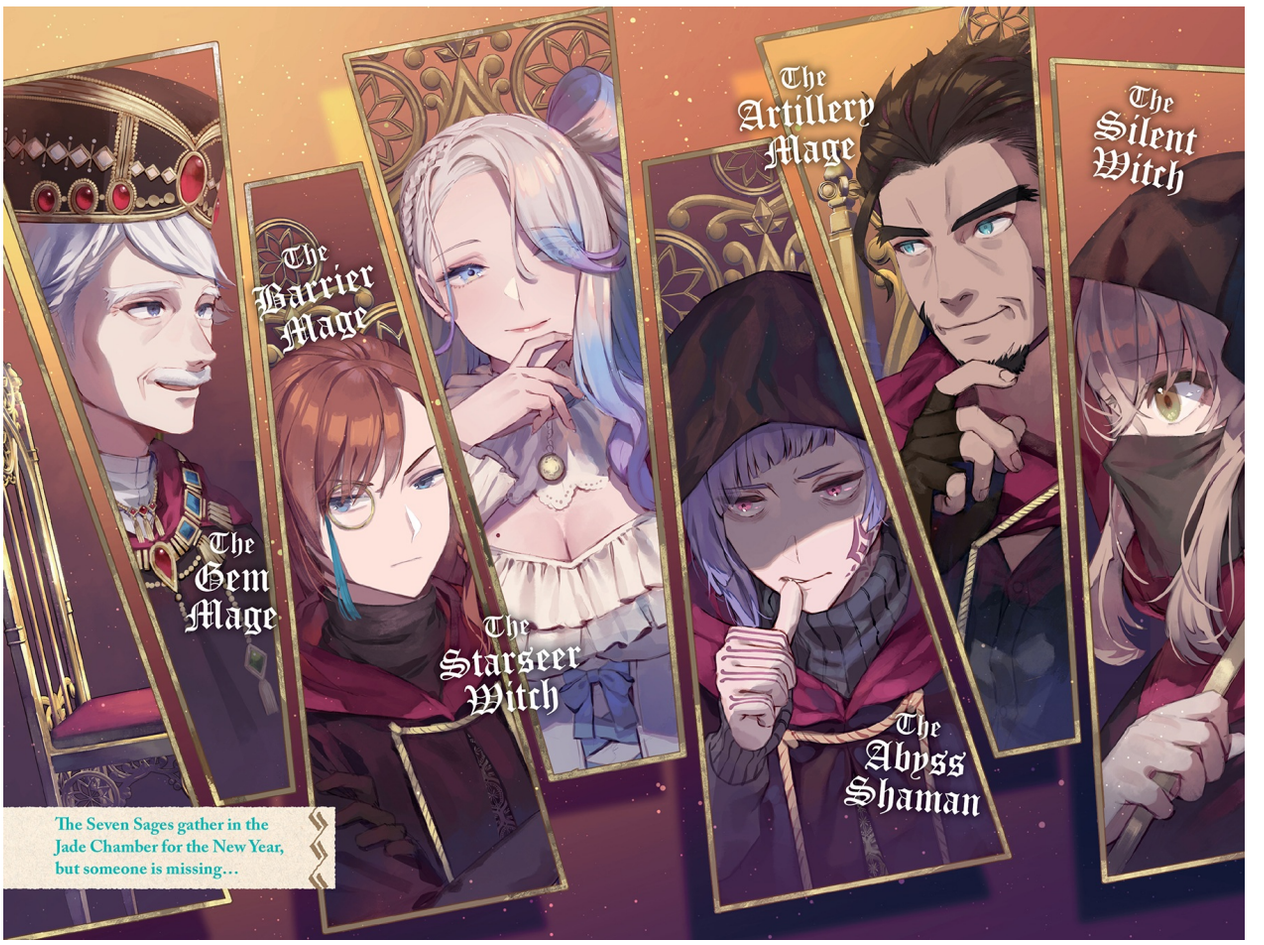

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT
WITCH
VI
Matsuri Isora
Illustration by
Nanna Fujimi

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The
Witch of Thorns
RAUL ROSEBURG
The current head of House Roseburg, a distinguished family of mages skilled in plant manipulation, and the fifth Witch of Thorns. In addition to his job managing the royal castle gardens, he researches flora and fertilizers. He currently has the highest mana capacity in the Kingdom of Ridill.
SECRETS OF THE
SILENT WITCH
VI


The Gem Mage
The Barrier Mage
The Starseer Witch
The Artillery Mage
The Abyss Shaman
The Silent Witch
The Seven Sages gather in the Jade Chamber for the New Year, but someone is missing…


“You have nothing I want.”
But if Monica had to say, there *was* one thing she wanted from this callous man, and one thing only: the truth. The whole truth. Laid bare for all to see.

SECRETS OF THE SILENT WITCH

VI

Matsuri Isora
Illustration by Nanna Fujimi

YEN ON
New York

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CHARACTERS SO FAR

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PROLOGUE

The Dazzling Family of Villains' Pre-Solstice Show

County Kerbeck, located in the east of the Kingdom of Ridill, was a land of plenty. Melted snow from the Worgan Mountains formed a great river that flowed through the area and blessed it with water. Harvests were always bountiful, and forestry was booming.

The domain's well-maintained roads and stops for travelers formed the backbone of highly valued trade routes both domestic and foreign. Traffic remained heavy, even now that the winter holidays had drawn near.

But precisely because Kerbeck enjoyed the most fertile lands in the eastern provinces, its people always had to be vigilant—both in regard to dragonraids and to attacks from other nations.

House Norton, which had governed these lands for many years, possessed one of the most formidable armies in the kingdom as well as great diplomatic power. This garnered the respect of other nobles in the region, and even some from the kingdom's center. The current Count of Kerbeck, Azure Norton, was known far and wide as a righteous man beloved by his people.

