well as light."

It seemed I had heard true. This place was alive with magic not of the present age but of a time when gods had walked the earth. I couldn't comprehend how it functioned, and it was claiming even my sense of time. What better prison to hold the mighty Black Blossom?

I squeezed the hilt of my sword without meaning to. The day's sparring match had humiliated me. It would have been one thing to lose to the Lady of the Sword, whose fame resounded throughout the west of the continent. But how could I, a potential future Hero, have let the lightning wolf and Lady Howard get the better of me?

"You can't succeed me," the current Hero had said. Her verdict still echoed in my ears, refusing to leave me in peace. The Hero's words carried absolute weight within the House of Alvern. The status I'd finally grasped through effort upon backbreaking effort had become fragile as a house built on sand.

I can't accept it. I refuse to accept it!

I *needed* to become the Hero to vindicate my late mother, to prove that I hadn't wasted my life. The thought propelled me down the stairs to the spell-gaol—the secret stairs that should have been locked and barred. Down to strike a deal with the dying Black Blossom and gain the secrets of his sorcery.

"This must be the bottom," I muttered. The seemingly infinite spiral of the invisible staircase had finally reached its end. Relief flooded through me at the feel of a stone floor underfoot and the sight of a mana lamp on a stone wall. No guard stood watch and no spell waited to detect intruders. My mother had warned me that no mortal could spend long down here, and the evidence bore her out.

I held my lamp high, and the whole gaol came dimly into view. It contained a single, massive metal cell, large enough to hold not merely a giant but a dragon with ease. Many were said to have met their ends locked away down here during the civil wars. Their curses almost seemed to cling to the stones. I shifted my sword, ready to draw it at a moment's notice. Then I approached the cell and shone my light inside.

Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield was in a pitiable state. The great demisprite sorcerer, the apostle who had wreaked such havoc at the old church, hung in midair, his battered limbs trapped in Floral Heaven's thorny vines. His black wings had been severed partway along their lengths and left untreated. The quantity of blood pooled on the floor told me that he would die before much longer. I doubted that he could even hold a conversation.

So I wasted my time.

Dejected, I turned to go. Then, without warning, Io spoke.

"Alvern boy. What was your name? Oh yes, Igna."

I froze, stunned that he knew me. Then he caught and held me with his gaze, blizzard-cold and full of hidden madness. Brokenly, he said the words I longed to hear.

"Don't you want power? Overwhelming power? Enough power to make you the next Hero? It stung, didn't it? At the old church? When you realized you were too weak to even help?"

I bit my lip and tasted blood. Coming here had been a mistake after all. What could be worth subjecting myself to insults like—

"Only wish for it," Io continued, "and it's yours. I'll give you everything. I won't last much longer down here anyway."

"Ridiculous," I spat and looked away, trying to shake the sense that he'd seen through all there was to me.

Io spit out a mouthful of blood and followed it with muffled, scornful laughter. "Go, then. Go and brood on your own incompetence." He snorted. "If you're what passes for an Alvern, that defective key—Allen of the wolf clan—might as well start calling himself one too."

"What did you say?" I couldn't let that insult go unanswered. How dare he call me inferior to that man—that houseless nobody who had bafflingly caught the current Hero's eye and who had the gall to bear the name of the legend who had created the Celestial Spear, Successor to the Star?

"The Brain of the Lady of the Sword is my better in nothing!" I bellowed into the darkness, casting a wind spell so that only Io could hear. "You hear me?! Nothing!"

That's right. He's not superior to me. The lightning wolf and the

Howard girl only got the better of me because I held back. Igna Alvern, the future Hero, knows no defeat.

This time, I did turn away from the spell-gaol and start back toward the stairs—only to whip around as a chill shot through me.

Wh-What is *this mana? A great spell? No, a great elemental I've never encountered before? And one stronger than Floral Heaven's bonds?*

I stood rooted to the spot as Io roared with laughter.

"The fight at the old church confirmed my suspicions," he sneered. "The Hero doesn't have long to live. So I knew you would come here, to me, seeking power."

I walked faster, refusing to dignify his ravings with a reply.

I've never heard anything so ridiculous. And "the Hero doesn't have long to live"? Nonsense.

"I will not die," Io cursed from within the spell-gaol. "Not until I wipe out those long-lived fools out west who cast me out as a child, and destroy them root and branch. Not until I kill Aster and Alicia, those cowards who turned tail and ran. Not until I see my fellow apprentice—until I see Rosa again. I refuse to die."

I shuddered as I set foot on the spiral staircase again, determined that I would never come back to this place. Io's peals of laughter and his vengeful ranting never stopped ringing in my ears.

Chapter 3

"Emma, please make sure that the Leinsters and Howards both get copies of these documents," I said. "I can't act on them on just my own authority, but I'll have everything ready."

"Certainly, Miss Fosse."

"Sally," I added, "I'd like you to deliver an urgent letter to Duke Walter Howard in the eastern capital. Can you manage it?"

"Leave everything to me, Miss Fosse. Your wish is my command."

The door shut behind the two maids, my helpers ever since I had come to work at Allen & Co., as we called the two ducal houses' joint business venture. I exhaled, leaned back in my chair, and stared out the window. The royal capital really looked like winter now. Most of the people walking its broad avenues wore coats. And while I didn't feel the cold in the company offices—everyone seemed to take the building's heating system for granted—I wore a white sweater and a long skirt. I'd gotten my best friends, Stella and Caren, to pick the outfit for me. The maids had complimented me on it, but I found the way it emphasized my chest a little embarrassing.

Still, it's not like I've got the guts to throw it on out of the blue when Allen gets back.

A reserved knock interrupted my careful contemplation of the future.

"Come in," I said.

"I hope I'm not intruding," came the reply, and the door opened to admit Ellie Walker.

Lady Tina Howard's personal maid wore her hair in pigtails, tied with white ribbon, and carried an imposing spell book—probably something to do with the archive Allen had asked her to find a way to unseal. We'd both been staying at the Leinster mansion, and she'd told me the night before that, since the Royal Academy had added two more weeks to winter break, she'd been spending her

days testing every possibility.

"You must be tired from all that work, Felicia." The young maid smiled and took the chair next to mine. "Are you feeling all right? You haven't been overexerting yourself, have you?"

"I'm fine, Ellie," I said. "I'm getting enough sleep, and I'm eating all right too."

We hadn't gotten many chances to talk woman-to-woman before, but Ellie had turned out to be incredibly considerate, always attentive to other people on top of working hard in her own right. Allen called her an angel. Stella and Caren had serious doubts. Me? I suspected her too, but just a little.

"Hmm..." Her lacy headband swayed as she tilted her head in charming puzzlement. "I hope you don't mind."

"E-Ellie, what—?" I squealed as she touched her forehead to mine. I'd never done anything like it, except with Stella, Caren, and a few others, and I panicked. So much for dignity.

D-Did she learn this *from Allen too?!*

"You have a slight fever," the younger girl announced, pressing her hands together. "I'll let Emma and Big Sis Sally know to make certain you stop work early this afternoon."

"B-But I have so much left to do." I glanced at the mountain of papers on the grand desk. Allen was away, and without our president, it fell to me, the head clerk, to go over them and keep business moving.

"Out of the question!" Ellie held up her index finger. "Ms. Caren warned me when she left. 'Felicia is just like my brother,' she said. 'She'll work herself to death if you let her.' And she asked me to 'put my foot down' when you push yourself too hard. Everyone here assures me that none of these papers are urgent."

I groaned. Getting closer with Ellie had taught me one more fact about her: She knew how to get things done. The Walkers had been keeping the Ducal House of Howard running since practically forever, and Ellie was an heir they could feel proud of. She tended to trip a lot and act flustered when Allen was around, but maybe this hypercompetent side was closer to the real her.

"D-Don't you have enough to worry about with the Sealed

Archive?" I countered, crossing my arms. "Not that I know much about magic."

"In Mr. Allen's words, 'Do one thing at a time, and do each one with care. More haste, less speed.' I'm working with Soi and the professor's other students, and together we're determining the right angle to attack the seal from. Chieftain Chise was even gracious enough to send me a valuable spell book from the western capital. She tells me that her sister wrote it."

Ellie returned to her seat and opened the book. The title on its deep-green cover read *Floral Heaven's Guide to Magic*. Allen had told me that a demisprite sorceress called Floral Heaven was one of the people on the track of the cult of the Great Moon, and that she had taught Stella and Tina's late mother. I'd never expected to run into her name in the royal capital. You really never knew what connections would bring.

Still, knowing our president, I wouldn't put it past him to have met Floral Heaven herself by now. Allen hadn't mentioned her in his letters from the city of craft, but he seemed blessed to run into the right people just when he needed them most. Not that I could complain—I might have been one of those people myself. But be that as it may, one other name had caught my attention.

"Soi?" I asked timidly. "You mean that tall elf girl? The scarily pretty one with the piercing stare? A-Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"She couldn't be nicer!" Ellie chirped. "And she seems to really look up to Mr. Allen. She tells me so many stories about him while we work."

"D-Does she really? Well, that sounds all right. But still."

Nothing seemed to scare this little maid. Maybe that came of surviving so many close shaves with Allen. It also explained why he'd asked her to act as his agent in the city.

Come on, Felicia! You're head clerk around here, and you need to get your act together!

While I took myself to task, Ellie eagerly laid two letters on the desk. "These came this morning," she explained, "from Mr. Allen and Lady Tina in the city of craft. Everyone's safe, even Mr. Fosse. I'm

so, *so* glad they managed to rescue your father from the apostles safe and sound. Congratulations."

"Oh, uh, thanks."

I knew it, Allen. You took time to write Ellie as well as me. I'm making you rest when you get back, whether you like it or not! As for my dad... Personally speaking, I can't thank you enough.

Growing bashful in the face of Ellie's angelic smile, I cleared my throat and continued, "Allen wrote that they would all be making an emergency detour to the Yustinian Empire after the fighting in Tabatha. It sounds like we might not see them back here for a little while yet. On that note, I'd like to discuss the state of things in and around the city while—"

"I'll bring up a map." Ellie cast a light spell with a flick of her left wrist. A map of the kingdom projected itself onto thin air, complete with a tiny palace and Great Tree in the royal capital.

There's no way that's student magic. Is this another trick she picked up chipping away at that notebook full of homework Allen gave her every morning? Maybe I made the right choice when I dropped out of the Royal Academy.



"Th-Thank you," I said. "I'm concerned about an unconfirmed report that His Majesty held secret talks with the previous Hero, Lady Aurelia Alvern, within the past few days. And to make matters worse, I hear she went back to the imperial capital right after."

"So, she didn't just come to deliver Luce, then?" Ellie gave me a puzzled look.

I wonder what could have happened. Still, no amount of thinking will get me any closer to an answer, so...

I gave my cheeks a light slap.

"F-Felicia? What's wrong?" The young maid froze, wide-eyed.

I can't fight, and I don't know much about war or politics. But I can still gather information and supply it to Allen. It's up to that kind, sweet, and occasionally mean young man to read something in it.

"It's no use. I can't make head or tail of it," I said. "So what should we prioritize now, apart from our duties?"

"I...I don't know. What?"

I opened a desk drawer and withdrew a top secret document with a picture of a girl dressed to kill on its cover.

Ellie covered her mouth and blinked in surprise. "I-Is that...?"

"Yes," I said. "A special issue on this year's hottest winter fashion in the city."

The girl Allen called an angel scrutinized the document on the desk. It must have given her some ideas, because she started babbling and covered her cheeks in embarrassment.

"Ellie," I said, in the same voice I used to negotiate business deals, "wouldn't you like to go shopping with me before the others get back? We can get a head start on them if we go now."

"W-Well, um, I mean... B-But I'm Lady Tina's maid." Though sorely tempted, Ellie tried to remain loyal to her mistress. But her gaze never left the booklet.

Time to help this angel fall.

I spoke the fatal words:

"That's too bad. I know it would win you a compliment from Allen."

The maid groaned. I giggled, captivated by her struggle. I

suspected I was about to open a door better left closed.

"Y-You're setting a terrible example," Ellie grumbled, toying with her white ribbons and refusing to look me in the eye. She almost never sulked like this.

"May I take that to mean you *will* come with me to look at clothes?"

The angel gave an embarrassed nod. I had won.

A few months ago, I wouldn't have considered going shopping with anyone other than Stella or Caren. I would certainly never have picked out new clothes to impress a boy. But I didn't mind the new me. She'd learned to tease her juniors, for one thing.

Ellie eyed my smirk a little resentfully and started weaving beautiful emerald mana, conjuring and dismissing illusory plants.

"That's really something," I said, thinking that maybe this was her take on the spell-control exercises Allen sometimes did.

Ellie responded with a "Huh?" and then an embarrassed cry as she cut off the flow of mana. I guessed that she hadn't realized what she was doing.

"I...I hope Mr. Allen and the others get back soon, don't you?" she murmured, giving her feelings the air of an excuse.

"Yes," I said. "I bet you won't feel so lonely at night then."

The young angel squawked, blushed, and rained feeble blows on my arm. "R-Really, Felicia!"

"What? It's true. And if you don't want Allen to find out, you'd better pour me a nice cup of tea."

That got an adorable groan. *She might turn out to be a teenage girl and no angel at all*, I thought, watching her, although I didn't let any change show on my face.

"You have a mean streak, just like Mr. Allen." Ellie pouted, then got up and made for the kitchenette.

You bet I do. Felicia Fosse is Allen & Co.'s head clerk. Don't act surprised if the president's bad habits rub off on her!

I propped my head on one hand and stared skyward out the window. The clouds hung thick, and they kept getting darker. I only

hoped that Allen and the others would have a safe trip home.

*

I passed with Chiffon through heavy blackish-brown doors and into a dim chamber. One would hardly know it was daytime. Hearing the doors swing shut behind me, I cast a wary eye over my surroundings, ready to draw the sacred sword Dear Departed Dark at the first sign of trouble.

I noted a small table, an armchair, several bookcases, a bed, an antique lamp, and a sofa probably meant for guests. It all seemed too plain for a head of state, although I supposed he might not live here much of the time. The Bright Wings flags on the wall did look faded. And of course, I had gotten permission to bear arms and to bring Chiffon without a fight, so perhaps I should have expected to find myself in dire straits.

In the meantime, the old man by the window, his head lowered in contemplation, noticed my entrance. He could hide neither the wrinkles in the finery he wore nor the pain on his face.

"Oh, you've arrived," he murmured.

I spread my white skirts in a proper curtsy. Having remained in the city of craft by my father's command, however reluctantly, I felt determined to do my duty.

"At last we meet," I said. "Cheryl Wainwright, crown princess of the Wainwright Kingdom, at your service."

"Oswald Addison, leader of the Bright Wings Party and the Lalannoy Republic, at yours," he replied. "I suppose I am a marquess, officially speaking. I beg Your Highness's forgiveness for summoning you to attend on me despite the great debt I owe you. Please be seated."

"Of course. Chiffon." The white wolf curled up on the hearth, tail wagging in acknowledgment. I had hoped for a guard at my feet, but one couldn't have everything. I lowered myself onto the sofa, and Lord Addison lowered himself into the seat opposite me.

"To begin with, allow me to express my gratitude for your kingdom's assistance in our recent dispute," he said. "I do not doubt

that my country would have found itself in grave peril without reinforcements from yours."

"We acted on national interest and personal inclination," I responded, then voiced my greatest concern in hushed tones. "How has Lady Elna fared since the incident?"

Lalannoy's champion, Arthur "Heaven's Sword" Lothringen, had mysteriously disappeared in the local church of the Holy Spirit. Lady Elna "Heaven's Sage" Lothringen had then expended her mana reserves on far-reaching detection spells until she left herself bedridden. The marquess and the other leaders of the republic had pressed me into service to treat her. On the understanding that Lisa would negotiate terms later, I had saved Lady Elna's life. Yet though she looked like some beauty out of myth, lying there in bed, she remained pale as death, with her hair in disarray.

"Poorly," the marquess admitted forlornly. "Her condition has stabilized thanks to your magic and the ceaseless efforts of the republic's finest medical sorcerers. But she will no doubt take action the moment she regains consciousness, even if that action takes years off her life."

"And Arthur Lothringen remains missing?" I asked. The disappearance of the republic's martial champion, coinciding with the incapacitation of its greatest sorceress, posed a grave threat to its national security. The loss might well transform the balance of power in the region.

"He does," the marquess said, voice harsh with irritation he didn't bother trying to conceal. "My son, Artie, has been leading the search effort since Lady Elna collapsed. I've committed all the resources we can spare."

"Arthur has become an emblem of your nation."

It was the tenth day since the battle for the city, yet Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage, the symbols of victory, had both vanished from the public eye. And the ongoing military around the church where the former seemed to have vanished stood out like a sore thumb.

"You cannot avoid a public announcement forever," I continued, looking the marquess in the eye. "Even if you manage to conceal

Lady Elna's condition, foreign powers will eventually discover Arthur's absence. They will also learn that our nations have made peace and entered into an alliance against the church. I suspect that the Yustinian response most concerns you, but our representatives have warned the empire to keep on its best behavior."

"Civil war has dealt a blow to our armed forces. Without Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage, we can mount no meaningful defense against imperial troops. So, much as it shames me to admit it, we have no choice but to rely on your intercession."

He drew a sheaf of papers from his coat and tossed it to me, guided by a wind spell. I caught it and checked the cover sheet: "Top Secret." A bookmark stuck out between two later pages.

"And this is?" I asked.

"A record of Snider's interrogation," the marquess said. "He served under Minié before defecting to the Heaven-and-Earthers. The bookmarked passage struck me as exceedingly interesting. Consider it an apology for summoning you here."

I nodded and turned to the page. It looked like new testimony concerning Marchese Fossi Folonto of the league, also known as the apostle Ifur, whom we had confirmed dead in an abandoned shrine outside the city. What did this Snider mean, he had been a "traitor"? And "in league with the Skyhawk Company"?

Despite my questions, I laid the report aside and straightened in my seat. "Would you mind telling me what this is really about? You must have had a reason for asking me here alone, excluding Lisa and Fiane."

A heavy silence descended on the chamber. Then the marquess drew a well-used leather case from an inner pocket.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked, making no attempt to hide his distress.

"Not at all."

Lord Addison slid out a cigarette and lit it with a puff of magical fire. I raised my left hand and cast a wind spell, reshaping air currents so that no smoke reached me. He arched an eyebrow but said simply, "You have impeccable control."

"My old schoolmate and current investigator is the finest sorcerer

on the continent," I boasted. Why waste an opportunity? Meeting him at the Royal Academy had been the greatest fortune of my life. Lydia didn't have a monopoly on fateful encounters.

"Allen?" The smoke-wreathed marquess massaged his temples. "If only he were here. He might discover something we've missed. To be frank, I can't make head or tail of this mess."

He sighed, the picture of a careworn leader. I didn't think he was playing it up. Another national crisis hot on the heels of civil war gave him more than enough to worry about.

"I believe I've told you that Lady Elna's grand tracking spell failed to find Arthur or any other mana, even though she nearly killed herself casting it." The marquess stubbed out his cigarette in a glass ashtray and held a hand over his eyes. "Since then, we have committed the full might of the republic to analyzing the results and scouring every tome that might shed light on them. And we succeeded in gleaning a faint trace of mana, almost imperceptible."