And now, in those same lands ruled by Count Kerbeck, on a small path branching off a larger road, walked a lone man. He was a detective, and a certain noble girl had hired him. In his midthirties, he wore traveling clothes; both his attire and appearance were plain, making it easy for others to forget him.

He looked out at the Worgan Mountains in the distance, then called to a nearby farmhand.

"Hard at work, I see! Despite the cold!"

"Sure am. Dragonraids've been awful lately," said the worker. "But when the dragons're sittin' still for the winter, we make good progress on the farms."

"Are those the Worgan Mountains over there? The ones the black dragon came from?"

“Hah, weren’t just the one. He had a whole swarm of pterodragons with ’im. The whole sky over yonder was black as night. Right terrifyin’, if you ask me.”

The farmhand used body language and hand gestures as he spoke. The other workers, starved for new people to talk to, started to gather around and add themselves into the conversation.

“’Ey! A traveler! You here to collect scales like the rest of ’em?”

The Black Dragon of Worgan had appeared in Kerbeck in the early days of summer. The Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages, had slain it. Apparently, a lot of people had been trekking up into the mountains ever since to collect the scales it dropped. Dragon scales were prized as materials for charms and magical items, and depending on the variety and quality, could sell for as much as rare gems.

The detective wasn’t here to find any scales, but he decided to express vague agreement so the farmhands wouldn’t find him suspicious. “Well, something like that,” he said.

“Don’t think there’s many good ones left,” said a worker. “The hunters made off with boatloads this summer.”

“Aye. Don’t bother climbin’ the mountains this time of year. You’re like to get crushed by an avalanche or mauled by a boar.”

“Is that right?” the detective replied. “Hmm. That’s a shame. Oh, I meant to ask. Are there any good places to stay around here? I haven’t settled on where to lodge for the night just yet.”

The farmhands all grinned and recommended him an inn.

“If you’re lookin’ to spend the night, it’s gotta be the Golden Rooster. They’ve got great salted meat and bean soup there.”

“And if you can sing a song or do anythin’ else to entertain, you could visit the lord’s mansion. He loves that stuff. Might even let you stay the night there.”

The farmhands had just mentioned the detective’s intended destination. He chuckled to himself—what a stroke of good luck. Then he offered a polite smile. “Is that right? As it happens, I *can* sing a bit… Maybe I’ll pay him a visit after all. What sort of man is the lord here?”

“The count? Oh, he’s a good-natured fellow.”

“Yeah. He has more fun durin’ the festivals than anybody else.”

“Always keeps the people in mind, that one. A better lord I

couldn’t ask for.”

The common folk’s expressions were cheerful as they talked about their lord—and proud. The detective’s preliminary investigation had been correct; Azure Norton, the Count of Kerbeck, was indeed beloved by his people.

But then one of the farmhands glanced around before taking on a severe look and lowering his voice. “Ah, wait. If you’re goin’ to the lord’s place, make sure you stay well away from their stable, y’hear?”

“Did something happen at their stable?” asked the detective, mystified.

The farmhands all stopped talking. Eventually, the eldest among them, a man, managed to mumble out the rest.

“Few years ago, the last lord’s wife had a daughter—adopted from a monastery, y’see. They were all nice to the girl for as long as the wife lived, but after she passed, things took a turn… Lady Isabelle’s especially hard on her, makin’ her do odd jobs and lockin’ her in the stable when she’s got no use for her.”

That’s her, thought the detective. Apparently, the target of his investigation was the subject of rumors among the common folk, too. *And that means she’s no fictional character… But I should go in person, just to be sure.*

“Oh, that’s… I feel bad for the girl.” He offered the workers a sympathetic expression as he mulled over how to go about his next task.

“The lord’s a good person otherwise, y’see, but he’s so cold to that poor girl… Anyway, if you’re goin’ to his mansion, you’d best not bring her up in conversation.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

After that, the detective chatted with the farmhands a little more, then politely excused himself and headed for the lord’s mansion.

“…He’s gone.”

“Sure is.”

After the man in traveling attire had left, the farmhands murmured to one another as they began their real work for the

day.

“All right, you lot. Mission’s startin’. I’m gonna grab a horse and head to the lord’s place. You talk to the old guy at the Golden Rooster and have him hold the traveler up.”

“Got it. That old man sure knows how to ramble, don’t he? Perfect for wastin’ our target’s time.”

“Sure does. All right, I’m headin’ out for a bit.”

* * *

The detective arrived at Count Kerbeck’s mansion quite late in the afternoon. He’d planned to get there a little earlier, but on his way, a loquacious old man had held him up, and a passing woman had sold him baked goods. Together, they’d taken up a good amount of his time.

The lord’s mansion was large and grandiose but with few of the colorful decorations you saw in the estates to the west of the kingdom. The people of the eastern provinces, which were particularly prone to dragonraids, tended to favor long-lasting structures. It seemed Kerbeck was no exception.

I suppose I could act like a proper performing traveler and go straight to the front door, he thought, *but before I do, I think I’ll check in on the girl in person. From what those farmhands said, she’s usually in the stable…*

The man evaded the gate guards and rounded the mansion. Stables were usually located in the back. On his way, he found a conveniently damaged section of fence, so he used it to slip into the premises. Staying hidden in the shadows, he made his way toward the stable.

As he approached, he heard a young woman’s voice mixed in with the horses’ neighing.

“Ohhh-ho-ho-ho!”

Wondering what the ruckus was, the detective peered inside through a small window. In the stable, a girl with light-brown hair was on her knees, sobbing. Looking down at her was a noble girl with orange ringlets. She had a maidservant with her.

That’s Isabelle Norton, Count Kerbeck’s daughter. So then the

other one must be…

The girl whimpering in front of Isabelle was very thin. She was hanging her head, so he couldn't make out the details of her face, but her clothing was shabby, cut and torn in places.

"Oh, Lady Isabelle, please…," implored the brown-haired girl in a weak voice. She kept breaking into sobs. "Please, can I…have something to eat…?"

"You? Eat? When you're even less useful than the horses in this stable? You're lower than *livestock*! I can't believe you'd be so bold. Oh, why in the world did my grandmother take in a girl like you?"

"Please, ma'am… Please…"

As the brown-haired girl continued her pathetic entreaties, Isabelle narrowed her eyes. Then a wicked grin appeared on her face. "All right. I suppose I can give you some water. Agatha?" she said, glancing at the servant next to her.

The woman picked up a bucket filled with the horses' drinking water, then splashed some of it on the ground in front of the pitiful girl. The water was cold from the midwinter air and soaked the hem of the girl's clothes, staining her skirt. And her outfit was already so wretched. She stared at her wet skirt blankly.

Isabelle, still smiling wickedly, said to her, "On your hands and knees, now. You may drink as much as you like."

"…Mmph, hic… Hic…"

The brown-haired girl trembled and hung her head, meaning to put her mouth to the puddle. But just then, a man appeared in the stable. He wore a splendid, hand-sewn mantle, and his mouth was adorned with a mustache. The detective knew who it was instantly—the lord of this estate, Count Kerbeck.

"Ah, Isabelle! Wonderful daughter mine! Whatever are you doing in a place like this?" he asked, twirling his mustache.

Isabelle immediately adopted a sad expression. Tears crept into her eyes as she ran to her father for a hug. "Father, listen! This *girl* tried to splash me with water!"

The brown-haired girl raised her head in surprise. "N-no, I didn't…," she said in a frail voice.

But the count refused to listen to the wretched girl's words. "Shameless ingrate!" he yelled, his deep voice reverberating. "We

took you in, and this is how you repay us?!”

The poor girl prostrated herself, shaking, ignoring how the action got her clothes even dirtier.

I see. It appears the rumors are true—Monica Norton is the outcast of the family.

As the detective observed this exchange, he noticed a boy approaching—a groom—so he quickly left the stable and returned the same way he’d come.

He’d seen enough. It would be foolish to pretend to be a performer and stay at this mansion. It would only risk drawing suspicion. It was time to go back to his employer, collect his reward, and enjoy a lavish New Year’s celebration for himself.

* * *

The groom stepped into the stable where the wicked nobles were scorning the girl and bowed to the count. “The intruder seems to have left the premises,” he reported crisply.

“I see,” said the count, nodding, before turning to the girl on the ground. “You did excellent work, Sandy.”

The brown-haired girl exhaled audibly and glanced up. A grin appeared on her plain face, and she began to speak with her natural accent. “How was that? I did a real good job playin’ the poor little bullied girl, didn’t I?”

“You did indeed,” agreed the count. “Your performance was wonderful. I’d expect nothing less from the one who triumphed over all the others in that fierce audition!”

“I agree, Father,” said Isabelle. “The way she spoke, the way she held herself, her facial expressions, her mannerisms—everything simply exuded weakness and frailty. It was beautiful! Sandy, you’re talented enough to be a professional actress!”

“Heh-heh… Aw, c’mon, you’re gettin’ me all embarrassed now, ma’am.”

Sandy scratched her cheek bashfully. She was the fourth daughter of a carrot farmer, and was twelve years old. She beat out some tough competition in an audition sponsored by House Norton and was chosen to play the role of Monica Norton during

the winter holidays.

The count and his daughter, meanwhile, would act as the wicked family who had taken the fictional Monica Norton in. This was all to help the real Monica—the Silent Witch Monica Everett—with her mission.

A few days ago, someone suspicious had appeared at several county monasteries, asking if they were once home to someone named Monica.

The Silent Witch's cover story as Monica Norton was that the former countess of Kerbeck had adopted her from a monastery. Someone had clearly thought her existence suspicious and had gone sniffing around County Kerbeck. The count, in turn, had ordered the people living near his mansion to guide any suspicious travelers to him so that he, Isabelle, Agatha, and Sandy, the stand-in, could put on an act to fool them—to make them believe that a girl named Monica Norton did, in fact, live there.

"My lord, should I follow that man?" asked Isabelle's maidservant, Agatha.

Count Kerbeck thought about this for a moment, then shook his head. "No need. While I would prefer to learn who his employer is, we might blow our cover if we pry. And that would waste all the effort we put into our act."

For the moment, it was more important to ignore any spies and focus on creating an alibi for Monica Norton over the winter holiday.

There was only one thing to do, and the count puffed out his chest and declared his resolve. "It seems we need to polish our acting skills even further for when more spies appear!"

"Yes, Father! I shall continue my research on how a villainess should act!"

"My lord," said Agatha, "if I may be so bold… Did you grow out your mustache for this occasion?"

Count Kerbeck seemed a little giddy as he proudly brushed his mustache with a finger. "I did. I had a feeling it might come in handy."

"That's so smart, Father! Every evil count needs a mustache!"

No one present brought up that plenty of *regular* counts also had mustaches. That would have been rude.

As the wicked father-daughter duo discussed villainous behavior and attire, the groom hesitantly interrupted. “Sir, ma’am, it’s a little cold out here. Perhaps it would be best to continue inside the mansion?”

“Ah, yes, you’re right. My apologies.”

Count Kerbeck lowered his hand from his mustache, then turned to face Sandy. He looked upon the commoner with gentle eyes, filled with the dignity and kindness his people so adored.

“Sandy, I apologize for confining you here during winter vacation,” he said. “You ought to be spending it with your family.”

“No, sir, not at all…”

Sandy would have to continue her role as Monica Norton for the rest of Serendia Academy’s winter break. Naturally, that meant she couldn’t go back home, and she’d have to spend both the solstice and the New Year’s holiday with the Norton family. This weighed heavily on the count’s mind.

“In exchange,” he said, “House Norton will wholeheartedly welcome you as our guest.”