I tensed. A big log cracked on the hearth, and Chiffon's ears twitched.

"Did it belong to Arthur's opponent?" I asked slowly, squeezing the hilt of my sword.

"It matched mana recorded more than two centuries ago, near the seat of the Dark Lord's power. In short..."

The exhausted Oswald Addison drew in a long, deep breath. His next words came only with reluctance.

"It belonged to the Dark Lord herself."

The Dark Lord? What would the ruler of the demonfolk across Blood River be doing here? But wait. Allen did say...

The marquess cradled his head in his hands, indifferent to appearances and to my confused silence. "Preposterous, you must agree," he groaned. "This city lies nowhere near the Dark Lord's realm. But my ancestors fought in the War of the Dark Lord. They saw her capital. They saw her in the flesh. If she still lives, I cannot rule out the possibility. And it would take an extraordinary being to harm Heaven's Sword."

I looked away, staring at nothing to calm my nerves while I recalled something Allen had whispered to me after the battle: "I

think I'd better tell you, Cheryl. You know Rill, the girl with silver hair who fought the false goddess with us down there? She's actually..."

He wasn't above telling little white lies, but he would never seriously distort the truth. At the very least, Allen had always been sincerity itself to me, Lydia, and the old Zelbert Régnier. He'd told us the truth even when it put him at a disadvantage. So when I spoke, I spoke with certainty.

"No, Lord Addison. That is one possibility you can rule out. I guarantee it."

The marquess looked up with a grunt of surprise, mistrust plain on his face.

"Because," I said firmly, "the Dark Lord helped to slay the false goddess and save your city."

"What?! Wh-What do you mean by that?" Oswald Addison half rose from his chair, visibly shaken. I couldn't blame him. Who would believe that a chance traveling companion had been the Dark Lord, out incognito with her cat? I certainly wouldn't have, had I heard it from anyone other than Allen.

And what did he mean, "I got an invitation to the Dark Lord's capital, and I need your advice about it when we get home"? He's impossible! Simply impossible! How does he always get himself mixed up in the biggest trouble he can find?

"I don't know everything myself," I continued, heaving a mental sigh at my personal investigator. "I didn't have time to question Allen. But I believe my father knows, as do the other leaders of the kingdom. Arthur certainly did. I presume he meant to discuss the matter with you once the situation settled."

The marquess reeled back into his chair. "I can't believe it," he muttered, making a mess of his gray hair. Then his voice turned grave. "But if that *is* true, it will make persuading Lady Elna even more difficult."

"Simply present her with the facts," I said, nonplussed. "Surely she'll understand."

I had only exchanged words with Lady Elna in the heat of battle, via orb, but she had struck me as a most intelligent person. Allen also spoke highly of her. He had told me that he would not hesitate

to leave any matter in her capable hands—more than I could recall him ever saying of me.

"She would, ordinarily. But not now. Forgive me for an indelicate question, but I ask you..." The marquess forced his face into the shape of a smile. "If Allen were assassinated today, without warning, and you were nearby, do you have confidence that you could remain reasonable?"

"Well..."

I hesitated. A definite yes would require more strength than I possessed. I knew I would panic, and I could see myself flying into a tempest of rage. I couldn't count how many times I had thought of taking Chiffon and slipping out of the western capital to race east during the Algren rebellion, and Allen had only gone missing then. When I'd heard that Lydia had cast Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend on the Avasiek Plain, I had only thought that a tactical taboo spell seemed a reasonable reaction for her. And if Arthur meant as much to Lady Elna...

"She is a brilliant woman," the marquess said. "But she loved Arthur with her whole heart, more than the world itself. Who can say if our words will sway her when she realizes that his assailant's mana belongs to the Dark Lord."

Heaven's Sage was an exceptional sorceress, the pride of Lalannoy. Once she woke from her coma, she would reanalyze the results of her spell and arrive at the answer herself. We couldn't prevent her. And where would she go then? I saw only one possibility.

If...if Lady Elna crosses Blood River... Depending on the damage and the demonfolk's reaction, it could spark another War of the Dark Lord.

"Brokenhearted people cannot always make the wisest choices. That is the one lesson even a fool like me can glean from this disaster." Oswald Addison clenched his fists, and a note of self-derision entered his voice. "Look at how my brother, Miles Talito, turned to the church's false Saint when he lost his son."

Before I could respond, a great shadow crossed the room. Someone had sent up a hot-air balloon, never seen in the kingdom,

to get a bird's-eye view of construction in progress. Mentally, I let out my breath.

So in the end, I must turn to him again.

I held my head high and pressed my right hand to my heart. "Lord Addison, would you permit me to write to Allen concerning this matter? My personal investigator might be able to devise proofs more convincing than the words of those of us who fought beneath the independence memorial."

*

Tina's grunts of exertion filled the old church courtyard, so bright and sunny that the foul weather of the night before seemed like a bad dream. She wore her white spellcasting garb and held her rod over a minuscule lump of bright-azure ice. Every slightest leak of mana from it froze the ground within her barrier and added to the ice flakes in the air. She was taking the first step of the first step toward all-freezing silver-snow.

Luce had curled up under the trees. Atra and Lia were using the griffin for a pillow again, basking in the sun with their arms around the sheathed light-wyrm sword. I would have to capture the scene on a video orb later. I owed it to Stella and Lily. "Please see to any recording while we're at the palace," the former had requested. The latter had added that she wanted "something to relax with" when they got back. Even Lydia had chimed in. "It's the least you can do while we're keeping an eye on the professor and putting up with the emperor's grousing," she had said. "Do I make myself clear?" She loved the children as much as any of us, even if she tried not to show it.

Still, another audience? And with every noble in our party except Tina.

The professor had gone along as their guide to the imperial court, and Caren was in another room. Anna and Mina had arrived with a detachment of maids after breakfast and marched her off. The reasons for our visit were equally absent. Alice remained asleep, while Lady Shise had risen and set off for the palace at first light.

That left me with time on my hands, which I filled by performing my professional duties as a tutor.

"There's no hurry, Tina," I called, jotting in a notebook spread open on a round table. "Take it slow and steady. Silver-snow might seem intimidating, but the trick to conjuring it is no different from your usual spell-control exercises."

"I...I know." The young noblewoman nodded several times, platinum hair as tense as her expression. The ice flakes had begun to swirl, gradually building toward a blizzard.

"I-It strikes me," said the girl eating our homemade cheesecake in the seat beside me, "that p-perhaps you should lend the dear girl a hand." As anxious as she sounded, she didn't put down her fork.

I wrote a few new spell formulae in my notebook, then reached out with my left hand. "She'll be fine. But it's nice of you to worry, Lena."

"D-Don't act as though you have a right to pat me! I...I'll have you know that I am a great elemental, and don't you dare forget it!" the child fumed, standing up on her chair. Even her feathers stood erect—perhaps she was taking after Tina.

"Yes, and an adorable one at that," I said, filling a teacup and adding a splash of milk.

The child sat down again, grumbling. Plainly she had hoped for a different response. "Humph!" She thrust her fork back into the cheesecake. "Is that any way to thank me for mending Bright Night out of the goodness of my heart?! I thought you might want it ready before this generation's Lady of Lightning and Floral Heaven woke up. I hope you realize that it would never recover without my help, even if this place *is* modeled on the Land of the Beginning and the End. S-So don't take me lightly!"

According to Tina, Lena had instructed the other children to carry the sword. The great elementals possessed powers beyond mortal understanding. Still, could such a battered weapon really regain its usefulness?

"Oh," I sighed, adopting a lonesome air as I stirred the tea. "I thought you liked me, Lena, but I can see I was wrong."

The azure-haired child let out a flustered squawk. Her gaze

wavered. Then Atra and Lia fixed her with cold stares from their bed atop Luce.

"Lena, no bully Allen. Bad."

"Bullying bad!"

Lena bit her lip, then seized the cheesecake in her fingers and gobbled it down with no regard for proper table manners. "D-Don't think you've won," she hissed in parting before she ran to her fellows, threw her arms around them, and closed her eyes.

Is Tina's personality rubbing off on her?

I was still observing the enigmatic child when a wolf-clan girl in a becoming purple sweater took her place in the chair next to mine.

"I'm back, Allen," she announced.

"It's good to see you again, Caren," I said. "You look tired."

"I feel tired." My sister dropped her dagger on the table, leaned against me, closed her eyes, and let her head droop onto my shoulder. She rarely showed this side of herself in front of others. Admittedly, all the older girls were out.

Inside the barrier, Tina channeled ever more mana into the lump of ice. "One step at a time," she muttered, dripping with sweat. "Easy does it." Her rapid progress astonished me no less than Stella's or Caren's. All those holes she'd blown in her greenhouse roof had become nothing but a fond memory.

"Still, I'm surprised," I said, preparing tea with extra milk and sugar for Caren. "I expected Anna, but I didn't think the Howard maids would come as well." I had only exchanged nods with their number three, Mina Walker, but I could still see that she regarded her Leinster colleagues as rivals. Not that Anna was any less competitive.

Caren held her teacup in both hands, a faraway look in her eyes. "They made me try on dresses until I didn't think I could take anymore. Especially one Howard maid with a black braid and spectacles. I couldn't believe how into it she got."

"You mean Chitose? She's their number five." I cut a slice of cheesecake, remembering the cool and collected woman whose magical white rabbits had contributed so much to our battle for the Lalannoyan capital. So she had followed us here.

"Yes, that's her." Caren plucked at my sleeve and whined, "I'm *exhausted*."

We might not share blood, but she had been my sister since birth. I fed her a forkful of cheesecake without further prompting. Her ears and tail twitched happily.

"Well, at least neither of us will have to go to the palace," I said. "Anna stuffed me into some suits earlier too, but she assured me it was 'just in case,' because 'you never know.'"

"I don't care where I go, as long as you're with me."

I gently stroked my sister's head. We hadn't had a peaceful moment like this in far too long.

Caren squirmed, ticklish, and looked down at my notebook on the table. "Is this...a new spell for Stella?"

"Yup," I said. "I thought I might be able to improve a wide-area purification spell and make it heal."

Stella's Immaculate Snow-Gleam had covered the western half of the Lalannoyan capital, albeit while her mana was linked to mine, and wiped out a writhing army of skeletons, products of taboo magic. In which case, what was to stop us from formulating a healing spell on an equally massive scale? Distinguishing friend from foe would prove a challenge, but one worth attempting. Of course, the completed spell might add momentum to the growing legend of "Saint Wolf."

Caren set her teacup on its saucer, lips pursed. "I think you're much too soft on her."

"Am I really?"

"Yes," she answered, almost before I'd finished asking the question. My sister had a surprisingly difficult time sharing.

"I'm working on something for you too, of course." I opened a second notebook for her inspection. "Improvements to that experimental supreme spell—and the secret art that goes with it. Give them a try later. I already got Lady Aurelia's permission, and we can ask Alice what she thinks of them later."

"Y-You can't buy me off this easily." Caren's tail thumped against me as she ran her fingers over the formulae. Violet lightning formed palm-sized wolves which mimed howling in an adorable display.

Good. Her control is excellent.

"Sir!" Tina shouted, shoulders squared and rod up. "Stop flirting! And Caren, don't sit so close to him!"

What a thing to say. At least no one is around to get the wrong impression. No one except... Oh, good. The children are busy having an afternoon nap.

Caren dismissed her miniature wolves and flipped her silver-gray hair with one hand. "Tina," she said, "I'm exercising my sisterly privilege. I suggest you become his little sister too if you don't like it."

"Wh-What kind of logic is— Wait! A-Are you telling me to let him marry Stella?!" The young noblewoman reeled, stunned by her own unanticipated inference. Her control of the silver-snow slipped, and it started to spin.

Oh dear.

"I said nothing of the kind," Caren said stiffly. "It was only a figure of speech."

"What if she hears you?! Her fantasies are already getting out of con— Oh."



The slowly revolving ice put on a burst of speed. A blizzard kicked up, and even the ice-resistant barrier that contained it started to freeze. The magic was out of control.

The children bolted away, blinking sleepily. Luce let out a reproving squawk.

That was directed at me, wasn't it? Yes, I can tell.

Tina and Caren panicked.

"S-Sir, wh-what should I d-do?!"

"A-Allen!"

It wouldn't be long before the snowy gusts built into a storm. The time had come to step in. Still seated, I waved my right hand. My ring and bracelet flashed. A moment later, sable petals filled the barrier and began covering the silver-snow.

A startled cry escaped Tina, who had raised her rod in an effort to reassert control without instructions from me. Her hair accentuated her surprise.

"Are they killing the mana's momentum?" Caren murmured, inferring my spell's purpose.

They both passed the test.

I took a sip of tea, dispelled the silver-snow, and tore down the barrier for good measure. "It's still in the experimental stage," I said. "There are tricky opponents out there, including some whose magic I can't unravel, like the ice wyrm or the false goddess. Tina, come here."

"Y-Yessir." The young noblewoman approached, platinum hair drooping.

I reached out and gave her a light flick on the forehead.

"Hey!"

"You shouldn't lose focus in the middle of an exercise," I said. "Not even Lydia or Lily has as much mana as you. You need to be able to control it."

"Y-Yes, sir. I'm sorry." Tina pressed both hands to her forehead, crestfallen. Her propensity for making funny faces, at least, hadn't changed since I'd met her.

I cut another slice of cheesecake and served it to the highborn girl on a small plate. "But I'm pleased to see that you have been

solving the problems I set you."

"S-Sir!" Tina suddenly beamed, then giggled and spun in a circle, hugging her rod. Her white skirt trailed her turn.

"Tina twirly-twirl!" Lia cheered, matched by an excited note from Atra.

The third child picked up a glittering ice crystal. "Humph. I see the latest key knows how to use the carrot and the stick," she said, twining her fingers into her long azure hair. I couldn't argue, although she seemed happier to hear Tina praised than her tone let on.

"I'm sorry, Lena. I couldn't hear you." I stroked my chin, hamming it up. "Did you just say you *don't* want a snack today?"

An electric shock ran the length of her little body. She flapped her arms, then took shelter behind Tina, pouting furiously. "C-Craven! H-How dare you take my treats hostage!"

"Not hungry?" Atra asked, poking her own head out from behind Lena in imitation.

"I'll eat yours!" Lia offered, popping out from behind her.

The azure-haired child screamed. Then she whirled around, feathers atremble, and snapped, "M-My treats are *mine*! I r-refuse to give you a share!"

Atra and Lia broke into a gleeful run, and Lena took off after them. Tina, Caren, and I couldn't suppress a chuckle at the thoroughly peaceful scene. I had so much to do and so much to investigate, and our war with the church was still heating up. But at least for this moment...

I turned to Tina and Caren. But just as I opened my mouth to speak, the white griffin shot upright, ringing the children in a sturdy barrier many layers thick. The girls stared, nonplussed.

"Luce?"

"Is something the matter?"

"Caren! Take Tina!" I shouted, springing to my feet and diving in front of them.

Dancing petals filled the air. Then a dark-haired boy appeared, an enchanted sword at each hip. He had used a teleportation talisman, against Lady Aurelia's express prohibition.

"Igna Alvern," Caren growled, dagger in hand.

"B-But why is he dressed for war?" murmured Tina. The potential future Hero had abandoned his sword-fighting garb for a pale-purple military uniform complete with cape.

He ignored both girls, looking only at me with envy, hatred, desperation, and a hint of jealous admiration. Flashing and crackling with electricity, he roared:

"I...I can't stand that you even exist!"

"Are you looking for a fight?" demanded Tina.

"With *my* brother?" Caren added.

I raised a hand to restrain them, then glanced at the children. Luce seemed to have them well defended.

Igna gave a few angry stomps and ran violent fingers through his hair. "This church is sacred. Not even an Alvern is supposed to set foot here lightly. Even I had to wait until I became a potential Hero. And yet here you are, enjoying a lengthy stay! And as if that weren't bad enough, the Hero—Grand Duchess Alice—honors you with hospitality I can't even imagine!"

The boy's hands stopped moving. His gaze shot past me to Caren.

"And..." Electric flashes rent the air. "And on top of all that, your sister and Stella Howard humiliated me. In front of Grand Duchess Alice and Lady Aurelia! That, I can never forgive!"

I knew the look in the gifted young man's bloodshot eyes. I had seen many eyes like his at the Royal Academy, at the university, and at the court sorcerer exam. They were the eyes of someone who had always gotten their way—the look that they gave me, their social inferior, because they didn't dare turn it on Lydia.

"Wh-Why should they need forgiveness when it was all your fault?!" Tina shouted, rod in hand, clip gleaming in her platinum hair. "Stella and Caren only beat you because you're weaker than—"

"Hold your tongue! I went easy on them!" Igna roared. Radiating fury, he drew both swords in one smooth movement and leveled them at me. One white blade and one black caught the light in bewitching ways. "I'll prove to Grand Duchess Alice that Igna Alvern deserves to succeed her as Hero, and I'll do it by crushing the new

Shooting Star here and now! Take any weapon you choose, Allen of the wolf clan! And have at you!”

*

Birds took wing, alarmed by the mana erupting from Igna’s body. Not for nothing did he top the list of potential future Heroes. In terms of capacity, at least, he far outstripped me.

The twin blades in his hands were already starting to flash with lightning. I had seen Alice use two swords once, when we’d fought the black dragon. She had called it “the original Alvern swordplay.” Igna really must have been desperate to fight me if he had resorted to it. I couldn’t see him donning military attire to talk things out.

“Listen,” I began, “you might have a reason to challenge me, but I don’t see why I should—”

“Have at you!” Igna entered Lightning Apotheosis, instantly closing the distance between us.

A roar split the air. Sparks burst in a blazing shower. I had summoned Silver Bloom and blocked a fury of strikes that reminded me of Leinster swordplay. Even so...

“Pathetic!” Igna barked when his pressure knocked me off my feet.

I flew backward, Caren’s and Tina’s frantic shouts ringing in my ears as I called up wind and levitation magic to land lightly on my feet. I wove new spells while I brushed the dust from my pant legs, then looked at Luce with a silent request: “Keep the children safe.” Seeing that the griffin had already stealthily deployed more advanced spells than I could count and stood ready for battle, I started analyzing Igna Alvern. He had learned from his loss the other day, leading with Lightning Apotheosis and devoting considerable mana to augmenting his strength and speed. My conclusion: He wasn’t holding back.

“I believe Alice and Lady Aurelia forbid private dueling,” I ventured.

“This is no private grudge!” he snapped. “Defeating you will open the Hero’s eyes.”

Open her eyes to what? What is he talking about?

The Hero acted for reasons even more mystifying than Lydia's or Lily's. I couldn't begin to predict her. But Igna neither knew nor cared what I thought.

"Consider yourself honored," he said, full of confidence, and spread his arms wide. "Few people ever witness the Alvern twin-sword technique!"

Flashes of lightning raced through the courtyard. A few struck Silver Bloom with earsplitting cracks. I glanced down at my right hand and groaned inwardly. My ring and bracelet flashed, egging me on.

"Caren, Tina," I called over my shoulder, steeling myself. "Stay close to Luce."

"Why?" Caren demanded. "He's no big deal."