Count Kerbeck was a larger-than-life figure who took the lead during dragonraids and never faltered, a playful man who would gleefully join in village festivities, and more than anything else, a lord who held his people first and foremost in his mind. That was why they loved and respected him. That popularity was also the reason they were following his instructions, stopping any suspicious travelers and reporting them to his mansion.

Sandy looked up at the count with respect and gratitude. “Thank you, my lord,” she said, bowing.

Isabelle and Agatha smiled.

“Sandy, please, make yourself at home,” said Isabelle. “We’ve prepared plenty of food, too.”

“First we’ll get you a bath,” added Agatha. “We also have clothes for you to change into.”

“Wow… I never dreamed anyone’d *ever* treat me this nice…”

Incidentally, Sandy’s role came with three meals a day—plus snacks—*and* she got to borrow clothes.

When she wasn’t pretending to be tormented, she would get to wear lovely dresses, eat delicious meals, and sleep in a soft bed. Plus, she would be paid handsomely and return home with baked goods handmade by House Norton’s chef. It was a truly

wonderful job.

While her unchanted magecraft is impressive,

even more formidable is her precision.

She could thread the eye of a needle with her spells.

Her skills are positively superhuman.

SECRETS OF THE SILENT WITCH VI



CHAPTER 1

The Three Young Sages Assemble

The New Year's magecraft dedication performed at the royal castle of Ridill was a huge hit. The people were treated to the brilliant flames of Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage, and the wondrous tones of Alteria chimes created by Monica Everett, the Silent Witch, and they showered the Seven Sages with praise.

Now that the dedication was over, the kingdom's highest mages were waiting in the Jade Chamber—a space open only to the Sages and the king himself. They would remain there on standby until the next ceremony commenced.

The Barrier Mage Louis Miller, seated at the chamber's round table, rested his cheek on his hand. "What an astonishing display we had this year! Truly unprecedented!" he said, his voice bright and cheery. Then he pushed his monocle up with one fingertip and plastered a thin smile on his face. "After all, we were *missing* one of the Sages, and *another* passed out while standing up!"

The Sage who had passed out while standing up—Monica—buried her face in her hands. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry!" she repeated between sobs.

Monica had sworn an oath to do her best to be brave around other people. That was part of why she'd pushed herself to produce the Alteria chimes for the magecraft dedication a little while ago.

…It had all gone so well. Up to a certain point, anyway.

Monica needed to do a massive amount of calculations to make the chimes ring beautifully. And so, while she was using the spell, she'd been able to forget all about how many people were watching.

The problem occurred after she finished.

As she dispelled her Alteria chimes, she found herself suddenly engulfed by raucous applause and cries of adulation. Realizing how many people had their eyes on her, Monica began

to panic. It got so bad, she actually managed to pass out while still standing upright. According to Louis, she'd made a strange sort of *pffhhh* noise, and her eyes had rolled back into their sockets. Bradford noticed her lose consciousness, and he and Louis held on to her from either side, keeping her upright and helping drag her away so that no one would notice.

To make matters worse, one of the Sages—the Witch of Thorns—was late and completely absent. Mary Harvey had used her illusions to fake his presence.

In the end, one of the Sages had been an illusion, and another had passed out mid-ceremony. It was indeed an unprecedented state of affairs.

The people had lauded the Seven Sages' magecraft as a miracle, but for the Sages, it was a much bigger miracle that they'd managed to keep the crowd from noticing their ridiculous situation.

Right now, all six of them, excluding the Witch of Thorns, were seated at the round table. They had assigned seats that ran from the room's entrance clockwise in this order: the Starseer Witch, a beauty of indeterminate age with her silvery hair tied back; the Artillery Mage, a large man with black hair and a beard; the Gem Mage, an elderly man adorned head to toe with jewels; the Abyss Shaman, a gloomy man with purple hair; the absent Witch of Thorns; the Barrier Mage, his chestnut hair in a braid; and finally, the short-statured Silent Witch.

Mary served as the facilitator of the group. She looked at Monica and Louis to her right, and gave a gentle smile. "Now, now, Louie. Don't be so grumpy. My dear Monica's Alteria chimes were truly a sight to behold!"

Emanuel Darwin, the Gem Mage, quickly added his own praise to Mary's. "Indeed, indeed. Not everyone can use large-scale magecraft like that at the drop of a hat! Well done, Lady Silent Witch!"

The man spoke quickly in an insincere, theatrical tone. Then, as though just remembering something, he pounded his palm with a fist.

"Ah, yes. I heard you and Prince Felix slayed a cursed dragon. Truly remarkable! As a fellow Sage, my chest swells with pride."

"Umm… Well…," Monica stammered.

“First the Black Dragon of Worgan, and now the Cursed Dragon of Rehnberg! You are a hero of this kingdom, a slayer of two great and wicked dragons!”

His attitude and heaps of praise had an obvious motive—he wanted Monica on his side. Emanuel was a vehement supporter of Duke Clockford and the second prince. Among the Seven Sages, Louis backed the first prince, Emanuel the second. The other five Sages were mostly neutral. If even one more of their number decided to support the second prince, it would massively tilt the scales. And now that Emanuel had heard about how Monica fought a cursed dragon with the second prince, he wanted her in his camp.

H-how am I supposed to turn him down in this situation…? she wondered desperately.

“To tell the truth,” said Emanuel, lowering his voice to a whisper, “I’ve been doing some research on imbuing a magical item with a reflective barrier. What do you think? If you’d like, Lady Silent Witch, we can discuss the specifics over lunch—”

“Lord Gem Mage,” interrupted Louis, his voice cold. Playing with his long braid, he shot a glance at Emanuel. “Reflective barriers consume a terrific amount of mana. Imbuing a magical item with one would require a very high mana capacity, would it not?”

“Ah, you’re curious, are you? …I suppose the completion of such an item *would* put you in a vulnerable position. Mm, yes.”

Reflective barriers were just what they sounded like—barriers that could send an enemy’s magecraft back at them. They were extremely powerful, but extremely difficult to use, and thus uncommon. The capacity of such barriers was rated according to a class system; Monica had once heard that Louis was capable of using up to class two. These could reflect most attack spells.

But if a magical item could be made with the same effect, then it was logical that some would think Louis—whose barriers were his calling card—might find himself in a precarious position. Not Monica, though. She knew that his talents went well beyond the strength of his barriers.

Louis was perfectly aware of this, too; his confident smile never faltered. “If you *were* able to create such an item, I would be overjoyed. It would mean less work for me.” He chuckled at

Emanuel's jab, then shrugged dramatically. "But you need a great quantity of mana to make an item like that, right? I know your capacity is rather low, Lord Gem Mage, and I worry the strain may cause you to drop dead from mana deficiency— Ah, I apologize. I meant to say that I'm worried you might damage your health."

Emanuel grimaced. He had the lowest mana capacity among the Sages, and he was rather self-conscious about it. Monica, stressed by the charged air between the two men, put one hand on her aching stomach.

"I'm surprised Thorns still hasn't shown his face," said Bradford, stroking his beard. "I thought for sure he'd be here before the ceremony."

On the first day of the new year, once the royal procession and magecraft dedication were finished at the gates, a ceremony was held in the throne room. The Sages were currently waiting for this event to begin. Everyone figured the Witch of Thorns would come back during the interim, but there had been no sign of him.

Mary put a hand to her cheek. "Yes, I'm a little worried about him," she said gently. "Monica, my dear, would you mind taking a little walk and looking for him? I'm sure he's somewhere in the gardens."

Monica was struggling to endure the room's awkward atmosphere, so she nodded without a second thought.

Mary smiled sweetly, then addressed Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman, who had been snoozing, head down, on the table the entire time. "Would you go, too, Ray dear? Have a walk, soak in the sunlight, and take your mind off things."

Ray sluggishly lifted his head and stared into space with empty eyes. A creepy smile appeared on his lips. "A walk… Just the two of us… A walk alone with a girl. They call that a walking date, right? Ah, a walking date. How *wholesome*. I, a shaman, feel loved in a *wholesome* way. How nice. Yes, how wonderful."


THE GEM MAGE
Emanuel Darwin

Ray's thirst for love continued unabated. While Monica was a little put off by his grin, she actually did have something to discuss with him alone. This was her chance to ask him about his progress investigating the traitor.

She stood up and gave him a short bow. "Um, er, Lord Abyss Mage… W-will you, um, come with me?"

Ray stood and gazed at her. A fire seemed to burn deep in his pink eyes. He took a step toward her, then another. The way he was closing in frightened her.

"…Do you love me?" he asked.

"I, um, *rephpect* you!"

"…But do you hold me in high esteem?"

"Y-yes!"

"…Then do you love me platonically? As a friend? Do you… care for me?"

"Hwah? Huh, um…? What…what *is* love anyway…?"

It was only the first day of the new year, and Monica was already worrying about the nature of love. The other Sages looked at her with pity.

For a single moment, the elder Sages, who almost never agreed, were finally on the same page—primarily in feeling sorry for Monica.

* * *

After disembarking from his carriage, Cyril Ashley gazed up at the royal palace towering above him. As he walked along the stone path leading to its gates, he was overcome with a mix of tension and admiration.

Next to him was his foster father, Marquess Highown. He looked at his son. "Nervous?" he asked.

"…No," said Cyril. "I'll be fine."

"You're swinging your right hand and right leg at the same time."

Cyril immediately grimaced and stopped walking.

At the New Year's ceremony, Cyril would officially be named the marquess's heir. Failure wasn't an option, and the pressure

was so great, it had made his expressions and mannerisms jerky and stiff.

Cyril had attended several high society gatherings since his adoption, but this was his first time visiting the palace. He had seen several mansions along the way, all the height of luxury, but the castle wasn't just extravagant—it was majestic, historic. He felt overwhelmed.

"Hmm," his father said, looking thoughtful.

Had he gotten fed up with Cyril? Lost hope in him? Cyril's anxiety was spiking.

Then his father made a suggestion. "You haven't been to the palace gardens yet, have you?"

"Oh, uh, no…"

"They're gorgeous. Why don't you go have a look? I'll be waiting right here."

Cyril's father was telling him to take a walk through the gardens to unravel the knot of tension in his stomach. The man was going out of his way to help him. Feeling guilty, Cyril decided to take him up on the offer.

"…I truly apologize, Father."

"You're young. Young enough to be a little more excited at the prospect of visiting the palace." The marquess's voice was low and gentle. "Go on," he added quietly.

Cyril bowed, then started off toward the gardens.

The moment he set foot into the palace gardens and took a look around, Cyril let out a sigh of admiration.

It was winter now, and cold enough that snow could start falling at any moment. And yet the flowers here bloomed in a rainbow of colors. The winter roses especially—he found that the word "beautiful" wasn't nearly enough to describe them. Roses that bloomed in autumn and winter were by no means commonplace, and normally, you'd see only one or two high up on leafless branches. Here, though, the roses were so big and so numerous, it was like the garden had been frozen in time at the height of summer.

It's so beautiful, thought Cyril. *I could almost forget it's winter.*

It wasn't just the flower beds—the trees planted near the palace walls were just as colorful. They weren't very tall, but their reddish-pink flowers, yellow pistils and stamens, and emerald leaves provided a vivid contrast to the gray winter sky.

As Cyril stared, entranced, at their unfamiliar flowers, he heard a voice.

"Pretty, right? We recently imported those from abroad. They're called camellias."

The voice sounded as though it had come from up in the tree behind Cyril. He looked over his shoulder and tilted his head, and he spotted a man sitting high up on a tree branch.

The man looked about the same age as Cyril, and in his arms, he was cradling a cream-colored kitten.