"Let us teach him a lesson, sir!" Tina shouted as a rumble of violet lightning and crystalline ice crashed into the electric flashes, canceling them out. I could always count on my sister and my students.

But glad as their offer made me, I thrust my rod to the right and locked eyes with Igna. "I'm the one he pointed his swords at. And anyway..." I brought Silver Bloom around in a big sweep, activating a Divine Wind Wave I had stealthily deployed earlier under Igna's feet. Striking from an unexpected direction, the intermediate spell buffeted the dark-haired boy off his feet and into the air.

"Maybe *I* ought to show off for *you* every once in a while," I said, advancing a few steps while the girls' hair fluttered. "Oh, but don't tell Lydia and the others. They'd never let me hear the end of it."

Caren and Tina looked taken aback, then sighed long and deeply, hands on their foreheads.

Igna cast a wind spell in midair, alighting atop a pile of rubble that I suspected had once been a stone wall. No sooner had my sister seen him land than she tossed me her dagger, sheath and all.

"Use that," she said as I caught the weapon in my right hand. "It deflected his lightning the last time we fought."

"Thank you."

"What's mine is yours. Just try not to get hurt." Caren hopped

inside Luce's barrier with a bashful look. My sister might be moving on to the university next spring, but I couldn't see her leaving me to strike out on her own anytime soon.

"Keep your rod, Tina, but I appreciate the thought," I added to the young noblewoman, who had been eyeing our sibling exchange with envy.

"St-Stop reading my mind, sir! It's not fair!" came her flustered response. I must have hit a bull's-eye. "Be careful," she added as she followed Caren. It was just like her to end with a show of concern.

Now...

I belted the dagger around my waist and squared off with Igna. My ring and bracelet blinked as if to say, "Don't let him know what hit him!" and "Kill on sight!" I ignored them. The purple uniform and cape only added to the young Alvern's good looks as he eyed me suspiciously, blazing with electric light.

"Do you still think this is a game?" he demanded. "You should have known that feeble spell couldn't hurt me!"

How rude. Although to be fair, I did think it would make a nice hello.

"No, I'm taking this fairly seriously," I demurred, twirling my rod.

"'Fairly'?" Igna's handsome face flushed crimson with rage. His mana was weaving into the advanced spell Imperial Lightning Dance, two casts on each sword point. Considering his age, he undoubtedly possessed rare talent, even by the kingdom's standards. But enough to succeed Alice?

I stopped twirling Silver Bloom and struck its butt on the ground. Igna clicked his tongue and put his half-deployed spells on hold as Divine Earth Chains and Divine Ice Chains bombarded him from all angles, above and below. He used his swords to intercept, skillfully defending himself without moving from the spot.

"Well done," I said. "I thought I might manage to checkmate you in one move, but I can see I underestimated you."

"You thought...? I'll teach you to think twice before you make light of Igna Alvern!" the boy screamed, hitting his boiling point. His blades crackled and sparked as a torrent of mana poured into them. Far-reaching electric slashes tore through stony chains and icy

brambles as he charged straight toward me. A haze of residual mana hung about him.

"Oh, I'm not making light of you. On the contrary, I think *you* ought to take *me* more seriously." I shrugged and struck the ground again, multi-casting more elementary spells to restrict Igna's movements. A shower of Divine Light Shots and Divine Darkness Shots pelted the whole area.

The dark-haired boy's swords mowed through my magic as he recklessly charged on, relying on the mobility that Lightning Apotheosis afforded him. Maintaining the lightning coating his blades and body as well as his advanced offensive spells ate up most of his capacity for spell control, leaving his barrier thin. He had probably never encountered a threat that he couldn't outmaneuver. In short, Igna was a typical melee fighter, specialized in offense. I would keep my distance and snipe at him with spells.

While I finished my appraisal and settled into a plan of attack, the boy sliced through a blast of light—too fast to block easily—with his right-hand sword and thrust with his left. Lightning flared, and its point began to shine.

"You think these piddling spells can stop me?!" he roared. "Taste my lightni—"

"Then how about a twist?" I swung my rod in a wide arc before his Imperial Lightning Dances got a chance to activate, conjuring ice mirrors in the path of every spell he'd dodged. The Divine Light Shots and Divine Darkness Shots ricocheted, and would keep ricocheting until they found their mark. In theory, that took evasion off the table.

"Redirecting your shots, now?! Enough tricks!" Igna finally abandoned his charge and started focusing on defense. His lips curled up in a sneer as each swing of his twin swords left fewer projectiles around him. He wore his heart on his sleeve. Still, if he had been on a battlefield, he would be leaving himself wide open.

Igna Alvern has never experienced a real fight with an opponent worthy of his steel.

I brought my left index finger to my lips and winked. "Twist number two."

Igna's swords froze for a moment when they cleaved a shining missile. Balls of darkness pelted the ground around him and burst into flame, gradually wearing away at his barrier. I kept my shots ricocheting but sped up some and deliberately slowed others. Some I brought to a sudden halt in midair or expanded to affect a wider area. Slowly but surely, Igna's defense started to fall behind.

"Th-This can't— I don't— I-It's not possible!" Igna wailed, seeming unsure and anxious for the first time.

"He gave *every* shot a camouflaged element?" I saw Caren mouth beside Luce, where she, Tina, and the children stood spectating.

"With a mix of expanded, accelerated, and delayed activations?" I read on the young noblewoman's lips.

"I...I am Igna Alvern! The future Hero!" Igna raged as the storm of spells slowly drove him back. "You're nothing to me!"

His armor of lightning transformed, suddenly thickening. He stopped intercepting my shots with his swords, ignoring any spell that hit him. Steadily, he resumed his advance.

"You've sacrificed mobility and devoted all your lightning to defense?" I said. "I see."

"Your spells mean nothing to me in this—"

Determined to close with me in one swift charge, Igna abandoned defense and stepped forward—into mud that sucked him down. I had cast another elementary spell: Divine Earth Mire.

"You must forgive me. I don't have your mana..." The orbs on my rod lit up the courtyard, and the ground rumbled. Tree branches burst forth, tearing through Igna's barrier and lightning to bind his arms and legs. "So I've had to resort to petty trickery."

"D-Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!" Igna's scream fairly took my breath away. He struggled to restore his defenses and his lightning, but my storm of spells denied him the chance. And all the while, more branches twined around his swords and body, immobilizing him.

I'd say that about does—

A sharp grunt from Igna cut my relief short. His body shone so bright I almost thought he'd exploded. A flash, a crash, and then a mighty impact rocked the courtyard. Leaves and petals filled the air.

Caren and Tina gasped, covering their mouths, as Igna Alvern finally reached me, his uniform hanging off him in rags. He must have torn himself free by unleashing far more of his plentiful mana than he could hope to control.

"I should have known," I said, raising my rod to fight and revising my assessment of the boy upward.

"Of course you should! I am the Hero's heir. And at this distance..." Igna bared his teeth, imbuing his blades with more mana than they could hold. Lightning flared as he leaned forward, poised to strike. "A sorcerer like you stands no chance! I've won this duel!"

Self-confidence was a virtue, or at least a vast improvement on my own self-deprecating ways. But *over*confidence could prove disastrous, as it had for Gerard Wainwright, once heralded as a prodigy. "People are a hell of a tough nut to crack. Of course, that's also what makes 'em so interesting," Zel had remarked sardonically after beating down a group of secret black-dragon worshippers in the royal capital's back alleys. I quite agreed.

"What are you laughing at?! Take your loss and feel just how powerless you are!" Igna roared and launched himself forward, becoming a bolt of earthbound lightning before leaping high at the last moment. His blades swung down to end my life—and stopped, motionless in midair.

Caren's and Tina's breath caught in their throats. They had been standing ready to leap into the fray if something went wrong. Lena, clinging to the sword with the other children, gave a boastful sniff.

"Briars?" my sister murmured.

"Made of black ice?" added the little noblewoman.

Igna hung suspended in the invisible thicket of dark, icy thorns with which I'd surrounded myself—a thicket of all-freezing silver-snow.

"D-Damn you!" The dark-haired boy flailed in midair. "Wh-Where did you get this power?!"

"A nosy black-and-white angel told me she would 'just love' to join in," I said, holding up my bracelet and scratching my cheek. This time, my ring gave me a jolt of pain.

I suppose it couldn't hurt to try.

I drew the lightning-wyrm dagger I'd borrowed from Caren and touched it to Silver Bloom. The orbs blazed, radiant, and ancient writing appeared on the long, dull blade.

Is it because we're in the old church?

My rod, like the bracelet, had replenished its mana before I knew it. The dagger guzzled from Silver Bloom's near limitless reservoir, transforming into a spear of obsidian lightning with a tip like a bladed wing.

"My blades and my lightning will shred your little brambles like so much—"

Despair spread over Igna's face as his words died on his lips.

"Wh-What on earth...?" Caren stared and clutched Tina's hand. The equally wide-eyed young noblewoman gasped and reciprocated.

I levitated Silver Bloom and raised the massive, imperfect lance of lightning that was to become a new secret art. "All right," I said, "catch!"

"W-Wait a—"

I took an easy, upward swing. The great electric blade passed over Igna's head...and blasted the clouds out of the sky. My ring shone brighter in protest, but I ignored it. This was excessive force by any standard. I could see that the word "restraint" was not to be found in the witch's dictionary.

The swords slipped from the boy's hands and stuck point-first in the ground. I loosed his icy bonds, and he landed on his feet, staring blankly into the sky.

"I-It can't be," he muttered to himself. "N-No mortal can wield such power. I-It's too like Grand Duchess Alice's Thunderbolt or...y-yes, the lost Celestial Spear of legend."

"Almost none of the power came from me," I admitted. "Would you like to keep going?"

Igna shuddered, eyes awash in baffled indecision. Even so, he seemed to make up his mind and reached for his fallen swords to—

"Igna, that's quite enough," a voice interrupted. "You cannot defeat Allen as you are now."

"Twin Heavens and the angel were impossible enough on their own," grumbled another. "Now he has the divine ancestor's dagger

that Shooting Star used two hundred years ago? It's enough to make even my head ache. No wonder Alice thinks he's something special."

The arrival of Lady Aurelia and Lady Shise Glenbysidhe, wearing her floral beret and Royal Academy uniform, forced us to call off the duel whether Igna liked it or not. The former Hero and Floral Heaven had set potent wards over the courtyard, presumably to prevent him teleporting away with another talisman.

The boy ground his teeth, watching me through bloodshot, hate-filled eyes. Even so, he pulled his swords free, murmured a halting "My sincere apologies," directed only at Lady Aurelia, and walked off into the church alone. He never raised his head.

Maybe I shouldn't have accepted his challenge.

But no sooner had I sheathed the dagger than Caren and Tina seized my arms, crying my name in evident relief. Atra and Lia latched on to my legs. As for Lena, she kept one arm around the sword and clutched my left sleeve.

"Whoa there!"

While I steadied myself, Lady Aurelia bowed low and said, "Once again, a member of my house has caused you distress." After a pause, she added, "He isn't wicked—not really. Only, he must struggle with the gap between himself and you veterans of so many fierce battles."

"It was no trouble," I replied. "I understand a little of what he feels myself."

"Thank you for saying so." The former Hero's expression twisted with worries too great to conceal. Every family had its problems.

With that out of the way, the great demisprite sorceress shamefacedly addressed the girl still clinging to my left arm. "I guess I didn't make much of a first impression. I can't believe I lost control like that. The name is Shise Glenbysidhe." She sounded calmer than she had the other day, but tears welled in her eyes, threatening to overflow at any moment.

Caren and I looked at Tina and gave her a gentle push forward.

Lady Shise removed her beret and asked her pupil's daughter, "Will you tell me your name?"

The young noblewoman glanced at us for a moment, making certain we were still there, before replying, "T-Tina Howard."

"I see." Lady Shise's hair bristled, and she looked up at the sky. "So she gave you that name." Tears poured down her cheeks, making damp spots on the ground. Then she covered her face with her hands and sobbed, voice quavering, "Rosa...Rosa remembered me. Even after I left her with the Coalfields and kept traveling."

The sight of the legendary sorceress's bitter tears left us at a loss for words. We had no idea what had passed between the late Duchess Rosa, Lady Shise, and Io, but we could tell that the weeping woman in front of us had loved Duchess Rosa with all her heart.

Lady Shise dried her eyes and smiled. "Do you mind if I hug you?"

"N-No."

The great sorceress's little shoulders shook as she tenderly embraced Tina. "I lost my dream, my people, and my students," she said, closing her eyes, "but by the moon and stars and the World Tree, and by my divine ancestor, I swear: As long as Shise Glenbysidhe draws breath, she will help Tina Howard."

Her overwhelming mana was transforming the courtyard into a field of flowers. I could feel how long she must have lived with regret. Tina must have too.

"Thank you," she said and nodded cheerfully. "I sincerely appreciate it, Lady— Eek!"

The great sorceress scooped up the young noblewoman and twirled her around on the spot. "So polite!" she exclaimed, a fond smile on her face. "It's hard to believe you're Rosa's daughter. That girl *looked* pretty, but she was a little terror, I can tell you."

"Lady Shise, I think that can wait." Lady Aurelia stepped in, forestalling what promised to be an endless stream of reminiscences.

The great sorceress reluctantly dropped the topic and turned to me. "Allen, right? How's Ellyn these days?"

"Y-You know my mother?" I gasped, accompanied by startled cries from Caren and Tina.

Wh-Where could they have met?

"Who do you think taught amplification magic to the best singer the western wolf clan ever had? Hint: You're looking at her." The great sorceress smirked and floated off the ground despite her lack of wings. "You know, for a key, you sure like fighting the hard way. Between that and what's haunting you, you've got my curiosity—"

Rapid footfalls heralded the arrival of Stella and Lily, dressed to the nines in white and pale scarlet, respectively. I didn't sense Lydia with them. Had she stayed at the palace?

"Mr. Allen, we just got back."

"Did you miss us?"

Lady Shise froze in midair and dropped to the ground. Her gaze fixed on Stella, who had gone to the children. Atra and Lia got head pats, of course, and our resident saint didn't forget Lena either. Now that I thought about it, Lady Shise had only met Tina before, hadn't she?

The greatest of demisprite sorceresses toppled with a groan. Tina caught her, shouting her name.

"O-Oh no!" Stella cried, rushing to join them.

Oh dear. This seems awfully familiar. So much for all my burning questions.

"Thanks, Caren," I said, removing the dagger from my waist and handing it to my sister. "It was a big help."

"I couldn't believe my eyes," she said slowly. "I'm still no match for you at all."

"That's not—"

"Don't try to argue." Caren cut my words short and seized my right arm. Tina and Stella were still busy nursing Lady Shise. In which case...

"It looks as though she'll need more time to recover," I said. "Lily, if you would."

"Tasty tea and treats while we wait? Of course!" The scarlet-haired maid clasped her hands and beamed. "Oh, and Caren, I'd like to talk something over with you."

My sister cowered behind me, cowed by the bright gleam in Lily's eyes. "Wh-What?" she asked warily, letting only her head show.

"Oh, I just *know* you'll love it!" Lily threw in a smug laugh. "Now,

step right this way."

Caren looked dubious, but she took the maid's hand and walked off into the old church.

"I will deal with Igna," Lady Aurelia said, watching the children leap on Luce's snow-white belly. "I think the Hero will be able to speak with you tomorrow."

"Thank you. I apologize for the inconvenience." I bowed, hand on heart.

How deep will I peer into the abyss of history?

I squeezed my rod and gazed up at the cloudless sky.

*

"Curses," I muttered to myself in the shadow of a stone column, adjusting my cloak. "The place is crawling with soldiers."

I slipped through the nighttime palace undetected, avoiding massive military mana lamps and taking care that the twin swords at my sides made no sound as I hurried toward the secret entrance to Black Blossom's prison. The Yustinian Empire proclaimed itself heir to the Lothringens, who had once bent the world to their will. Their palace, survivor of so many civil wars, naturally possessed a long history, and successive renovations had left many disused passages in their wake. My own House of Alvern, the only grand-ducal line to remain on the world stage, must have taken a hand in some of that construction, because our archive still held old plans of the building. I could never have gained access to the spell-gaol without them. Yet when I thought of the sentence I would be handed, perhaps as soon as tomorrow, I couldn't keep from shuddering.

For as long as I could remember, I'd had only one goal: to become the Hero. Only one member of our house could inherit the ancient title and our founder's sacred sword Dark Night. I had honed my swordplay and spellcraft, trained my body, read deeply, and disciplined my mind. Fierce competition with the other contenders had nearly driven me to my knees, but I had persevered, pressing ever forward. Last year, at fifteen, I had finally, *finally* become the Hero's heir apparent. Yet now that status stood on thin ice.

"I won't stand for this," I muttered. "I refuse to stand for it."

Grand Duchess Alice had driven the black dragon, one of the seven, from the Wainwright capital. Rumors in our house had it that one of Duke Leinster's daughters and an unknown thirteen-year-old boy had joined her in the fight. Had five years really passed since then?

I hadn't believed the story at first. Grand Duchess Alice's might could shake the entire planet. The Leinsters descended from the great Scarlet Flame, who had done much to establish modern magic in an age without gods, but not even a lady of their house could be fit to fight at the Hero's side. Much less a humble commoner. But the rumors of that boy had not stopped. They had kept reaching my ears, even here in the imperial capital. After the black dragon, he had battled a vampire, a devil, a monster, and the many cabals lurking beneath the surface of society, repulsing some and vanquishing others. In no time at all, this adopted son of the wolf clan, hardly older than me, had gained a reputation as the "Brain of the Lady of the Sword"...and Grand Duchess Alice had started smiling more and more often. At the same time, I'd become aware of ominous rumblings: "Perhaps the Hero plans to pass her sword and title to this 'Brain.'"

We Alverns had a crucial role to play, maintaining peace and stability in a godless world. How could we leave it to some wolf-clan adoptee, not even a distant relation? The idea was preposterous. Yet Grand Duchess Alice never made any definitive statement on the succession, so I had shunted the problem into a corner of my mind even as I stewed in my gloom. Alverns had been inheriting the title and the lightning-wyrm sword, generation after generation, for at least a millennium. Surely she wouldn't break with such a fundamental tradition. And surely I was the more skilled candidate, in any case. But I had suffered defeat at the hands of his sister and his student, and then again going head-to-head with the man himself. I had almost assuredly lost my place in the line of succession.

I can't afford to hesitate now. The time for that is past!

I clamped my lips shut and lay low near an old well on the edge

of the palace grounds. Soldiers in full battle gear patrolled the stone passage that held the secret entrance to the spell-gaol.

"Hey," said one. "Heard the news?"

"What news?" another answered. Both spoke carelessly, but they held themselves like hardened veterans. Their equipment marked them as elite knights of the imperial guard. And though no longer young, they were still in their prime.

The first knight lowered his voice. "Just between us, it's about that pip-squeak in the spell-gaol. They decided when we're moving him."

"He was part of the group that attacked the city, wasn't he? Are you sure we oughta risk it?" The second looked about, his apprehension plain. Knowledge of the threat Black Blossom posed seemed to have spread, albeit indirectly.

If they've picked a date to move him, they must be ready to start interrogating him in earnest.

The knights moved on, still chatting as they went.