He wore an undyed shirt and a pair of pants with suspenders—the clothes of a peasant farmer. In addition, he had a towel thrown around his neck and a straw hat atop his head. Judging from his outfit, Cyril thought he might be the palace's gardener.

But why would he wear a straw hat in the middle of winter? wondered Cyril.

"Hey, um, I climbed up here to save this cat. But now I can't get down," the man said candidly. "Could you help me out?"

A gardener? Stuck in a tree? Sighing to himself, Cyril murmured a short spell and created a plank of ice stretching from the ground up to the branch.

"Wow, that's amazing," said the man in the tree, sliding down the ice. "You really saved me, there. I'm not great with high places, you see."

"…You're not?" said Cyril. "Then why did you climb up?"

"I was just so focused on saving this little guy." The man stroked the kitten in his arms.

Cyril looked at him again and noted his facial features. He was surprisingly handsome. The most attractive man Cyril knew of was his beloved prince, Felix Arc Ridill, but the man before him was handsome enough to rival even Felix. His vivid, curly hair reminded Cyril of scarlet roses; that and his deep-green irises were particularly eye-catching. He looked like the personification of a rose.

In contrast to his gorgeous face, however, he was quite muscular. Cyril had never been able to put on muscle, no matter

how much he trained, and he found himself a little envious of the man's thick arms.

Then Cyril looked at the man's hat. "Why are you wearing a straw hat in the middle of winter?"

"Don't you think it makes me a little more approachable?"

"Actually, I think it just looks strange at this time of year," said Cyril bluntly.

"You do?" The man sounded a little disappointed as he pinched the edge of his hat. Beneath it were more of those fluffy, scarlet curls.

A gorgeous face, a toned physique, and peasant clothes. The man was a mass of contradictions.

"Are you here for the New Year greetings?" he asked. "The son of a noble, maybe?"

He certainly didn't speak like any gardener Cyril had ever met. The man's lack of politeness irritated him slightly. "…I am Cyril Ashley, son of Vincent Ashley, the Marquess of Highown," he said gruffly.

"Oh, Marquess Highown!" said the man, his face lighting up. "He does a lot for me, you know. Provides a lot of financing."

"Really?"

"You see all these flowers here? My family has been taking care of these gardens for generations." The man smiled a little proudly and cast his green eyes over their surroundings. "Strange to see so many flowers blooming outside of a greenhouse, isn't it? We actually use a secret blend of fertilizer for everything. And the secret ingredient is *mana*."

"…Isn't it forbidden to imbue animals and plants with mana?"

"Well, strictly speaking, it's forbidden to imbue them with enough mana to cause harm, like how a human gets mana poisoning when they absorb too much. As long as you don't go over that limit, it's allowed."

Just as humans were born with a certain amount of mana, animals and plants had trace amounts of it, too. The man explained that he was doing research on how to strengthen plants by changing the ratios of the elements composing their native mana, rather than by simply adding more.

"If a human's mana is equivalent to one hundred, this flower would be at about a one. So I make sure not to go above one as I

adjust the balance of mana using our special fertilizer. By doing that, I can create cultivars that resist cold, and so on. Right now, I'm only using it for the ornamental plants in these gardens, but eventually, I want to do the same with other plants, too."

Cyril was impressed by the man's explanation. It made sense to him now why his foster father would be investing. If this method could create vegetables and herbs that grew even in barren lands, it would go a long way toward solving food and medicine shortages.

"How innovative," said Cyril.

"Well, it's not as easy as I make it sound. I've had one failure after another. A tiny mistake in the proportions can increase a plant's mana so much it withers, and even the dirt beneath it becomes unusable. And I still need to investigate whether vegetables with altered mana capacities have any negative effects on humans. Unfortunately, Ridill hasn't put much research into these subjects, and we're lagging behind."

When a person absorbed too much mana, it could cause awful side effects. Cyril knew that personally, thanks to his mana hyper-absorption syndrome. It would likely take years of hard work to figure out if the edible plants this man created were safe to consume.

Even so, Cyril felt like such research deserved praise. "It's an excellent topic for investigation. If we were to suffer food shortages, such as during a famine, this work could save the lives of thousands. Tens of thousands, even."

"Aww, shucks. Such praise from the future marquess of Highown really means a lot!" The man smiled from ear to ear, showing off his pearly whites. Then he took a carrot out of the shoulder bag he'd left at the base of the tree and held it out to Cyril. "As a sign of our friendship, have a vegetable from my field! Oh, and I grew it with normal fertilizer, so no need to worry."

"…I'll pass, but thanks. I have my greeting shortly."

"You could have just eaten it here," said the man, chomping into the raw carrot himself. "Do you still have time? I can show you around the gardens."

Cyril hesitated a moment, then accepted the offer. "I'd love that. Thank you." He was extremely interested in the man's work, and more importantly, talking to such a candid person was

making him less nervous.

The man flashed him a smile, then started down the garden path, kitten still in his arms and carrot in his mouth.

Cyril looked at the furry creature. “About the cat,” he said.

“What?” asked the man.

“…Would it be all right if I pet it?”

“Sure! Here you go.”

The animal’s fluffy, cream-colored fur proved very relaxing.

The gardener loved to talk. There was clear joy in his voice as he walked among the flower beds, kitten held in his thick arms.

“My ancestor was something else, too,” the man said. “So frightening, even the king was terrified. Bent the king’s arm to get permission to build these gardens.”

If there was ever a time when the king was terrified of a mere gardener, then it would have been a grave matter indeed. Cyril decided the man must have been exaggerating and silently waited for him to continue.

“Did you know that nobles back then didn’t do their business in bathrooms? When they needed to go, they’d do so behind the flower beds. Have you ever heard a woman say she’s ‘going to pick flowers’ when she needs to go? That’s where it comes from. Or at least, that’s the theory.”