"We've got the good old grand marshal. Worrying's a waste of time with him around."

"That I'll grant you."

Imperial Grand Marshal Moss "Castle Breaker" Saxe, a seasoned commander, had crossed swords with Heaven's Sword of Lalannoy many times and lived to tell of it. Could the Brain of the Lady of the Sword beat him, I suddenly wondered? He had less mana than even the average person, but he controlled it with far greater than average precision. Armed with that strange silver bracelet and enchanted rod, he might just stand a chance.

"I'm not strong enough," I muttered. "Not nearly. Not enough to beat him."

I made for the far end of the passage, never rising above a crouch. There, the hidden staircase down to the spell-gaol began.

Thunk. Thunk.

I descended the invisible spiral staircase one step at a time, relying on a feeble glow I had conjured in the palm of my hand to navigate the domain of utter darkness. A nervous thrill ran through

me at each noise of my own footfalls. I had come here once before, but I would never grow used to it. Its eeriness defied familiarity.

The stairs seemed infinite, but like anything, they had an end. Eventually I reached the bottom.

Should I really keep going? Wouldn't it be wiser to turn back?

I shook off my indecision and advanced to the spell-gaol proper.

"There you are," a man's voice rasped out of the darkness. "You kept me waiting, little Alvern." He sounded even weaker than he had three days ago, like he might expire at any moment.

"Can you really give me your power?" I asked hesitantly, stopping in my tracks. "Power I can use to crush the Brain of the Lady of the Sword?"

Muffled laughter mocked me at the edge of hearing. My ears pricked at the clink of chains. I held up my little light, and my breath caught at the mad gleam it revealed in Io's eyes.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" he demanded. "I am Io Lockfield, the Black Blossom, the greatest sorcerer on the continent. Nothing could be simpler."

Notice how he doesn't call himself the second apostle.

"In your condition?" I asked, making my light a little stronger. Io looked as pitiful as ever, still bound in innumerable chains. His wounds had been stanched just enough to keep him from bleeding out, but I doubted he could last much longer.

The demisprite outcast who had lowered himself to join the apostles curled his lips in an ugly sneer. "At least you *talk* tough." He chuckled. "Let me guess: You challenged the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, and he thrashed you. Only a handful of people on the continent can match that man for spell control. An untested boy like you can't even fathom what he's capable of."

"Still your tongue." My light flared with wrathful mana.

"Never lost to anyone outside your house before? I'll help you lick your wounds, if that's what you came for. Well?"

"Enough!" I lost my head and slammed my fist into the spell-gaol. Then I turned my back on it, breathing hard and clawing at my hair. "The deal is off. I must have been out of my mind. All your 'power' can't get you out of that cell, so what good is it to me? I'll accept

the loss, go back to training, and hone my skills the old-fashioned way until I can put him in his— Ah! D-Damn you. H-How can you reach me...out here?"

I writhed against the grip that had suddenly fastened on my throat. Io shouldn't have been able to lift a finger, yet somehow he had not only broken his chains but punched a hole in the spell-gaol itself to clamp his bloodstained hand around my neck. His left arm, partially petrified, writhed with inky formulae. And in the meantime, my feet were slowly leaving the cold ground.

I...I can't brea—

"Thank you," he said. "You have my gratitude, Igna Alvern. I inscribed a secret weapon on my heart for times like this, but it turns out the Saint was right about these *things* having big appetites. I don't think I had quite enough to feed it, so I'll make up the difference with your blood."

"Let...let go o—"

A forest of stone branches burst from Io's shadow, forming several dozen wolf heads that dug their fangs into my flesh. I tried to scream in pain, but my consciousness faded as they tore my mana from me.

No... I...I can't let him get outsi...

Darkness filled my vision as the spell-gaol echoed with the apostle's scornful laughter.

"You assumed I was at death's door, too weak to move. But thanks to your imbecilic folly, I think I'll get my shot at revenge. On everyone."

My hands fell as strength left them.

Forgive me...Grand Duchess...Alice.

Io's fearful ravings became the last thing I heard.

"I'll sacrifice this whole world, feed it to Stone Serpent and Tenebrous Wolf. The whole slate, wiped clean."

Chapter 4

"Good grief. Will His Imperial Majesty ever make a *reasonable* demand? He'll grind my old bones to dust the way he's going. It's getting to be high time I retire," I grumbled, stroking my gray beard with a scarred hand.

In my office at high command, not far from the palace, I drummed my fingers on the ebony desk that I'd been using for more than fifty years, since we'd ended the civil wars, and brooded on the challenge that Emperor Yuri Yustin had set me that morning.

"Now he wants me to move Black Blossom from the spell-gaol to the surface under heavy restraint and interrogate him before Floral Heaven gets the chance," I sighed. "It *is* possible, but it won't be easy."

The Church of the Holy Spirit had been pulling strings all over the west of the continent. Its second apostle, the powerful demisprite sorcerer Io Lockfield, had single-handedly assassinated aristocrats and military leaders of many nations, if reports were to be believed. Would it really be wise to remove him from his prison, even if he did have one foot in the grave? No mortal could stay sane for long in the spell-gaol. Interrogation was out of the question.

I touched my gray hair, recalling my emperor's words: "Our country has put itself too deep in the kingdom's debt. They gave us peace; we only gave them Shiki. We desire new information to bargain with." His Imperial Majesty had always seen the big picture, and his sight had not dimmed with age. He looked beyond the war against the church, planning to score diplomatic points for the next generation.

I can see the necessity. I just don't like being the boots on the ground.

"Really, he is impossible."

I leaned my old body back in my chair, not caring how it wrinkled

my uniform. I was looking out the window at the eastern sky, toward Lalannoy, when I heard a knock at the door. I straightened in my seat and responded with dignity.

"Enter."

"By your leave." A platinum-haired knight strode briskly into the room and shut the door before throwing me a smart salute. Despite his youth, Carl Labyria commanded the imperial guard, and he looked the part wearing his uniform and longsword. "Grand Marshal, sir, I have finished organizing the detachment you requested. Please confirm my choices."

"Well done," I said placidly, and the finest young knight in the empire stepped forward to place his paperwork on my desk. I scanned it at once.

They've all seen a battlefield. I'd call it a reasonable lineup, except for one.

"I don't see why you should join the force yourself," I said. "His Imperial Majesty only foisted—*ahem!*—*delegated* this task to me. You won't find much to interest you shifting a prisoner from the spell-gaol to an aboveground cell."

"If I may make so bold, sir." Carl snapped his heels together and flashed the bracing smile, only tolerable in a young gallant, that made him a favorite with the ladies at court. "This mission merits the personal attention of the tried-and-true commander of all the empire's armies. I fail to see why an inexperienced youth, such as myself, should consider it beneath him!"

"You take your duties *too* seriously. Oh, but don't take that as a reproach." Having forestalled a bow from the promising youngster, I folded my hands on my desk and confessed what I had felt so keenly during the recent attack. "I've been keeping pace with His Imperial Majesty for seventy years now. He's borne the years shockingly well, for all his almost daily threats to retire, but they've taken their toll on me. I think I might make this my last duty."

That seemed to strain the young knight's credulity. He shook his head, then met my gaze with a confused look. "But...but sir, you slew three skeletal dragons mere days ago!"

"No. No I did not, Carl Labyria." I waved my wrinkled left hand

before the knight could say more. Gripping Castle Breaker's hilt, I revealed the truth of that night. "Some of the kingdom's finest merely gave me credit for the victory. The grand marshal can't be allowed to disgrace himself in the emperor's own capital. That ought to tell you how wide the gap between the kingdom and the empire has grown. We need to foster new talent, and quickly, while the northern barbarians are the only assumed enemies on our borders."

My grandson Huss, currently accompanying Princess Yana Yustin on her visit to the royal capital, was the best my own family could offer. The army had many other talented youths as well. But not nearly enough, considering the competition.

I opened a drawer and withdrew a report stamped "top secret." Its title: "Re: A Certain Wainwright Subject."

"Don't give me that look, Carl," I said. "My retirement will be good news, at least for the palace garrison. You'll get to foist the job of listening to His Imperial Majesty grumble on my old shoulders."

"Y-You...have me there, sir," the knight admitted in all earnestness.

I burst out laughing and slapped my thigh. "That's the spirit. Keep it up!"

"I...I'll do my best."

That seemed to have done something to ease the tension.

"One other thing." I flipped through the prisoner escort papers as I changed the subject. In a way, this was another matter of life and death. "About security for the group that's to meet with His Imperial Majesty this afternoon..."

"As you commanded, sir, I have selected only the tightest-lipped and most loyal knights from your own veteran force and the imperial guard."

"Good. As I stressed in my message, this visit must remain unofficial. Even then, allowing commoners into the palace will cause resentment in some quarters. Still, I hear that the Brain of the Lady of the Sword has deep ties to leaders in several nations. And that all the long-lived races in the kingdom's western regions know his sister, the 'lightning wolf,' for her bravery."

The words sounded implausible even as I spoke them. And yet

we had acquired the information through too many channels to admit any doubt.

"Most importantly..." I closed my eyes and exhaled. "Both are guests of the Hero, Grand Duchess Alice Alvern. Remember that any disrespect could spark a major incident."

"Yes, sir! I will make doubly sure." The young commander of the imperial guard struck his scabbard to show how seriously he took the responsibility. "But with all due respect, sir, who exactly *is* this 'Brain'? To be frank, neither I nor the guards I briefed can bring ourselves to believe he exists."

I couldn't blame them. If I had merely heard the story, I would have doubted the sanity of my informant. And horrifyingly, it seemed that many of the Brain's accomplishments had been kept from prying ears. The emperor had even speculated that his presence had contributed significantly to the kingdom's rise in the past few years.

I passed the report to Carl in silence.

"Wh-What is this?" he asked.

"Everything we've managed to learn about him. Personally, I think you'll sleep easier if you never read it," I said. Brilliance too great could throw lives far off course.

He's already saved two *cursed children? Impossible.*

Carl took my warning without comment and bowed low. "I shall study it with care."

"Better keep a stiff drink handy while you do. You'll have a hard time getting through any of those pages sober."

"I...I appreciate the advice." The young knight warily eyed the report. I guessed that I had scared him enough.

"They always crop up at history's biggest turning points," I said, clapping Carl Labyria on the shoulder. "Legends, I mean. People who define the age they live in, whose tales will live on for generations to come. You'll get a chance to talk with one in the palace once we finish moving Black Blossom."

"Yes, sir! I look forward to it."

"Good," I said. It *would* be a treat—for His Imperial Majesty too, I imagined. We had spent so many of those far-off days of our youth poring over the old epics, and we had lived our whole lives aspiring

to carry ourselves like champions of legend.

I squeezed my sword hilt and looked out the window. Dark clouds were covering the sky, portending rain. Perhaps even the heavens despaired of the captive apostle's fate.

*

"Humph! Could you *be* more of a cad, Allen? If you had any decency, you would have told me 'Tina's older sister, Stella, is here with her' before I made a public spectacle of myself twice in a few short days! And as if that weren't bad enough, the two of *them* took care of *me*! Do you have any idea of the distress I'm going through?"

The great Floral Heaven violently returned her teacup to its saucer on the table before the luxurious sofa that had been brought out into the courtyard for her. Lady Shise Glenbysidhe didn't look like a demisprite despite her diminutive size. She wore sage green today, out of uniform except for her floral beret.

Luce's tail waved a noise complaint from the shade of a tree. Stella, wearing a pale-azure sweater, shot concerned glances from her seat beside me. I gestured an apology to griffin and lady alike.

I was still reeling from Lydia's postbreakfast proclamation: "You, Caren, and Tiny are going to see the old emperor in his palace today. Take Lily as your guide and bodyguard. The rest of us will join you later for Black Blossom's interrogation. Need I say you have no choice? The emperor's already agreed, and so has the professor."

Tina made sense, since she had sat out the previous visit, but I hadn't counted on the invitation extending to houseless nobodies like Caren and me. I could only imagine what deals must have been struck behind the scenes, although I suspected that Mr. Walker, who had apparently left suddenly for Lalannoy that morning, had played a hand in them. And the professor, who had stepped out to a military stronghold.

The biggest surprise had been Caren's ready acquiescence. "There's nowhere I wouldn't go for you," she had said—a victim of Anna's and Lily's wiles, if the looks on their faces were anything to

go by. They had probably gotten to her during that private talk the day before. Now she was off dressing for the visit, as was a cheerful Tina.

The children had dozed off, and Alice had woken up but gone inside "to check on Violet Growly," so I found myself bereft of allies. Alice hadn't even explained why she had summoned me from Lalannoy yet.

"That hardly seems fair," I argued, straining under the mental weight of the made-to-measure suit, courtesy of the Ducal House of Leinster, that I had sworn never to wear again. "I don't see when I could have explained matters to your ladyship when you only recovered from your first sight of Stella this morning. Especially when we've been searching for Igna since last night."

"That sounds like your problem," said Lady Shise. "I need to drag my idiot apprentice out of the spell-gaol today. I can't even spare time for a nice, long talk with Tina and her sister!"

I let out an incredulous groan, wondering if I had ever encountered anyone so unreasonable. No one had told me about her part in Io's interrogation. While I sat dumbstruck, Lady Shise's mana carpeted the courtyard in unseasonal flowers.

"Listen up, Stella," she said, spinning her beret on her finger. The noblewoman still had her eye on me. "You can't indulge a man all the time. The last Shooting Star had woman troubles too, you know? The Comet and the Crescent Moon were both so shy I got impatient watching them. Of course, Chise fell for him too."

"Y-You don't say?" Stella gave an awkward nod and slid a knife into a cheesecake on a large platter, distributing slices onto small dessert plates.

I would like to know more about Duchess Letty and Alicia Coalheart, the real Crescent Moon, but now isn't the time.

"Please don't give Stella strange ideas," I said, adding more sugar than usual to my tea.

"Ha! I'm only stating the facts," Lady Shise countered. "I tell it like it is. And I bet Twin Heavens and the angel agree with me. Now, where were we?"

Much to my displeasure, the ring and bracelet flashed in unison.

“The other apostles who were with Io,” I said, stirring the sugar in with a teaspoon. “I understand they attacked the old church looking for a forbidden tome left by someone called...the Bibliophage, was it? And you and Alice repelled them.”

“Here, Mr. Allen.” Stella passed me a plate of cheesecake. I thanked her and took a sip of tea. I should have shown a little more restraint with the sugar.

“I know that you have been pursuing the ‘Apostate of the Great Moon’ for many years, although I don’t know why,” I continued. “I learned that from a note that Duchess Rosa left in the Nitti archive in the city of water. I suspect that the Apostate is Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield, who calls himself the Sage, but I can’t be certain.”

I set my cup on its saucer and awaited the response. Confirming Aster’s identity would justify a trip to the imperial capital on its own.

“I see. You saw Rosa’s notes,” Lady Shise murmured with a faraway look in her eyes and hung her beret on a branch that grew to catch it. She seemed to be recalling her visit to the city of water. “I’ll cut to the chase: The ‘Sage’ and ‘Crescent Moon’ we fought that night were both fakes. They looked the parts down to their height, they spoke right, and their spells and techniques were almost identical, but they weren’t who they said they were.”

Stella and I exchanged looks.

“The Sage and Crescent Moon...”

“Are impostors?”

What did that signify? Of course, Duchess Letty had already declared the vampiress a fake back in the city of water.

“I don’t know who the former really is,” Lady Shise continued, touching the jade ribbon in her lavender hair. “His name doesn’t even match, although you wouldn’t think there could be many sorcerers with his command of ice. But the vampiress has to be a Coalfield. No one else would bring that tacky black parasol to a fight. Even the people out west have forgotten by now, but I know Alicia was a Coalheart, and she loathed the main house that indirectly murdered her mother down to the marrow of her bones. She’d rather die than use that thing.”

The quiet intensity of her fury left Stella and me speechless. The

counterfeit of an old comrade in arms must have struck a nerve. Plants rustled as I took up the conversation.

"I met Ross Howard when I closed the black gate in the city of craft. He said that he had helped build eight altars throughout the world, and he asked me to 'stop those who would use the altars, and shut the black gates, so that the children of the divine staff can laugh and play.' He also told me that Ashfield the Sage and Ashheart the Moon Fiend 'know the roots of the world,' and that the Shiki archive holds records of them."

Lady Shise blinked her violet eyes, while Stella's widened. Then the great sorceress put her beret back on her head and folded her arms. "Do you have any idea what you just— Wait. Could it be...?" She lapsed into muttering and retreated to a world of her own.

"Mr. Allen," Stella ventured instead, "was this person you met...?"

"Yes, your *very* distant ancestor," I said. "He claimed to have founded the House of Howard."

"Founded our house? If that's true, he's missing from the family tree. Father will be delighted." Pale-azure snowflakes danced, glinting in the light, and Stella's hair swayed just as Tina's was wont to do. Like sister, like sister.

"Hmm... He seemed genuine enough to—"

The platinum-blonde Hero took the chair beside me before I finished answering Stella. I hadn't sensed her approach.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Alice Alvern continued, picking up my cheesecake in her bare hand and taking a bite of it. "You never know what magic from the age of gods will do. Shise, don't act so stunned over a little thing like that. It's embarrassing. My Allen's been through the black gate on the Heaven Fiend Island in the Four Heroes Sea. More cheesecake."

"Welcome back, Alice. Aren't Tina and Caren with you?" I asked. No sooner had I cut another slice than her hand snatched it away. Perhaps she ought to curb her appetite.

"My comrade and enemy number three finished changing," she said. "Violet Growly needs more time. The scarlet crybaby and the maids want to outdo themselves. They've all got this gleam in their eyes. It scares me."

"Oh."

I hoped Caren would be all right. She had found best friends in Stella and Felicia and established cordial relations with Lydia and the others. Still, she had been a shy child, never wanting to leave my side.

Come to think of it, Alice and her "witness," Lady Shise, are both here. I'd better get them to finally explain what they wanted me for.

"He went through a black gate that *still worked*?" Lady Shise demanded, emerging from her meditations to arch an eyebrow. "Oh, no wonder Twin Heavens and the great elementals are so keen to help him. And if he closed another gate in the city of craft, that explains why I picked up traces of the Dark Lord's mana and puts my doubts to rest."

Part of her response baffled me. What did passing through a black gate have to do with the Dark Lord's mana?

"Oh, I fought alongside the Dark Lord in Lalannoy," I said, making a mental note. "Only by chance, of course. Maybe I picked up her mana then. Or when I met Ross—she was with me for that too."

Lady Shise, Stella, and even Alice froze. The duke's daughter recovered first.

"M-Mr. Allen," she said, plucking at my over-fine sleeve, "what on earth do you mean?"

"You remember Rill," I said. "That girl with the white cat, Kifune. She's the Dark Lord. Although from what Ross said, I think she was using an assumed name and appearance."

"Humph." Stella pursed her lips, shifting from shock to displeasure. She made a point of getting up and taking the seat to my immediate left.

D-Did I do something to offend her?

"Lydia, Princess Cheryl, and Tina already knew, didn't they?" she demanded.

"Well, yes," I said. "I told everyone who helped fight the false goddess under the independence memorial."