Why was he suddenly talking about bathrooms? Cyril scrunched up his face. This was a decidedly low-class topic, and yet the gardener didn’t seem to care.

“And so, you wound up with excrement all over the place! But when they did that to my ancestor’s gardens, she flew into a rage and forced them to create these extravagant bathrooms inside the palace. Then she threatened to crush anyone who sullied her gardens to bits and bury their pieces with the fertilizer. After that, everyone got into the habit of using the bathroom.”

“……”

“Eventually, it became all the rage for nobles to build grand bathrooms inside their homes. Every single aristocrat started maintaining one of their own. That custom trickled down to the commoners via the nobles’ servants, and now having bathrooms

in regular houses is deeply ingrained in our culture."

At the end of his patience, Cyril glared at the gardener. "…Is this really an appropriate discussion for a tour of the gardens?"

"Now, listen to the end, all right? A few decades after the bathroom craze, an infectious disease swept the known world. But it barely affected Ridill. And why do you think that was? Because we take proper care of our bodily waste. This concern for public hygiene then began to permeate other countries, spreading out from our kingdom. And everyone lived happily ever after. The end."

The discussion ended on a surprisingly reasonable note. But still, bathrooms? How had this man made the leap from flower beds to bathrooms? Cyril made a difficult expression.

"In conclusion," said the gardener proudly, "since my ancestor created wonderful bathrooms to protect her flower beds, I think she deserves to be called the 'Witch of Bathrooms.' So since I'm the fifth to take her name, you can call me the 'Fifth Witch of Bathrooms' if you like!"

"Fifth? And what? A witch?"

"When you go into the palace, take a look at my ancestor's bathrooms. They're really something else, I promise. Each one is as big as my laboratory. Truly extravagant. I was almost moved to tears the first time I used one of them."

The kitten, still resting in the gardener's arms as he passionately went on about bathrooms, seemed to notice something and meowed. The gardener gazed farther down the path and spotted two figures, then proceeded to wave.

"Oh, my friends are over there! Heeey! Heeey!"

* * *

"The sun's light is blinding… I'm going to melt… The sun refuses to love me…"

Monica and Ray had gone outside to look for the Witch of Thorns, and within minutes, Ray was clinging to his staff. His face was pale even at the best of times, but now he was a ghastly shade of white. If they were out here for too much longer, he was

liable to turn into an *actual ghost*.

"Um, Lord Abyss Mage," said Monica, "are you feeling unwell?"

"I need sleep… I was up late last night doing research…on this…"

Monica gasped. Ray had just taken something out of his robe's pocket—an ornamental item made of pitch-black stone entwined with goldwork. It was the cursed tool Barry Oats, the shaman who had betrayed House Albright, had used just before he died.

"This tool uses a curse to rob its target of their sanity, and puts them under the user's complete control."

"Their complete control?" repeated Monica, frowning. This was unexpected.

"…But this one's a dud," added Ray in a mumble. "He needed to strengthen the curse to fully control his target, but he strengthened it too much. This thing will just kill whoever it's used on…"

His explanation surprised Monica. She'd never considered the possibility of controlling someone using cursecraft. Things like that were the domain of mental interference magecraft.

Ray seemed to have the same opinion; he nodded solemnly. "Few people would think to use cursecraft to control someone… If you wanted to, there are ways to do something similar, but it's an awful, wicked idea. No one in House Albright would do such a thing. It's shameful, and anyone who tried it would be kicked out of the family, and with good reason…"

He pulled his robe's hood down low. As his gemlike pink eyes glinted in its shadow, he said lowly, "But someone asked me recently if there was a way to control living creatures."

"…Huh?" said Monica. She blinked, caught off guard.

"It was the second prince—Felix Arc Ridill."

Monica felt the scattered puzzle pieces in her mind slowly fitting together, and in the worst way imaginable.

"And while I was investigating the whereabouts of Barry Oats," Ray continued, "I was stalled for a period of time…thanks to the intervention of a certain influential figure."

"Who could that be…?" asked Monica, her heart pounding in her ears.

Ray looked around to make sure nobody else was nearby, then

said, “the second prince’s grandfather—Darius Nightray, the Duke of Clockford.”

A shaman was involved in the death of Monica’s father, Venedict Reyn. And her foster mother, Hilda Everett, had told her someone influential was behind the culprit.

If that person was Duke Clockford… Then is he linked to my father’s death?

The traitorous shaman, Duke Clockford, and Felix. If Monica assumed the three were connected, it would lead her to a single, terrifying thought.

“Then the Cursed Dragon of Rehnberg was…” She trailed off, hesitant to say the rest.

“Yes,” said Ray, groaning. “It could have all been a farce set up by Duke Clockford.”

The traitor was ordered by the duke to curse a green dragon, thus creating a cursed dragon. His plan was probably to gain full control over the creature and have Felix slay it at a convenient time and place.

But the cursecraft failed, and the dragon went berserk.

Ultimately, they defeated the dragon, and Felix was hailed as a hero and a protector of the kingdom, just as intended. But the dragon’s rampage was not part of the shaman’s plan. And in the end, he died, engulfed by his own curse.

So Duke Clockford was the one who set the entire cursed dragon affair into motion? And he’s also tied to Dad’s death…? How much of this does the prince know?

What if Felix knew everything and still followed the duke’s commands? What if his beautiful smile concealed a dark truth? Monica was terrified just thinking about it. Goose bumps covered her skin, and not because of the cold winter wind.

…*I’m scared*, she thought, rubbing her arms together.

“If the duke is involved in this incident,” said Ray, his expression sour, “we can’t make any careless moves.”

“…Right.”

They didn’t have the evidence to say for sure that Duke Clockford was the mastermind behind the cursed dragon incident. And the shaman in question was dead, so any accusations would be difficult.

The whole thing left a bad taste in Monica’s mouth, and she

was starting to trust Felix less and less. She clenched her fists and felt her left hand throb in pain—a reminder of her brush with the cursed dragon. The bruise was already gone, but the pain remained, and it hurt every time she curled her fingers. She had almost no grip strength, either.