"It's not fair," Stella grumbled, pouting like a child now and not trying to hide it. She seized my left sleeve and looked up at me. "I can't stand that you told Tina and wouldn't tell me. Is that all I mean

to you?”

“O-Of course not. I didn’t mean...”

“Your fault,” Alice pronounced, joining the fray while I floundered.

“If you make Stella cry, you’ll answer to me,” added Lady Shise.

Hopelessly outnumbered, I saw no hope of victory.

“Mercy. I surrender,” I said, invoking botanical magic to conjure a flower which I placed in Stella’s hair. “I’ll be more considerate in future.”

“As you should.” Stella flashed a gentle smile and reluctantly unhanded my sleeve.

Lady Shise crossed her legs and raised her hands slightly, as if to say that she had done all she could. She actually said, “You’re one strange fellow, even for the last key. The Thunder Fox, the Blazing Qilin, and even the lonesome Frigid Crane from Star’s End follow you. Twin Heavens, the pinnacle of mortal achievement, took a shine to you, and the ‘second coming of the Blue Rose,’ Carina Wainwright, gave you her blessing. And now you say you teamed up with the Dark Lord? Where did you come from? You don’t even fight like a key. Chise and I learned about that when we were little. ‘Keys devour their enemies’ mana, root and branch. Never attempt to meddle in their spells.’”

“Star’s End.” Another unfamiliar term. And “lonesome”? Lena, it sounds like your secret’s out.

I grinned in spite of myself, thinking of the child no doubt sound asleep inside Tina.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “I’m an ordinary wolf-clan boy.”

The Hero and the great sorceress were having none of it.

“Harsh, Allen.”

“In your dreams maybe. And even that’s a stretch.”

C-Cut me some slack.

The remaining young woman studied her new flower in a small ice mirror, sipped her tea, and said, “Too much modesty is no virtue.”

“E-Et tu, Stella?” I said. “Why, then Luce is my only friend.”

The white griffin looked up and voiced a cry of disagreement. I suppressed a groan.

"Mm. Good Luce." Alice nodded.

"Ha! More nonsense," crowed Lady Shise.

Oh, was the sky always this blue?

"May I return to the matter at hand?" I asked at length.

"Mm-hmm."

"And be quick about it."

I covered Luce's shady retreat in blooming flowers—a modest revenge—and threw up my hands. "I have so many questions for you—about the great elementals and great spells, the seven dragons, the divine Thinking Staff, the eight grand-ducal houses, the altars, the Shiki archive, the 'fields' and 'hearts,' the cult of the Great Moon, how the ice wyrm came to be, and what the first Wainwright, the Blue Rose, planned. I'd also like to hear how you met my mother, Lady Shise. And about the 'keys.'"

Just listing it all made my head spin. It was enough to make me despair of ever closing the information gap with the church's false Saint. I wished I'd had more time to speak with Arthur. But for the present...

"Most of all, I'd like to hear about your travels with Duchess Rosa."

Stella gasped. "Oh, Mr. Allen," she murmured, tears welling in her eyes. We knew so little about Duchess Rosa, and I doubted we would have many opportunities to hear Floral Heaven's one account of her.

Lady Shise screwed up her face. "I can't believe you put that first," she muttered admiringly. "It's a long story."

"I'll listen," I said. "With Stella and Tina."

The great sorceress hesitated. "I'll consider it. Give me some time."

"Of course."

Lady Shise's parting from Duchess Rosa must have been a bitter memory. Her outburst on meeting Tina made that plain. I knew that some wounds of the heart did not heal with time. We could only wait and see.

I shot a meaningful look at Stella, then bowed to the Hero. "I'd like you to tell me what you can too, Alice. But your health comes

first.”

Lady Aurelia had informed me the previous night—slowly but surely, the time Alice slept was growing longer.

“You’re a mother hen.” The platinum-blonde girl cracked a slight smile. “A Hero fights.”

“I don’t bake cheesecakes for girls who say things like that.”

Alice jumped. “Th-That’s a mean trick!”

“Yes, yes, I know,” I said. “Now, tell me why I’m here while we have our witness, Lady Shise, on hand. The suspense is killing me.”

“Excuse me? Witness to what? This is the first I’ve heard of it.” The great sorceress frowned and turned her gaze on Alice.

You mean she hasn’t even told Lady Shise? What could be that sensitive?

The girl jerked her platinum-blonde head away. “You’re a mean magician. So I’m giving you Bright Night,” she said, sour-faced. A wave of her hand called the light-wyrm sword that Tina and the children had spent the past several days carrying. It appeared from thin air and dropped, shining, into my baffled hands.

She’s giving me this? What does she expect me to do with the battered old thing?

“Go on. Draw it,” Alice urged.

“What? Oh, right.”

Lady Shise was positively heaping sugar into her tea, I noted out of the corner of my eye as I slowly slid the weapon free. Radiance poured from the scabbard—a bright white blade alight with a quantity of mana that fairly took my breath away.

What on earth?

I turned to the great sorceress. She crossed her legs and said, “We’re sitting in the Alverns’ burial ground. You’ll find orders of magnitude more elementals here than almost anywhere else, even now that the laws are in ruins. And that’s the Lady of Lightning’s prized sword that she carried off with her in ancient times. You shouldn’t be surprised that it perked up with Tina and the great elementals holding on to it.”

“The Lady of Lightning? Like in the storybooks?” Stella cut in, drowning out my feeble “Y-You don’t say?”

How could— Wait. Does it work like Devoted Blossom? That flaming sword healed itself. If only I'd gotten a chance to speak with Master Fugen. I hear he was there.

I returned the sword to its black scabbard and attempted to renegotiate. "Listen, Alice—"

"No take-backs."

"But really—"

"Just put it away when you're not using it. Like you do with Twin Heavens' rod."

I abandoned the attempt. I couldn't convince Alice. What options did that leave?

Several people's worth of footsteps intruded on my worrying.

"Thank you for waiting, sir!" a voice cried.

"*Perfection* takes time," another added, with a lilting laugh.

I turned to see an exuberant Tina in an azure gown and Lily, clasping her hands and beaming, in one of pale scarlet. A short way behind them came a wolf-clan girl in a sophisticated violet dress, staring bashfully at the ground as she wavered between anticipation and anxiety. The necklace I'd given her glinted around her throat.

"A-Allen, um..."

"Gorgeous," I heard Stella murmur, voicing my own sentiments, as I approached my sister and took her hand.

"Caren, you look dazzling," I said. "You might have stepped out of a picture book."

"Th-Thank you very much." Caren blushed, and her ears and tail gave a happy twitch. I had the most adorable sister in the whole wide world.

A sharp clap drew all eyes to the old church door. There stood Lydia, dressed for a sword fight. Lady Aurelia must have still been inside with Anna and the other maids. The ill-tempered noblewoman swept back her scarlet hair and leveled an accusing finger at me.

"Stop fooling around. The sooner you leave for the palace, the sooner you'll get back," she snapped, then paused. "It looks like the pint-sized Hero hasn't explained why she invited you yet. Fine. Stella, I can talk while she—"

"Scarlet crybaby, look." Alice tossed me the sword before Lydia

could finish.

"Whoa!" While I scrambled to catch it, the Hero made a show of sweeping her own platinum-blonde tresses aside and puffing out her meager chest, presumably imitating the Lady of the Sword.

"Allen will use an Alvern sword, not a Leinster one," she said, triumphant. "That's the final word. Frustrated?"

A cloud of fiery plumes materialized as mana lifted Lydia's scarlet hair.

Oh dear.

I signaled the girls with my eyes and hands, then distanced myself from the Lady of the Sword and the Hero. Lady Shise seemed to take the hint as well and raised a many-layered barrier.

Lydia drew Cresset Fox, her mouth a taut rictus. "Time to D-I-E."

"I'll always be out of your league, crybaby," came the response, and the courtyard suddenly got a lot louder as they started roughhousing. We couldn't even carry on a conversation.

Lady Shise grimaced, muttered, "What a pair of troublemakers," and entered her barrier. The crashes ceased, and we could hear each other again. Io's interrogation, I suspected, would be somewhat delayed. Much as I worried about Alice's health, the pair sounded as though they were having a ball.

"You...you half-sized Hero!"

"Weak. Sloppy. You can't have Allen."

Surely Lady Aurelia would step in if things got out of hand, I decided, rising to my feet. "What are we waiting for? The palace awaits."

"Of course," said Caren.

"Would you dance with me later, sir?!" cried Tina.

"Oh, and me too, please," Lily chimed in.

One of the skills that Lydia had drilled into me would soon prove useful. Caren kept darting glances that made me wonder if she wanted to dance too. I would ask her to when we got back.

"Would you hold the fort for us, Stella?" I said, leaving Bright Night on the table for the time being. "We won't be long."

"Of course," the platinum-haired noblewoman replied. "Take care.

And I hope you'll save a dance for me when you return."

*

Knights in their prime, serving as palace guards, showed us into an ancient stone colonnade dotted with lichen. Scars and scorch marks on the sturdy, unadorned roof and pillars, paired with a thick screen of foliage, suggested an escape route from the civil wars.

"Quite different from the royal palace, isn't it? Not a guard in sight," I said, touching a column. "You know, I'm having an attack of nerves. Would you mind if I waited here and rejoined you on the way back?"

Caren and Tina folded their arms. Lily brought her hands together.

"Don't dillydally," they said as one.

"Oh, very well," I sighed. My escape, it seemed, was not to be.

Really, an audience with the emperor? I'm giving Lydia a piece of my mind later. The professor will get what's coming to him when we're back in the royal capital.

"Come along, Allen," my well-dressed sister prompted, taking my left arm as if nothing could be more natural.

"Yes, Caren." I resumed walking, and Tina darted ahead, her steps as light as mine were leaden. It was nice to see her without a rod slung on her back for a change.

"Still, sir, I'm surprised," she said. "I guess even you're scared of something!"

"What do you take me for?"

To my discomfort, Her Highness only laughed. The mark of Frigid Crane flashed on the back of her right hand.

Lena, kiss tonight's dessert goodbye.

While I plotted my course, the oldest member of our party popped up on my left.

"Anyway, Caren," she said.

"Yes, Lily?" My sister tightened her grip on me, alert for danger.

But the maid, who had been secretly weaving defenses around us since we'd set foot in the palace, kept smiling and said, "Don't you

think you're sticking a little *close* to Allen?"

Caren started. "W-Well, I...I'm holding on to him so he doesn't run away. I can't leave him to his own devices." She nervously checked my expression as she finished. Despite the many unbelievable experiences we had shared, my sister had never visited any kind of palace before.

"I *see*." The scarlet-haired maid raised an index finger to her chin, floral hair clip glinting in the light. "In that case, I think I'll join you!"

"Huh?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Lily vanished, and I felt something soft on my right arm. I got flustered in spite of myself. She had mastered short-range teleportation *too* well.

While a floral aroma tickled my nose, Tina caught on and raised a shout.

"Hey! Caren, Lily, how could you?! Where's your sense of fair play?!"

The girls holding my arms in custody looked at each other and smirked in unison. What good friends they'd become.

The platinum-haired young noblewoman gaped at them, then stomped her foot in fury. A stretch of the colonnade froze, and ice crystals filled the air. I sensed agitated mana on all sides—no doubt knights on guard duty.

"Keep your voice down, Tina," I whispered, dispelling her magic. "The walls have ears."

"Y-Yes, sir," she whispered back, nodding, then darted behind me and grabbed my coat sleeve.

This makes it awfully hard to walk, I thought but couldn't bring myself to say for the short while until the exit came into view.

"It looks like we're here," I said as we passed through a marble arch half swallowed by trees and into a circular courtyard bathed in winter sunshine. I couldn't feel the cold, doubtless due to embedded spell-stones.

"Oh, wow!" Tina's eyes lit up.

"I can hardly believe we're still in the palace," Caren murmured.

I caught Lily's eye and sent her a hand signal out of the younger

girls' sight: "I don't expect trouble, but please stay alert."

"You got it," she signaled back. "I'll guard your retreat if anything goes wrong!"

How nice to have a maid we could count on. Not that I would ever actually let her act as rear guard, of course. I flashed my bracelet in thanks, then looked around. Tree branches obscured the old stone columns, but I counted eight of them in all. Lydia had been right—the arrangement did resemble the altars. But why?

The thump of a staff on paving stones recalled me from my quiet contemplation.

"Oh, there you are," a hoarse voice said. "We have long wished to meet the kingdom's latest champion."

I turned as a short old man with platinum-blond hair emerged, alone and unguarded, from deeper inside the courtyard. He couldn't have looked more out of place in his finery. Except for a dagger at his waist, he carried no weapons to speak of. Yet a canny glint in his eyes hinted at hidden depths.

"Yuri Yustin," he continued, a smile playing on his lips. "Emperor for over fifty years now, more's the pity."

"Allen of the eastern capital wolf clan, at Your Imperial Majesty's service," I said. "This is my sister, Caren. I wish to express our sincere gratitude for your generous invi—"

"No need to stand on ceremony," the emperor interrupted, holding out a wrinkled hand. "We know all about you and the brave rider of the 'lone flight west.' You must pardon our abrupt summons."

"Y-You are too kind."

The ruler of the Yustinian Empire, one of the three great western powers, knew our names. Caren half hid herself behind me, unable to conceal her shock at the revelation. Of course the empire would keep files on Lydia and Cheryl, but had it been gathering intelligence on us as well? I raised my mental alert level and prompted the platinum-haired noblewoman with a look.

"I am Duke Howard's second daughter, Tina," she said, curtsying. "Mr. Allen has been instructing me."

"Good, good. Between you and your saintly sister, we can see

Duke Howard is blessed with fine children," said the old emperor. "Come farther in. There will be plenty of time to observe Black Blossom's interrogation later."

"Yes, sire."

Under a stone roof in the center of the courtyard sat the most luxurious table, chairs, and sofa I had ever seen. Tea steamed in cups that must have only just been set out. The old emperor settled onto a throne and encompassed it all in a magnanimous sweep of his left hand.

"Never mind propriety. Sit where you like."

"Thank you, sire," I said, reaching for the chair opposite him.

"You sit here," Caren and Lily chimed in, taking my hands and steering me to the sofa, where they seated themselves on either side of me as though nothing could be more proper.

E-Excuse me?

Tina's eyes widened in dismay—she had been just a step too slow. After a moment's hesitation, she flounced down next to Caren.

"Hmm..." The old emperor, who had watched the whole proceeding, pensively stroked his chin. "We can see a tempestuous love life in your future."

My ring and bracelet flashed, and I took a sprinkle of ice crystals for Lena's input. Caren, Lily, and even Tina gave a silent, emphatic nod.

"If I may, sire," I said, unsatisfied with the response, "I wish for no such thing."

"Ladies' men have always claimed that," he replied. "Those not blessed with looks, such as ourselves, may regard them with envy, but never with sympathy."

I couldn't help suspecting a personal grudge.

Come to think of it, I don't see Moss Saxe. I assumed the emperor would keep him on hand for protection.

"Now, before we tell you of the Eight Great Elementals and the Eight Heresies, we have a proposition for you." The old emperor tossed his dagger onto the table and rested his head on his hand. "From our nation's perspective, it is the main issue at hand."

"Yes, sire?" I said, expecting some request involving Lydia, Stella, or maybe Tina. The professor also seemed an outside possibility.

Instead, the seasoned ruler said:

"Allen of the wolf clan, would you join our empire?"

Caren and Tina instinctively clenched their fists. Lily returned the teacup she'd been about to drink from to its saucer with an audible clink.

"What do you mean?" I asked calmly.

"Do not play the fool," the emperor replied. "We mean what we said. If you agree to become an imperial subject, we will create you an earl for the time being, and a marquess as soon as we finish 'cleaning house.' What do you say?"

The sighing of wind and twittering of birds became the only sounds in the courtyard. I could tell that the girls were waiting with bated breath.

I made a silent bow to the old emperor, then shook my head. "I sincerely appreciate the offer, but I respectfully decline."

"Oh?" White eyebrows twitched. A threatening finger tapped the dagger. "You mean you want more?"

"Perish the thought. I am grateful that the famed Emperor Yuri Yustin values me so highly," I said, the words coming so smoothly that I surprised myself. Perhaps I had gained a firmer emotional center than before. Either way, I gave my honest reasons. "However, I am a private tutor to Ladies Tina and Stella, Miss Ellie Walker, and Lady Lynne Leinster, as well as an elder brother to Caren, who will be enrolling in the Royal University come spring. I cannot see my way to taking up other duties."

"You can't, can you?" the old emperor said slowly. "Very well."

Caren and Tina breathed little sighs. Lily seemed her usual self, but she had clearly mismeasured her milk and sugar. Still, I was glad that the old emperor had relented so—

"Inform us the moment you quit tutoring. We shall present you with a vast domain confiscated from blue-blooded fools. Of course, our granddaughter Yana Yustin might occupy our throne by then."

I barely managed an "O-Of course, sire." He didn't sound like he was joking. I thought I had better consult Lydia later, and inform the

professor as well. Me, an imperial aristocrat? I couldn't begin to picture it.

Merry wrinkles creased the old emperor's cheeks. Then his eyes narrowed. His whole demeanor changed, turned piercing. The preamble was over.

"Now, we shall tell you what you wish to know. Look around you. You have seen similar places elsewhere, have you not?"

"Yes, I have." I met the full force of his gaze, sat up straighter, and said, "In the city of water, the southern and royal capitals, and Lalannoy's city of craft. Sire, what does the resemblance signify?"

"Oh, that's simple." The emperor's eyes glittered with a force of wit that belied his years. He seized the dagger on the table in a firm grip and said, "When you must do the near impossible, it isn't luck or prayer you need. You need attempts beyond number and the indomitable will to learn from your failures and forge ahead at any cost. Not that it is always the *right* thing to do."

His words carried conviction, yet I could sense a deep ambivalence behind them. He spoke like a criminal who craved the release of confessing a long-kept secret.

"Here, we sit in the wreckage of one such dream." The old emperor rose from his throne, dagger in hand, and gazed up at the ceiling. "Eight heretics left the cult of the Great Moon and attempted to craft eight 'great spells' of their own in these testing grounds, modeling their work on the Eight Great Elementals that shook the world during the age of strife and the great spell Thunderbolt. We believe the ancients called these sites 'altars.'"

Eight heretics? Does he mean the people we know as the legendary wielders of the great spells? And there was an altar right here?

The old emperor cast a glance at our stunned faces and touched a tree branch. "Do not be so alarmed. This place ceased to function long ago. The enigmatic 'black gate' materialized only once, during an experiment four centuries and several decades past. Our subterranean spell-gaol is all that remains."

Roughly five hundred years had passed since the age of strife, and two hundred since the War of the Dark Lord. That placed this

story...

"In other words," I said, "the great spells were created *after* the age of strife?"

"Indeed. If you believe one of the Eight Heretics and our ancestor..." Yuri Yustin slid his hand off the branch and proffered his burden to me. "Our empire's founder, the Star Shooter."

A north wind blew through the spell-stone-heated courtyard and brushed my cheek. I recalled something Atra and Lia had once told me—that their true names had been stolen.

This is much too heavy for me to bear alone.

Meanwhile, the old emperor returned to his throne with a spring in his step. "Aren't you glad that you visited our palace today?" he said, raising his left hand with heartfelt cheer. "Well, lad? Speak up."

Th-The nerve of him. No wonder he's spent so much time with the professor and Mr. Walker.

I exhaled, sent a look that said "I'm fine" at a concerned Caren, and answered the question with one of my own.

"Who knows of this?"

"In the empire, only Moss and ourselves. It is an oral tradition, you see. Not even Ladies Alice and Aurelia could know everything, especially given the shame that the Alverns must have felt at traitors making off with the formula for Thunderbolt and one of their swords. Hmm? And yourselves, we suppose, now that we've told you. You may send your thanks via the Howards."

"I promise to consider it. Now, you were say—"

A sudden, frightening chill shot up my spine. A being possessed of terrible mana was rushing toward us from the bowels of the earth, radiating hatred as it came.

"Lily, take Tina!" I shouted, scooping Caren up in my own arms and leaping backward.

"Right!" Lily answered as I set my sister on the ground and materialized Silver Bloom. The maid landed nearby, already building a wall of fire flowers with Tina in her arms. The ring and bracelet on my right hand flashed warnings while I drew the lightning-wyrm dagger and Tina's rod from thin air and tossed them to their owners.

"Allen—"

“Sir—”

“Keep alert!” I barked, quickly assessing the situation. The old emperor’s dagger had generated a strategic barrier to shield him, and knights, alerted by the disturbance, had arrived to bolster his defenses.

“What on earth—”

“Run, sire! You must run!” a handsome young knight screamed, interrupting his sovereign as he burst into the courtyard at the head of a panic-stricken troop. Blood stained their armor, and the whole group kept flickering with healing spells.

“Control yourself, Carl,” the emperor snapped, grim-faced, at the lead knight. “How did you get those wounds?! Where is Moss?”

“Th-The grand marshal shielded us and stayed behind to hold him __”

“Bad news.”

An eerie, distorted voice boomed, filling me with physical revulsion. The ground shuddered. A forest of charcoal branches stabbed through paving stones, snapped trees, and shattered the ceiling, enveloping the entire courtyard in stone and darkness. It reeked of blood.

“Botanical magic?” Caren muttered, drawing her dagger. “And this mana doesn’t just come from Stone Serpent, does it?”

One branch whipped out, slamming something into the ground at breakneck speed. The thick table snapped clean in two. Tina shrieked. Caren and Lily grew even more wary.

A broken-bladed sword buried itself in the ground. A right arm still gripped its hilt.

The throne toppled with a crash. The old emperor’s eyes couldn’t have been wider. “Castle Breaker...?”

I searched my memory and found an answer. Castle Breaker was Grand Marshal Moss Saxe’s enchanted sword. A man’s raucous laughter put an end to hope.

“I already killed the old fossil.”

Charcoal branches converged, forming a sphere in midair.

“Allen! Here it comes!” Caren shouted, armoring herself in lightning and conjuring a cross-tipped lightning spear.

The sphere burst, showering the whole courtyard in sharpened wooden stakes. Lily and Caren stepped forward faster than I could, fending off the squall with fire flowers and lightning.

"S-Sir!" The platinum-haired noblewoman pointed forward, gripping her rod.

"Get back, Tina," I said calmly, glaring at the grotesque man who had emerged from the earth. His left eye was gone, as were his left arm, left leg, and black wings, replaced by writhing dark-gray branches. His once distinctive white hair had turned the color of charcoal where it wasn't stained with fresh blood. His clouded eye had lost all light. His once pristine white robes hung in tatters, and the place where his heart should be pulsed ceaselessly, generating more repulsive spell formulae to cover his body.

This isn't just Stone Serpent. I sense dark mana too—another great elemental. Tenebrous Wolf? Is he invoking two great elementals at the same time?!

The second apostle slowly formed a staff in each hand. I spoke his name.

"Io 'Black Blossom' Lockfield."



He should be in the spell-gaol. Is that why the grand marshal wasn't here? Was he trying to move Io aboveground before Lady Shise arrived?

"How horrible," Tina gasped, overcome by the transformation.

"Why would anyone resort to *that*?" murmured Caren.

The old emperor and his knights stood speechless, as though they'd lost the will to fight.

Io flexed his branch-arm, testing it. Then he shrouded his staves in charcoal lightning: Igna's mana blades. The floating monster formed a twisted grin, not caring how it split his cheeks.

"I planned to kill Floral Heaven after I finished with the emperor, but I've changed my mind. The Alvern brat I ate agrees."

I gritted my teeth as my suspicion turned to certainty. Igna Alvern had been missing since last night because Io had devoured him.

The monster surrounded himself in a thicket of branches molded into wolf heads, spread eight ugly charcoal wings, and crossed his enchanted staves. He was weaving two casts of a tactical taboo: North Wind of Dark Death.

"I already sealed off the palace. Don't count on reinforcements. The Hero's seen better days, and Floral Heaven is stuck in the Alvern church, guarding the Bibliophage's book. So fight! Show me how you struggle as you die!"

Io's plants squirmed back to life as he screeched.

Not good.

A moment later, a look of ecstasy suffused his face, and he swung his staves down at us.

*

"So that's it. I understand your point, and it's worth considering. Stella, what do you think?"

"I agree with you, Lydia," I replied, holding my cup in both hands as I digested Alice's "proposal." Northern herbs gave the tea a distinctive aroma. "But is it really, well, possible? I've never heard of

a precedent, at least not in the kingdom."

Dense clouds had darkened the sky since morning, and the air temperature had fallen precipitously. Fresh logs were burning in the old church fireplace. I hoped that Lady Shise and Igna were all right. She had gone for an aerial stroll with Luce, and he had yet to return home.

"Mm-hmm. Very possible," Alice said evenly, skewering a piece of Mr. Allen's homemade cheesecake on her fork. "Aurelia."

"The Hero is correct," said her dispassionate predecessor, stepping forward to deposit a thick tome on the table. Several bookmarks protruded from its pages. "This lays out the legality in no uncertain terms. And there are precedents—they've merely been forgotten."

"The Old Imperial legal code?" Lydia arched an eyebrow. She had dressed for sword fighting so that she could act immediately if anything came up.

"The basis for every modern nation's laws? I...I've never seen a copy before." I gaped at the leather-bound lawbook, covering my mouth with the white sleeve of my military uniform. Not even my late grandfather, reputedly a great collector, had managed to secure a copy of this priceless text. According to my father, he had lost an arm to the Hero four generations before Alice in a scuffle over an antique volume, although I wasn't certain I believed that story.

Aurelia wiped Alice's mouth with a white handkerchief, a loving look in her eyes. "Each nation has actively developed its own laws since the total collapse of the Old Empire, but the articles concerning succession in noble houses—and in your nation's case, among the long-lived races—have been left almost entirely intact. They have too much incendiary potential to meddle with, even if many have long since ceased to be applied. We will use that fact to our advantage."

Lydia and I kept silent, returning our cups to their saucers almost in unison. My thoughts seemed lost in a dense fog and refused to coalesce, buffeted by alternating waves of elation and anxiety.

Why, if—if—*we really go through with this plan, Mr. Allen and I will be...*

I groaned. The mere thought made my cheeks burn. I touched the sea-green griffin feather in my breast pocket for peace of mind, but my heart only raced faster.

Oh, whatever shall I do? Mr. Allen, Caren, and the others are conferring with Emperor Yuri Yustin in his palace, and here I am, quite possibly getting carried away. No! Stop that, Stella! You must control yourself! Do you want Mr. Allen to catch on as soon as he returns from—

"You haven't told us the most important part yet, pint-sized Hero." Lydia crossed her legs and glared at Alice, plainly on her guard. The mark of Blazing Qilin glowed on the back of her right hand. "Why only tell us? I know you've had chances to explain this to him in person. Isn't that what you called him here for?" She paused. "Is your condition that serious?"

The platinum-blonde Hero cut another slice of cheesecake. I hadn't even noticed her finish the first one. "Simple," she said. "It would take too long to explain. Allen takes everything seriously, and Violet Growly won't approve. She's an Allen-obsessed wolf. My comrade is smart. She'll understand. But she can't keep quiet. Word will get out. My enemy number three is cleverer than you, scarlet crybaby, even though you're both Leinsters. I can't be too careful with her. She'll try to get all she can out of this. Talk it over with your houses as soon as you get back to the royal capital."

I could see her point about Caren and Tina, but Lily? Perhaps. She *had* gone behind our backs to get herself named envoy to Lalannoy.

Alice never showed her feelings on her face, but her gaze turned piercing. "I originally planned to share information and make a casual suggestion," she said as if to herself, running a finger over the black scabbard of the sword that Mr. Allen had left leaning on a chair. "My health will hold up for now. But a big 'star' vanished from the northern sky the night after Allen got my message. Time has been meandering at a trickle. Now it's flowing faster, and it *will* get where it's going. I can't afford to take things easy. Bestowing Bright Night on him after he brought it back is part of that."

"What do you mean, a star vanished?" I asked, nonplussed.

"You didn't answer my question," Lydia pressed coldly.

But the platinum-blonde girl declined to clarify. We turned to Aurelia and got only "The matter is under investigation."

I must report to Mr. Allen when he gets back.

While I made up my mind, Alice folded her arms, looking uncharacteristically humble. "My proposal will benefit both the Leinsters and the Howards immensely. I've decided that I can get you on my side," she said. "You're too timid to get much done, scarlet crybaby, so I'm pinning my hopes on Saint Wolf. You have my permission to trap Allen by any means necessary."

"H-Hwuh?!" A strange cry escaped my lips. I swayed side to side.

T-Trap Mr. Allen by any means necessary? D-Does she mean what I think she means? Th-Then, he and I will—

"Why would she need your permission? He's *mine*!" Lydia glared daggers, and a shower of fiery plumes, at our lovely host. "Stop trying to be funny. Or is all this talk about giving him the Alvern name just a big joke to you?"

Alice's proposal couldn't have been more shocking. Who would dream of simply *bestowing* a house name? Why hadn't we?

Alice attacked her second slice of cheesecake with her hands. "I sleep for longer every time I fight. An Alvern condition," she said, for all the world as though it were a matter of no consequence. "The old me wouldn't have let the faux Sage and the faux Crescent Moon get away the other night. And there are no Alverns left who can inherit the great spell Thunderbolt."

"Huh?" I goggled. Even Lydia looked perturbed, although she said nothing.

"I'm the end of the old days—the last Hero." Alice, always pretty as a doll, closed her eyes as if in prayer. "I'll do as much as I can before the new age—the age of the new Celestial Spear—starts. I can count on the two of them."

There was no self-pity in her, only a pure will to do a Hero's duty. We held our tongues, unable to bring ourselves to interject.

By "Celestial Spear," does she mean the technique Mr. Allen used when he fought Igna?

"As holders of one of the eight grand dukedoms, the Alverns have

focused on keeping the planet in balance since gods walked the earth," Aurelia added, her eyes on Alice. "But nothing lasts forever. We realize that our time as Heroes has come to an end, just as the other grand ducal houses left the stage before us. Some members of our house will object, Igna chief among them, but he cannot deny his loss to Stella and Caren, or to Allen. A Hero may never know defeat. I ceded my title to the current Hero for that very reason."

The age of the new Celestial Spear...

"So you want to make him your successor and dump the whole planet's problems on his shoulders? Do you think I'd stand for that?" Lydia demanded, repeatedly touching her right ring finger with her left hand. The fireplace blazed hotter in sympathy with her angry mana.

I hastily waved my left hand like Mr. Allen would, conjuring minuscule flakes of ice to suppress the flames. Alice hadn't proposed anything so extreme...had she? I watched nervously as she gave her head an emphatic shake.

"You really are hopeless when it comes to Allen, scarlet crybaby," she said. "He can use the Alvern name for whatever he wants. I won't ask for anything in exchange. Honestly, I'm worried about your future."

The scarlet-haired Lady of the Sword turned away, realizing her mistake. "I don't mind settling things the hard way, you know? I won't go easy on you, even if you are practically an invalid."

But Alice wouldn't let her off the hook. "Try it," she said gravely, planting her hands on her hips. "I'll tell Allen."

The effect was instantaneous.

"What?!" Lydia's boldness deserted her, leaving an ordinary girl in love, gaze wavering and voice unsteady. "Th-That's a dirty trick. And you c-call yourself the H-Hero?"

"I don't want to hear that from the girl who's been over the moon because she got Allen to make a magic pact with her," Alice countered. "Keeping a vague sense of him without linking mana as long as you're in the same city is positively indecent. It's already fading, but do you mind if I just dispel it? I'll confiscate what you've been hiding while I'm at it."

"O-Of course I mind!" The scarlet-haired girl shielded her right hand and pressed it to her heart.

So that's why she's been acting so assured lately. I knew something was going on. Wait, what has she been hiding? In any case, I'd like Mr. Allen to cast the same spell on me. I'm certain I could spend every day in bliss if I could feel his mana all the—

The whole church shook despite the potent barrier surrounding it.

"A-An earthquake?" I gasped.

"No," said Lydia.

"Uh-uh," agreed Alice, and they both raced out into the courtyard. I scrambled after them just as a white griffin swooped down out of the sky, heedless of the gusts its landing kicked up.

"Alice!" shouted Floral Heaven, dismounting in a flash and thrusting out a video orb. Lady Shise Glenbysidhe wore her floral beret, a cloak over her uniform, and a look of panic on her face. "I don't know how he did it, but Io broke out of the spell-gaol! Look!"

The orb projected a view of the palace and city into the air. A horde of wolves made from writhing charcoal-gray branches was attacking everything in sight, while lightning bolts rained down all around them.

Grand-scale botanical and lightning magic, both targeting the whole city. This is no laughing matter.

Imperial soldiers were already launching desperate counterassaults to protect the civilian population, but they couldn't halt the spells' momentum. Wolves were toppling some buildings, smashing through others, and devouring the inhabitants. I looked away, unable to bear the sight.

"The taboo Hermitage of Verdant Billows and Alvern lightning," said Lady Shise, a veteran of too many campaigns to let this disturb her. "I hate to say it, but the Stone Serpent and Tenebrous Wolf lurking inside Io must have eaten Igna. His blood is temporarily amplifying their power, which explains how Io broke free. He'll destroy himself eventually, but who knows how much damage he can do before then."

"Poor Io. And poor, poor Igna." Alice lowered her lovely face and closed her eyes.

"Why does he get himself mixed up in trouble every time he goes somewhere without me?" Lydia grumbled, hanging her enchanted sword at her side. "We'll leave the city to Anna, Olly, and the other maids. Stella, we're going to that courtyard at the heart of the palace."

"Of course!"

With Mr. Allen, Caren, Tina, and Lily by our side, even the second apostle will be nothing to fear. I couldn't join the final battle in Lalannoy. Today's the day I make up for it!

"Wait."

"Not so fast."

Alice and Lady Shise stopped us short. We turned back to find them both looking grave.

"He's too far gone," said the former. "He'll recover unless we completely destroy him. We need a plan."

"We went our separate ways, but Io is still my apprentice," the latter added. "I want to put him out of his misery. And I'd like your help."

The scarlet-haired girl said nothing. I pulled on her sleeve. "Lydia." If the Hero and Floral Heaven had something to say, we ought to listen.

Lydia sighed and ran a frustrated hand through her hair. "Fine. Get it over with—before Allen does something reckless."

*

Obsidian lightning pelted the palace courtyard, already ravaged by the double North Wind of Dark Death. Charcoal branches formed numberless wolf heads, smashing paving stones and felling trees. The force of them was nothing to sneeze at.

Io roared with scornful laughter. **"What's wrong, Allen?! Surely the 'Brain of the Lady of the Sword' can do better than that! Now die, die, die, die, *die*!"**

The second apostle hovered in midair, casting fresh spells with the staves in his upraised hands. Numerous roots, stinking of rot, emerged from the ground and lashed out like whips.

"Allen, let me and Lily handle them!" Caren darted in front of me, wearing armor of lightning over her violet dress and furiously swinging her electric spear.

"You can always count on a maid!" Lily's greatsword and fire flowers cut down every remaining tendril.

Io hadn't confined his assault to the palace—he had also unleashed the taboo Hermitage of Verdant Billows and a barrage of Igna's lightning magic on the entire city. That spoke to inconceivable reserves of mana. Still, his individual blows were cruder and less precise than those of other monsters I had fought. We stood a chance of holding out until Lydia and the others rushed to our rescue—we had all survived our fair share of desperate battles. However...

"*They* might have a harder time," I murmured, glancing past Caren and Lily's wild performance and Tina, who hung back looking for openings to hurl spells into, to face a corner of the courtyard. The old emperor's protective dagger must have exhausted its mana, because its barrier was no more. Castle Breaker, still lodged in the ground, glinted in the light. Knights shouted wildly.

"C-Commander Carl!"

"Multiple casualties! We can't keep fighting much longer!"

"We ought to retreat!"

The young commander grimaced, stopping a blast of lightning with his longsword. "B-But how can we?!"

Emperor Yuri Yustin, deprived of his grand marshal, stood despondently at the rear of the group. Struggling knights cast defensive spells in shifts, determined to defend their sovereign. I doubted they would last long.

I multi-cast the intermediate spell Divine Light Spear and the elementary spell Ice Mirror Shower through Silver Bloom, although I had drained the better part of the rod's mana fending off taboo magic. Shining rays ricocheted wildly around Io until I launched them at chinks in his magical defenses.

"Stop trying my patience!"

The apostle raged as spears of light impaled his arboreal wings and left leg, only for the wounds to heal instantly while he started

conjuring dark-gray airborne shields. I recognized traces of the great spells Resurrection and Radiant Shield. Io's right eye, the one not covered by roots or branches, held nothing but hate.

Doesn't he realize my spells wouldn't be able to pierce his barrier if he hadn't reduced himself to this?

"Don't you dare look at my brother that way!" Caren roared. While I lamented the great sorcerer's fall, she kicked off a floating ice mirror behind me and became a streak of purple dress. Her cross-tipped lightning spear dispatched ashen shields in rapid succession as she continued her head-on charge.

Io gnashed his teeth and thrust out his staves.

"Too bad. So sad. Caren's a decoy!" Lily teleported right above the apostle with Black Cat Promenade. She brought her greatsword down with all her might, shearing through the half-petrified branches raised to stop her. Io tried to recover, but a follow-up burst of fire flowers intervened, leaving his defenses that much thinner.

"You're wide open!" Caren had gotten in close, multi-casting Imperial Lightning Dance on the tip of her spear. She slammed the advanced spells into Io's barrier at point-blank range. The apostle let out a cry of pain, although even that assault failed to fully penetrate his defenses. Dust and debris flew as he slammed into the ground.

Now!

I invoked wind magic, relaying a message to the young knight called Carl. "Please take His Imperial Majesty and withdraw! Leave the apostle to us!"

He only hesitated for a moment. "I am in your debt," he sent back, directing his dozen or so subordinates to seize the motionless emperor and begin their retreat while he acted as rear guard. He struck me as a good commander. Even Richard might approve.

Io's animal scream rent the air. We all startled as he took flight in a surge of mana. More power flooded out of him with each ghastly pulse of the swollen place where his heart should be.

I know this mana—it's from the Great Tree in the royal capital. He's using the stolen "most ancient bud"!

"Oh no you don't!" Tina immediately multi-cast Divine Ice Walls, but they succumbed to the dreadful mass and momentum of the

charcoal branches, vanishing into the maw of a writhing thicket.

"Tina!" I scooped up the straining young noblewoman and jumped back, piling on botanical magic and the elementary spell Divine Earth Wall. Caren zipped over to us, adding potent walls of lightning. Lily stood not far away, covering the knights with Scarlet Blossom Shields while—

A massive jolt derailed my train of thought. Shards of ice, stone, tree, and lightning pelted our barriers and earthen walls, battering them out of existence. Caren and I redoubled our defenses, and Tina soon joined the desperate struggle.

Io hovered above us, his face pulled taut with fury. His mana kept intensifying.

I gave the young noblewoman a pat on the head. "I can see you've improved."

"Yes, sir! But I'm only getting started. Lena says so too," Tina responded as the mark on her right hand flashed and grew bolder. I wouldn't have put it past her to freeze the whole palace if I didn't curb her enthusiasm.

The ever-dependable Caren had naturally taken up a position in front of us to deal with the latest dark-gray growth of branches. I watched her slender back as I analyzed Io.

"He attacks primarily by keeping Hermitage of Verdant Billows continuously active, while Igna's lightning and power from two great elementals fuel his army of 'wolves.' His defenses have gaps in them, but Resurrection and Radiant Shield pose a real problem with so much mana backing them up. The Great Tree bud embedded in his heart is augmenting his supply. What do you think, Lily?"

No answer.

"Lily?" I asked again. Still nothing. And she was usually so quick to speak up. I kept one eye on Io, still muttering to himself and clawing at his head, while I turned to check on the silent, scarlet-haired maid.

"L-Lily?" Tina called, weaving spells.

"Are you all right?" Caren asked, looking for an opening to charge into.

But the noblewoman merely stared down at something clasped in

her hands. Her greatsword stood lodged in the earth. She didn't even bother to wipe the blood trickling from her forehead. Something was wrong.

"Who stands still in the middle of a battlefield?!" Io sneered and thrust out a staff, evidently himself again. **"If you want me to kill you that badly, just—"**

The fire flowers dancing around Lily started changing color.

"Sir!" Tina cried.

Caren shouted, "Allen!" at nearly the same moment.

"This mana," I murmured. "Don't tell me...?"

The light faded from Lily's eyes, and her lovely scarlet tresses darkened as her swirling mana, brimming with silent wrath, incinerated every branch that lashed at her.

"It was my treasure," the maid mumbled. "I came close to giving up so, so many times, and it always, always helped me keep going."

She slowly raised her head. The floral hair clip she always wore—the one I'd given her in the southern capital—was missing. Something must have grazed her and broken it in the midst of the blast that had swept over the courtyard.

People do *like to say that the most easygoing people are the scariest when you make them mad.*

Lily fell silent. Her right hand shot out. The fire flowers had turned from Leinster scarlet to a baleful, gray-streaked crimson. Now they started shaping themselves into swords. The charcoal branches writhing across the courtyard burst into a sea of flames.

Tina clutched my robe, frightened by Lily's strange transformation and the violence of the mana converging on her. Even the floating Io was stunned into passive silence.

"You broke something that meant a lot to me." The wrathful beauty closed her right hand. "Now I'll make you pay for it!"

She yanked something free of the empty air in a shower of gray fire. A breathtaking pattern, like falling petals, ran the length of the blade. A moon-and-stars sigil flickered with light. Seen like this, it had something about it that called to mind Cresset Fox, the enchanted sword I had entrusted to Lydia. Great flowers of overlapping ashen flame blossomed, falling into formation around

Lily.

The long-lived races of the west had completed Devoted Blossom's sister sword after the War of the Dark Lord, building on a dagger that an ancient master of fire magic had used throughout their life and pursuing only raw, unadulterated power. Even the Ducal House of Leinster had failed to produce a warrior capable of wielding it. After one test by the then Lady of the Sword, the beautiful, terrible blade had been locked away for more than a century. I whispered its name:

"Ash Blossom."

Io swung both staves with almost frantic haste. Coming from the demisprites, who had played a part in the weapon's forging, he must have appreciated its monstrous potential. His barrage of Imperial Storm Tornadoes formed a colossal ink-dark cyclone.

"Die!" he shrieked, launching the clustered advanced spells at Lily.

She hadn't moved, but neither did we. We couldn't. Her raging mana threatened to incinerate anything in its way.

Without a word, Lily gripped Ash Blossom in both hands and leaned forward, lowering the flaming blade behind her. Her scarlet mane rose. And then...

"Why don't *you*...**just get lost already?!**"

She charged into the cyclone with an angry roar, feet barely leaving the ground before she swung. A ray of baleful light cleaved everything in its path. What little remained of the pillars and roof crumbled, vanishing into ashen flames.

Io was no exception. The dread inferno sheared through and engulfed the cyclone, the forest of writhing branches, the gray shields, several dozen barriers, and the apostle himself.

"Im...possible."

The light of Resurrection flickered, instantly counteracting the damage. It restored the apostle, although it couldn't wipe the shock from his face.

Lily landed in front of the flabbergasted Tina, Caren, and me. Flaming sword in hand, she started to chant.

"'Ash. Ash. Ash. Scorn not. Boast not. Stray not.'"

Unbelievably, her spell formulae moved as though with a life of their own. Her blade drank down one massive flower after another.

Io's staves shook in his grasp. **"The Scarlet Flame's curse?!"**

He panicked, hurling lightning wildly and calling up a wolf pack to interfere. Yet the remaining flowers mounted an impregnable defense, shielding Lily from all harm—just as they had once stopped the wrath of a millennium-old monster in a harbor town near the southern capital. She seemed entranced by her enchanted weapon as her sword dance reached its climax.

"'Thou art the flame that governeth iron, governeth war, governeth blood—the flame that bringeth ruin upon the foe in my path.'"

Formulae that I could neither decipher nor identify were taking their places along the blade. Lily was activating them, but not even she seemed to understand how they worked. In her own words, "It just kind of pops into my head and out my mouth." No wonder the weapon had been sealed away. I hadn't heard of anything of the kind happening with its sister sword, Devoted Blossom.

A little scarlet bird winged in and stopped on my shoulder before quickly disappearing.

Understood.

I stepped ahead of Tina and Caren, rapidly instructing them what to do next. I had barely finished when Lily raised the enchanted sword high above her head, scarlet hair fluttering.

"'O ashen flame that scorched the god-slaying beast, make thyself manifest now.'"

A blizzard of fiery gray petals sprang up and started to incinerate the whole space in one fell swoop. I could see the strain on Io's face as he diverted all his mana to defense.

Lily brought her blade down in one smooth motion, invoking the spell with which it shared its name:

"'Ash Blossom.'"

A moment later, an ashy inferno swallowed everything in front of her. Minuscule gray fire flowers sliced through every obstacle in their path, denying each the right to exist. Lily seemed to retain enough presence of mind to bound her casting with a barrier, preventing any

damage beyond the courtyard. Needless to say, her technique was impeccable.

Io's animal screams echoed as his hundreds of fire-resistant barriers evaporated and the blaze engulfed his sphere.

After a brief moment that seemed an eternity, the spell ceased. The enchanted sword vanished from the maid's hands, and she slumped forward.

"Lily!" I cried, magically augmenting myself to the limit of my ability and darting in to catch her. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead. She was the picture of total exhaustion. This was Ash Blossom's greatest flaw—for all its awe-inspiring might, the sword consumed mana so rapidly that no one could wield it for long.

I wiped the maid's sweat with my handkerchief, and she opened her eyes. "I'm sorry, Allen," she said, gloomily holding out her hand and opening it to reveal the hair clip I'd given her. "I let it get broken."

I cast a healing spell on her forehead wound and let out my breath. She didn't seem to have any other injuries.

"I'm glad that it means so much to you," I said, gliding a finger over the bracelet on her left wrist and applying pressure with the handkerchief. "But you need to take better care of yourself."

"I will," she murmured.

My sister ran up moments later, so I placed Lily in her care and surveyed the situation. No trace of the once beautiful courtyard remained in the blasted ruin. The ashen flames were on track to consume everything within Lily's barrier. And I sensed Lydia's mana at the front of the palace. She would most likely have Stella with her. If all was going according to the plan the bird had just relayed to me, then Alice—

"There's a tiresome bunch at the gates."

Lily's barrier collapsed before a gust of black wind. More charcoal branches squirmed free of the soil to smother the flames. Io must have grown tired of maintaining his limbs. A serpentine trunk tethered him directly to the earth, and branch-wolves served him as arms as he glared down at us out of his wild right eye—the only one he had left. A warped circle took shape in midair. Then, amid an

intimidating hail of lightning, a light flashed from a spot on his chest.

That was the grand marshal's.

The monster remained oblivious. His voice came, halting yet cruel.

"Now you die."

Immediately, I stretched out my right hand. "Tina!"

"I thought you'd never ask!" The platinum-haired young noblewoman took it, and we established a shallow link. "You could have made it deeper," she grumbled, swinging her rod in a wide arc.

An icy gale beat back against Io's black wind as a winged Blizzard Wolf took shape. The supreme spell shook the air with a mighty howl and began its charge.

Io's eye widened. **"From World's End? Don't you ever give up?!"** He wove his charcoal branches into a great wolf pack, attempting to pinion the ice wolf through strength of numbers.

"Sir, Caren, now's your chance!" Tina shouted, straining to maintain control of her spell. "You saved the best for last, now use it!"

But a misfire is a real possibility under the—

"Always count on a maid!" Lily chimed in, positioning herself behind the younger noblewoman.

Much appreciated.

The way he guzzled mana, the monster that had been Io must have been chipping away at his own life. And considering that he had weathered Lily's Ash Blossom, no ordinary spell would put a dent in him. It seemed safe to assume that he possessed regenerative abilities bordering on immortality while the Great Tree bud remained intact. We needed to pierce all his defenses and deliver a blow to the bud in his heart. I knew a way, but could I put it into practice without Silver Bloom's mana?

"Allen." Caren hugged me in a swish of violet skirts. Then she looked straight at me, just as she had when we were children. "Please stop fretting. I'll bear the burden with you, if you'll let me—and I want you to! Where you go, I go! Even to the ends of the earth!"

One thing had changed—my sister had grown beautiful. My heart

leapt in spite of myself.

"Caren—"

"I mean it!"

I felt a soft touch on my cheek, then a mana link, deep and strong. My sister had gone up on tiptoe and kissed me. The mark of Thunder Fox shone vividly on the back of her right hand.

"Hey! Th-That's cheating!" Tina shouted, still reining in her spell. Lily, supporting her, also looked and sounded less than pleased.

Caren brought a hand to her lips and blushed. "I went and did it again," she said, ears twitching and tail waving. "You'd better take responsibility."

"If you say so," I responded, nonplussed, and lightning shrouded us both as we set to weaving magic. I twirled my rod and she, her spear before we crossed the two.

"I can see my sister's grown up into a real troublemaker," I said.

"Of course," she replied. "I have you for a brother."

I had no retort.

"Sir!" Tina shouted. The Blizzard Wolf had fought valiantly, but it finally began to give ground.

"Lily, if you please!" I hollered back.

"You sure know how to work a maid to the bone!" Lily waved her left hand, raising a phalanx of fire flowers against the greatest impact yet that day. The ice wolf shattered with a piteous howl, and a wave of branches and "wolves" surged forward.

"You lose! Now die!" Certain of victory, Io raised his staves high, weaving lightning on the right one and black wind on the left.

"Wrong, Io 'Black Blossom' Lockfield," I said, grinning. "Why, you ask?"

"Because the Hero's lightning smashes everything," Caren answered at once, wearing a fearless smile of her own. "That's just the way of the world."

Io furrowed his brows, perplexed, then looked skyward with a start. High above the palace, a white griffin soared. The planet's guardian, the Hero, Alice Alvern, had arrived.

"The frontal assault was a feint?! I'll teach you to make a fool of me!" Io brought the full force of his mana to bear, deploying

more than a thousand barriers above him.

I couldn't have seen or heard. Yet a black blade and a white gleamed in my eyes, and a girl's voice sounded clearly in my ears:

"Thunderbolt."

Several bursts of light tore through the sky, and a great roar followed. A massive pillar of lightning, far beyond my power to grasp, hurtled down—and burst. I just barely glimpsed Io's barriers and branches disintegrate before I hugged Caren's head to me and closed my own eyes tight. It was all I could do to withstand a shock and shudder so all-consuming I could believe the world was coming to an end. I could tell that Lily's fire flowers were shielding Tina as well as us.

At last, the great spell ceased. When I pulled away from Caren and looked around, the better half of the courtyard had been neatly carved out of existence. The stone columns before me only still stood because Alice had chosen to spare them. Her finesse beggared belief. And yet, Io's raucous laughter filled the air.

"I'm still here. I weathered the storm! I survived the Hero's great magic!"

He had lost all his barriers, branches, wings, and arms, and his mana was severely diminished, but he still hung in midair, alive and healing. The Great Tree bud embedded in his chest lay exposed, beating regularly.

"Lydia and Stella are decoys. I'll wear him down." Just like Alice planned it.

"Come on, Caren!" I called.

"I'm with you!" my sister responded, and we launched our final charge. I worked botanical magic, building a passage through the air. We raced up it.

"Give up, damn you!"

Io had no sooner regrown his right arm than he hurled lightning and mobilized a reduced force of branches to intercept. But we didn't even try to dodge. We knew we didn't need to.

"Sir! Caren!" Tina's ice mirrors repelled the lightning.

"Keep going!" Lily's fire flowers burned through the arboreal wave.

An ever more impatient Io attempted to regrow his left arm, but it crumbled, refusing to take shape. His mana was nearing exhaustion. The sinister power that remained to him went into weaving a North Wind of Dark Death.

"Stop fooling yourselves! I'm the greatest sorcerer on the continent!"

"No, you're not! Not even close!" Caren snapped, mowing down feeble branches with her crackling spear. I touched my rod to its cross-shaped tip and activated the newest supreme spell: Thunder-Shade Dragon. The deep-violet colossus that I had made just for Caren started taking shape overhead.

The unknown magic sent a flash of unease across Io's face. Then he steeled himself for the fight. **"I won't make it that easy for—M-My magic?!"**

His half-woven taboo spell started to fade, and his barriers with it. Had I ever seen interference so delicate?

"Really, Io, I can't help pitying you. Didn't you see me coming?" asked the glum sorceress who had appeared atop the lone remaining column, a spell book with a mouth in her hand.

The cornered apostle let out a thunderous bellow.

"Shise Glenbysidhe!"

My sister and I joined hands and gripped the shaft of her spear.

"Caren!"

"Right!"

Frigid Crane's power flowed from Tina. Blazing Qilin's power came from Lydia, via our pact. And Thunder Fox's power poured from Caren. Finally, the spear tip sucked in the dark-violet dragon soaring over our heads...and words failed the apostle as a blade like midnight-purple wings sprouted from the electric weapon's point.

"You can't be the world's greatest sorcerer! My brother is!" Caren shouted, her conviction unshakable. Our eyes met. Then, in unison:

"Celestial Spear!"



We loosed the new secret art at the apostle. He could neither intercept nor defend—the all-piercing deep-violet spear outpaced even the lightning. Leaving an illusion of jubilant dragon-song, it visited merciless annihilation on the final branches to sprout from Io Lockfield's chest and sped on to pierce clean through the heart of Black Blossom.

A bloodcurdling wail burst from the apostle. Then, for a moment, all sound ceased.

A freezing, burning thunderstorm raged over the courtyard. I held Caren close, bracing against it—only to look up at a wet *thunk*. Below us, Io leaned on Castle Breaker, struggling to stand.

"N-No. Th-This cannot—"

His face contorted, and he hacked up charcoal-gray blood. His right arm crumbled to ash. He was beyond help.

Lady Shise regarded her former student's pitiful end sadly from her perch on the column. The storm had died, so I released my Lightning Apotheosis and dropped from the aerial pathway to the ground. Caren made to jump down after me but lurched with a soft cry.

"Whoops!" I caught my mana-exhausted sister with a levitation spell and studied her face. "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yes," she said. "Th-Thank you. It's only, well..."

Cracks ran the length of Caren's dagger. It had lost all its power, doubtless unable to withstand mana beyond its capacity. We really would need to get it reforged soon.

"Sir! Caren!"

"Ugh! I'm dead tired. And my hair clip..."

Tina and Lily ran up, their dresses dirty but otherwise unharmed. Lydia's mana was rapidly approaching, while the griffin overhead circled a few times before flying off northward, probably bound for the old church.

I hope Alice is holding up all right.

Just then, I heard rubble collapse ahead of us. Io was crawling on the ground, missing his lower body and both arms.

"Not yet," he mumbled brokenly. "I...I can't... I must reach the Shiki archive. For my dream."

The Shiki archive? The same one Ross Howard mentioned?

While I braced for danger, Lady Shise approached the dying apostle. Io's right eye opened as wide as it would go while his body crumbled into ash.

"Master," he rasped. "I...I've... I was... Oh, Rosa... I'll bring you back to li—"

At last, his voice failed. Only a small, cracked brooch and a shard of Castle Breaker remained. That was the end of Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield, second apostle of the church.

Lady Shise removed her beret and picked up the brooch. "Rosa's," she murmured to herself. "Io, you fool. How stupid could you be?"

No one spoke as the great sorceress sobbed quietly in the ruined courtyard. I pulled Caren close, just watching over the scene.

Epilogue

"That concludes my report. We have been unable to confirm any other apostle's involvement in Io 'Black Blossom' Lockfield's rampage. I suspect that he acted alone."

Having finished my explanation, I tendered the written report that I had spent the previous night writing over Lydia's strenuous objection to the professor, who sat across from me in a rumpled suit. The day after our battle in the palace had brought unexpected snow flurries. Tina forecast that they would end by nightfall. On the hearth rug, Luce let out a yawn.

"I see. You never know what life will throw your way, do you, Allen?" the professor said slowly, scanning my report before stowing it in an inner pocket. He had returned from a military stronghold that morning and come straight to the old church. He looked tired.

I heard the girls laughing in the next room. What did they find so much fun?

"I wish you wouldn't pretend it doesn't concern you." I bit into one of Lady Aurelia's homemade cookies and gave my best withering stare. "Remember, this is the second apostle we're talking about. And I know you pulled strings to send Caren and me to the palace."

"Hardly. His Imperial Majesty wished for nothing more. He's been badgering me to arrange a meeting for some time now. Ask Graham if you don't believe me. But then, he'll be in Lalannoy for the time being."

I held my tongue. I wouldn't trust the professor as far as I could throw him, but I had known him long enough to realize he wasn't outright lying.

"In that case, I suggest we move on to the next—"

"S-Sanctuary! You must shelter me!" A panicked child burst through the open doorway. She looked around the sparsely furnished room, azure hair and feathers whipping, then hunkered

down behind me.

"What's wrong, Lena?" I asked. "I thought you were with Atra and Lia. You'll ruin your dress, dragging it on the floor like that."

"*Shh!* D-Do you want them to find me?" she demanded. "If they come here, you must tell them I am not—"

A pitter-patter of little feet heralded a pair of beast-eared children, who poked their white-and scarlet-haired heads in at the door. They wore Howard and Leinster maid uniforms, respectively, complete with white lace headbands. Mina and Anna's handiwork, I assumed. And what charming handiwork it was.

They spotted their fugitive comrade in short order and fixed her with two bright-eyed gazes.

"Lena!"

"Tina, Anna! Lena here!"

"We'll be right there!" came the response.

"Thank you, Miss Atra! And you too, Miss Lia!"

Tina arrived a few moments later, dressed as a maid herself and armed with a brush and a lacy headband. With her came the Leinsters' beaming head maid, a video orb and a folded uniform balanced on one hand.

How do they have so much energy after that grueling fight yesterday?

While I pondered the question, Lena let out an Ellie-esque groan, her plumage erect with alarm. She made to flee, but Atra and Lia caught her in a happy hug.

"U-Unhand me!" she cried, shrinking from the approach of the young noblewoman, who wore an ominous smile, and the chestnut-haired head maid, who had unfolded a miniature uniform of her corps. More maids crowded the doorway, all bright and smiling.

"You won't mind if we borrow Lena, will you, sir?" Tina asked—a formality.

"We'll return her cuter than ever," added Anna.

"Do what you must," I said.

"H-How could you?!" Lena wailed. "St-Stop. C-Come no closer. I r-*refuse* to wear those garments! And when did you find time to measure me?!"

"That's a secret." Tina laughed and joined Atra and Lia in hauling her off.

"I can hardly wait!" Anna crowed.

"Leave everything to us!" the other maids chorused, trailing them into the hallway in high spirits.

Ah, peace. Technically.

I turned my attention back to the professor and asked a question that had been bothering me. "How is His Imperial Majesty?"

"Poorly."

His reply caused me a pang. I'd feared as much. Moss Saxe, a pillar of the empire, had been pronounced dead, fallen in battle while attempting to transport Io. Apart from his right arm, still gripping Castle Breaker, they hadn't even managed to recover his body.

The professor gazed out the window. "His Imperial Majesty and Grand Marshal Saxe have kept the empire standing in the face of threats at home and abroad for more than fifty years. Now the one's mistake has cost the other's life. We shouldn't be surprised that he's suffered a shock."

"I doubt I could have beaten Io if not for the grand marshal," I said. "It certainly would have been a near thing. The fight in the spell-gaol took a toll on his mana. I think the damage would have been even worse otherwise."

Io had already lost his left arm, left leg, and black wings by the time we encountered him. We had even found a shard of Castle Breaker in his chest, embedded in the Great Tree's most ancient bud. In Lady Shise's words, "Little Moss got caught off guard, but he still did plenty." The transport team had suffered only a single death: the old soldier who had stayed to guard their retreat.

"And Io was branded with a new great elemental, Tenebrous Wolf?" The professor adjusted his spectacles, and his expression turned hard. "What do Shise and the Hero have to say about that?"

"That almost no legends about her or the Lunar Cat survive," I replied. "The children called her the 'strongest' of them and said that they haven't met in ages. The Shiki archive, which Io mentioned at the end, might hold some clue. And I'm told they found a *new* map

sewn into his witch hat. A map signed by Ellie's mother, Millie Walker."

The professor sighed heavily—and for once, he seemed to mean it. "Now Millie of all people! And did you say 'new'? That *is* troubling. And I must say, you do seem to attract great elementals. Thunder Fox, Blazing Qilin, Tina's Frigid Crane, and Marine Crocodile in the city of water. Then the false Saint employs Stone Serpent, and now Tenebrous Wolf. Oh, and you have a way of running into great spells too. It must be fate. Well, at least you can do what you like in Shiki—it's your own domain."

"Professor, this is no laughing matter," I said, unable to repress a grimace. My ring and bracelet flashed in agreement with his overblown assessment, but I paid them no heed. I refused to. "I'll admit that I've been investigating the great spells all along. But I'm only a private tutor, remember—no matter how many responsibilities I've found myself saddled with recently."

"You're still singing that old tune? I can't imagine anyone falling for it at this point," the professor replied and drew a letter from his coat.

"What's this?"

"A message from Cheryl in the city of craft, and the reason I visited that stronghold," he explained. "I take it she wanted to keep the Yustinians in the dark for the time being."

The Lalannoy Republic and the Yustinian Empire had been feuding for a century—hardly surprising, given the origins of the former. Both nations might have joined the anti-church alliance, but hard feelings remained. No doubt they still decrypted any magical communication they could. And so, the republic had turned to the comparatively unfettered Cheryl. I carefully opened the envelope and ran my eyes over her message.

I beg your pardon?

"Arthur is missing?! And the Dark Lord's mana was found at the scene?! Professor, wh-what on earth does this mean?"

"I don't know," came the reply. "Graham left in such haste to find out. But I trust you can appreciate the gravity of the situation."

I frowned, imagining what would soon transpire in the republic.

The might of Heaven's Sword and Heaven's Sage had held the country together for more than a decade. Now one of those two shining stars had gone out, and without warning. The ramifications would be incalculable. And when the remaining champion rose from the sickbed that grief and rage had put her in, when she learned that there had been traces of the Dark Lord's mana...

The professor heaped sugar into his tea and drained it at a draft. "Lady Elna has never taken political action before, but that's no guarantee that she won't now. I mean, imagine Lydia deprived of you."

"Hence the need for hard evidence exonerating the Dark Lord?" I said. "As insurance against a worst-case scenario?"

"Yes."

I recalled the Dark Lord. Rill and I had fought through that desperate struggle together. And she had mentioned a request to Master Fugen when we'd parted, no doubt something to do with the false Saint, or at least the Church of the Holy Spirit. It was a slender thread, but I supposed we would need to trust our weight to it.

I was still brooding on the future when a platinum-blonde girl entered. "Mm. Just who I wanted to see," she said, a small plate of cheesecake with a fork in her right hand and a fresh teapot in her left. Bright Night bobbed along beside her in a brand-new white scabbard.

"Should you really be up and about, Alice?" I asked, pulling out a chair beside mine and readying an extra cup.

"I'm fine. You all worry too much. Shise needs rest more than me. She won't stop moping. I finally got sick of it and tied her to the bed," the Hero replied, seating herself. She had been asleep since the previous evening. And her mana felt ever so slightly weaker.

A sobbing Lady Aurelia had confessed the night before. "The more power an Alvern wields, the shorter her life. Every time we invoke great magic, the time we sleep grows a little longer. Until finally..." She hadn't been able to bring herself to finish the sentence. Her Ladyship loved Alice like a daughter.

"Thank you for yesterday," I said, pouring tea into the new cup. "I don't know what we would have done without you."

"It was hard holding back. Fend it off yourself next time."

I forced a hollow laugh. She called a blast that had converted most of the palace courtyard to a bottomless pit "holding back"? I didn't stand a chance.

"What did you mean by 'just who I wanted to see'?" asked the professor.

"What I said," answered the girl, now holding the light-wyrm sword. "Allen."

"Yes?" I added extra milk and sugar to the teacup and set it on its saucer before Alice.

The Hero took it gladly. "I'm giving you the Alvern name. Caren too. Use it however you like. And take Bright Night as proof."

Time froze. I could have believed that even the fire on the hearth stood still.

Shaken, I took a small forkful of Alice's cheesecake before venturing, "Surely you're—"

"Joking? No. Serious. Shise approves. And this is mine." The pouting Hero laid the sword on my lap. She meant every word.

D-Don't tell me this *is what Lydia and Stella stayed behind for yesterday.*

I sent my former mentor a silent cry for help, only to find him gracefully refilling his teacup. He had joined the enemy.

"Wait. This is all too fast." I smoothed back my hair, mustering the strongest protest in my power. "I...I can't just take this!"

"I acknowledge you," Alice said. "And the first Celestial Spear in centuries was pretty. Allen Etherfield and Caren Alvern kept the planet going in the gap between the age of the gods and the mortal era. I know they'll be happy to share a house name in this life."

"Centuries?" I repeated. "And who are those people? B-But in any case, I...I really can't—"

"I'm in favor," my sister announced from the doorway before I got an answer to my questions or an antidote to my confusion. A shower of violet sparks later, she was sitting serenely in the chair to my left, wearing a sophisticated violet dress identical to the one that had seen her through our visit to the palace the day before. The maids must have brought spares. Her necklace sparkled in the light.

"Caren, I don't—"

"I just came from hearing all about it," she continued. "We won't need to use the name all the time, so I think it will work in our favor during official dealings. Lydia, Lily, Stella, and Tina all approve as well."

"What?! B-But then... Say something, Professor," I pleaded, perceiving my escape cut off. The granting of a house name had been a common reward during the age of strife, or so the records claimed. But in the present?

The professor set his cup on its saucer and said, "Why not? And in any case, who are we to deny Grand Duchess Alvern?"

T-Traitor! Don't think I'll forgive or forget this *knife in my back! I know you just weighed the benefits and decided this would make a good excuse to foist more trouble than ever on me!*

I covered my eyes with my hands. "I need a moment to consider."

"Mm-hmm. I'll allow it, if you make me a cheesecake reserve before you leave for the Shiki archive," the Hero said. "That's where the second volume of the Bibliophage's forbidden tome is. She successfully resurrected a mortal, you know? *No one else* has ever done that. Even the gods failed. You'll find the seventh altar there too, with a signpost to the final one." Alice smiled prettily, as if she hadn't just said something earth-shattering.

So the altar in Shiki isn't *the eighth.*

"Allen Alvern. Caren Alvern." Alice gave a little laugh. "I like the sound of them."

"I quite agree," said Caren.

"Good Violet Growly. I'm glad you see reason. You can be my little sister."

"Judging by our heights—and our chests—I think it should be the other way around."

Both girls laughed. It was nice to see my sister, now one of the kingdom's finest fighters, chatting so amiably with the young Hero. At least, I hoped they were amiable as I wondered what had brought me to this impasse.

Bam! Without warning, a gaping hole opened in the door.

"I thought I just heard something that doesn't bode at all well.

Would you care to explain, Caren?" a gown-clad Lydia demanded, withdrawing her fist and squaring her shoulders. Her blade-sharp glare would have set our old schoolmates at the university quivering in terror. But my sister, as tough as she was lovable, took no notice.

"Your ears aren't playing tricks on you," she said, taking my left hand. "Come on, Allen. You haven't kept your promise to dance with me yet, and a snow-covered flower garden must have its charms. What are we waiting for?"

"What? Oh, right." I hesitated. "But I'm not dressed up."

"Not a problem."

I yielded to Caren's urging and stood.

Well, what's a big brother for if not humoring his little sister?

Lydia spawned plumes of fire, her scarlet locks levitating with rage. "It seems to me you're getting a little full of yourself, Caren."

"No, not in the least." My sister giggled and murmured to herself, "Caren Alvern!"

"Forget it, scarlet crybaby," added the Hero. "I'll never agree to 'Lydia Alvern'!"

"W-Watch it, you...!" my partner growled, but even she seemed at a disadvantage against their combined assault.

I was busy dispelling fiery plumes and violet sparks when I felt a tug on each sleeve. "Stella? Lily?"

The two noblewomen had arrived a little after Lydia, the former in a gown of white and azure, and the latter, pale scarlet. Both looked bashful as they said, "E-Excuse us, Mr. Allen, but..."

"Would you dance with us too?"

So *that* was what they had all dressed up for. No wonder the maids of both ducal houses had seemed so enthusiastic.

I went down on one knee and swept a grandiose bow. "If my ladies will have me."

"Y-Your ladies. Really." Stella brought her fingers to her cheeks and swayed to and fro, giggling uncontrollably. Snowflakes had already begun to swirl.

No sooner did I rise than the older noblewoman tapped her hair clip and whispered, "Thank you so much for fixing it. You've no idea how happy it makes me."

I responded by tapping my bracelet to hers—prompting Lydia and Caren to turn and shout in unison.

"You two! Wait your turn!"

Stella gave a start. "I...I didn't mean..."

"I was o-only exercising my rights!" whined Lily, and just like that, the room descended into a clamor of girls' voices. I sensed Tina's familiar mana approaching, no doubt drawn by the commotion.

Alice looked up from her battle with the cheesecake long enough to meet my gaze with a tender smile. "Keep an eye on Tina, Allen," she said. "With you, I know she can change the fate of the planet."

*

"Hmm... I suppose that about does it," I said to myself in a room of the old church that evening. Having finished writing letters to Cheryl in the city of craft and Felicia in the royal capital, I rolled my pen across the round table and returned my rolled-up shirtsleeves to their normal state. I thought that I had written all that I needed to. I hoped that I would be able to sort things out before Lady Elna woke up. If not, surely Cheryl could handle anything that came up.

"Honestly, Allen?" my former classmate grumbled in my head. "Don't you think you're being unfairly hard on me?"

"Come on, Allen," the head clerk chimed in. "Give me more to do!"

I failed to see what they were so miffed about.

Outside the window, flower petals and snow danced in the moonlit night. Azure butterflies of living ice flitted among them. I couldn't have helped wanting to paint the scene if I'd had an artistic bone in my body. It looked like something out of a dream.

"N-No, not the maid uniform," came a drowsy groan from the bed, where a white-nightgowned Lena slumbered between a contented Atra and Lia. Tina and the maids had been using them as dress-up dolls all day.

I stroked the children's hair. Then came a reserved knock at the door.

"Are you awake?" the knocker asked.

"Yes, I'm awake," I said.

The door opened silently, and Caren hurried inside, wearing a light-purple nightgown. She took a seat on the couch and hugged a cushion, looking like she wanted attention.

"The thing is," she said diffidently, "I can't seem to get to sleep."

"It's been one thing after another since we got here," I said. "And we have to go straight on to Shiki, a place we know almost nothing about."

At long last, we had defeated the dreaded Black Blossom. But the second apostle's blend of great elementals and great spells could easily wipe out a city. That girl—the uncanny false Saint, who seemed to survey everything as if from a great height—would turn it to military use without hesitation if the results of Io's rampage impressed her. I also wondered who was controlling Tenebrous Wolf. We had a rough road ahead.

I made to return to my chair, but Caren patted the seat beside her with her hand and tail. As her big brother, I had a general obligation to comply with her demands. No sooner had I taken my place on the couch than she snuggled up shoulder to shoulder.

"This was another big mess, huh?" she said.

"It sure was. I'm—"

"If you apologize, I'll kiss you." She nuzzled her head against mine, cheeks puffed out in indignation. She was adorable. Too cute for words. And yet...

"Caren, you really ought to think twice about saying things like—"

"I only say them to you." She turned to the side as I did, meeting my gaze. Slowly, she reached for my cheek. "Alice told me a story. In the old, old days, there was a Caren in the House of Alvern, and she had a big brother named Allen too."

"R-Really? That's quite a coincidence."

Oh dear.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about this mood spelled danger. And yet, I couldn't look away. It would make Caren sad.

"That Allen saved the planet once, but he couldn't become an Alvern," she continued. "Alice said it was 'complicated,' and that she

was really glad we could both share the name."

Alice?! You didn't tell me about this!

My no-longer-so-little sister blushed. "Allen Alvern and Caren Alvern," she said shyly. "They really do sound nice."

"L-Listen, Caren—"

Before I could say more, my teary-eyed sister murmured, "Allen, I __"

"Whoops! Hold it right there!" Lily barged in through the window, dressed in her nightgown and carrying a teapot and cups. Ignoring our astonishment, she set about preparing tea with smiling efficiency. "Really, Caren? Didn't we *all* decide that no one would try to steal a march tonight?"

"W-We did...b-but I'm his *sister*!" Caren protested. "A-And anyway, what are *you* doing here, then?!"

"My duty as a maid," came the lilting reply.

"Th-That doesn't answer my question!"

My sister and the maid slipped into their usual (hopefully) friendly banter. The way the two of them leaked mana, I fully expected Lydia and the others to force their way in before long.

I glanced out the window and made a prayer to the moon.

Please let this peace last as long as possible.

A gust of wind scattered petals and snow. Ice butterflies beat translucent azure wings. They looked like they were headed south.

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been five months. My health hit an all-time low while working on this volume, and man, that caught me off guard. Just when you think things are going well, trouble rears its head. Overconfidence doesn't pay. I'll be more careful from now on.

But anyway, doesn't Caren look great on the cover? I'm so glad we got to show Fiane in an illustration too! Now, where can I squeeze Romy in?

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, with revisions—I mean... No, "revisions" is right. It counts even if I keep only a single word.

Now, on to the story. To be honest, I wasn't planning to put Caren front and center this volume. But Alice is in the running for the trickiest character to handle in the whole series, and when I asked myself who I could bounce her off this time, my answer was "Caren." And the plan to reforge her dagger is going on behind the scenes. It's an absolutely wild weapon (the kind that makes elders of the long-lived races faint), so these things take time.

Lily's past went according to plan. A lot comes after that flashback, so I'd like to write more someday. And I want to write the best volume eighteen I can. We haven't settled on a cover yet!

Announcement time. *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter* is going to become an anime in 2025! I hear the series has sold over 850,000 books (including ebooks) worldwide. I'm so grateful.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. I'm so, so sorry for everything I've put you through. I'll try to do better with volume eighteen.

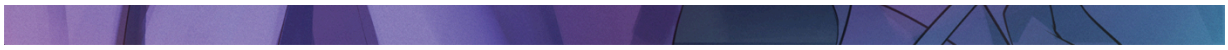
The illustrator, cura. Another volume of amazing work! Thank you so much for Lena.

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. Next volume—what do

traitors dream of?

Riku Nanano


“Come on, Allen. You haven’t kept your promise to dance with me yet.”
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. The new secret art she just learned from Allen seems to have quite a history.
Private Tutor to the Duke’s Daughter 17




“Delicious.
The best ever.”
“What shall we try next?”
“Want to share whatever looks good?”
Duke Howard’s second daughter
Tina
Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen’s tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.
Hero
Alice
As the successor to the title of “Hero,” this platinum-blonde girl of doll-like beauty commands the fear of many nations’ leaders. The time she spends asleep seems to be slowly but steadily increasing.


“Tee-hee! ♪
I’ll treasure it.”
Young lady with dreams of maidhood
Lily
Under-duke Leinster’s eldest daughter met Allen in the southern capital while he was still in school. She doesn’t seem to have much confidence in her dream, but only time will tell.


A short way behind them came a wolf-clan girl in a sophisticated violet dress, staring bashfully at the ground as she wavered between anticipation and anxiety. The necklace I'd given her glinted around her throat.
"A-Allen, um..."
Private tutor to the dukes' daughters
Allen
A young man who fails to appreciate his own unrivaled control of magic. Summoned to the empire by Alice, he and his sister find themselves in an audience with its sovereign.


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Author
Riku Nanano
Illustrator
cura
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The Celestial Spear, Successor to the Star




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Black Blossom, apprentice of Floral Heaven

Io Lockfield

A demisprite sorcerer and former second apostle of the Church of the Holy Spirit. He participated in a surprise raid on the imperial capital, only to be intercepted by Alice and confined beneath the palace.

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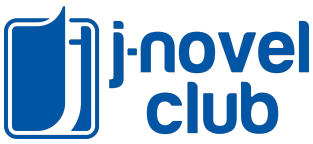
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 17
by Riku Nanano

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