Once winter vacation is over...will I be able to keep protecting the prince as I was before?

Such beautiful flowers were blooming in the palace gardens, and yet Monica didn't have the energy to enjoy them. Thinking about Felix was depressing her.

She and Ray walked, hoods pulled low over their eyes, a melancholy air about them. They must have looked like a couple of ghosts haunting the place. The two of them hardly belonged in the gorgeous gardens under such a clear, blue sky.

Just then, they heard an enthusiastic voice calling, "Heeey! Heeey!" from farther down the path. It was the very person they were looking for—the Witch of Thorns.

Ray clicked his tongue, looking annoyed. "Finally found him," he said. "I can't stand this guy. He's so loud. And he always tries to foist vegetables off on you… I don't like how good-looking he is, either… Ugh, I'm green with envy, envy, envy…"

Monica heard none of his vengeful mutterings. She was too busy staring at the young man next to the one they'd come to find. That gorgeous silver hair, conspicuous enough to pick out at a distance and that slender figure dressed in expensive clothing—how could she mistake them?

L-Lo-Lo-Lo, Lord Cyril?!

Monica almost dropped her staff out of sheer confusion.

* * *

Cyril unconsciously rubbed his eyes, then looked at the scene in front of him again.

The gardener's friends were a man and a woman wearing matching robes and holding matching staffs. Both had their hoods pulled down, and the woman wore a veil concealing her mouth.

The robes were extravagant, featuring a lot of gold and silver thread, and the staffs were taller than their holders. Weren't such things reserved for the greatest mages in the kingdom? For the Seven Sages?

As Cyril stood there dumbly, the gardener ran over to the figures, still holding the kitten in his arms.

"Hey!" he said. "I don't see you two in the gardens much!"

"You never showed up at the Jade Chamber," muttered one of the robed figures—a gloomy man. "So we had to come get you…"

The gardener rapped his fist against his forehead. "Oh, shoot. I forgot. Come to think of it, I heard some big booms earlier, and the sound of bells… Wait, was that the magecraft dedication? Don't tell me it's already over."

"It's *long* over, you dolt…!"

"Oh. Sorry about that! Want a carrot as an apology?"

"No…"

"Well, shucks," replied the gardener, sounding disappointed. He took another carrot out of his shoulder bag and began chomping on it.

Wait… It can't be…

Cyril's blank mind slowly started to work again. The Jade Chamber the gloomy man had mentioned was a special room open only to the king and the Seven Sages. And one of those Sages was the fifth head of House Roseburg, a distinguished magecraft family.

Cyril said that Sage's name, his voice trembling. "The fifth… Witch of Thorns…?"

"Huh?" said the Witch of Thorns between bites of carrot. "Didn't you know? I thought for sure you'd pieced it together a long time ago."

"…It's because you're not wearing your robe, stupid," the gloomy man muttered.

"Oh, that's right! I took it off so it wouldn't get in the way of my gardening work. Here, could you hold this little guy for a second?"

He pushed the kitten into the other man's hands, then ran over to a cart parked to one side of the gardens. There, he picked up a cloth hanging over a bunch of farming implements. It was an extravagant robe, adorned with silver and gold embroidery.

After throwing it on, he took his staff from the cart as well; it was lying there next to a hoe and a shovel. The staff's beautiful decorations jingled softly.

"I am Raul Roseburg, the fifth Witch of Thorns!" he said. "Pleased to meet you!"

The man was already unbelievably handsome, but dressed in the brilliant robe and gripping his staff, he instantly took on an impressive, dignified air—though marred slightly by his peasant clothes, straw hat, and the towel still hanging around his neck. And regardless of his attire, the man had been stuck in a tree, had offered Cyril vegetables on their first meeting, and had called himself the Witch of Bathrooms. Who would have imagined he was a Sage?

The Witch of Thorns took back the cream-colored kitten and smiled. "Oh, and let me introduce you to my friends!" he said. "The purple one is the Abyss Shaman, and the short one is the Silent Witch! We're the three youngest members of the Seven Sages!"

The Abyss Shaman scowled at this sloppy introduction, and the Silent Witch remained as quiet as her name.

These people are Sages… The greatest mages in the kingdom!

Belatedly, Cyril paled, wondering if he'd offended them with his behavior. He was speaking to counts of magic who served as direct advisers to His Majesty. Flustered, he tried to bow.

But before he could, the Abyss Mage closed in on him. The man's hood fell back, exposing his distinctive purple hair. Unfazed, he stared at Cyril, his eyes open wide.

Is he going to berate me for being rude? wondered Cyril as he grew still paler.

A fire seemed to burn in the Abyss Shaman's pink eyes. "D-do you love me?"

"……" Cyril reined in his confusion. "I apologize," he said flatly. "What was that now, sir?"

"Do you love me?"

Cyril hadn't misheard. How should he respond? He was at a loss.

The Abyss Shaman's pale cheeks took on a rose-colored blush, and he began speaking very quickly. "Meeting a woman in a garden filled with blooming roses. Surely it must be fate. And if

it's fate, then we're destined to be drawn together—to love each other, yes? A beauty dressed as a man… That's good. That's very good. Keh-heh… Keh-heh-heh."

"Dressed as a man? What are you—?"

"It's all right. As someone once said, the size of one's breasts isn't important—what's important is the size of one's love… So please. Please, tell me you love me. Love me. Love me, love me, love me…"

As the Abyss Shaman begged rapturously for love, a small hand tugged on his robe. It belonged to the Silent Witch. The little witch stood on her tiptoes and murmured something into the Abyss Shaman's ear.

"…What? …A man? Not a girl?"

The Silent Witch nodded.

"Yeah, he's male," said the Witch of Thorns, who had been playing with the kitten. "He's Marquess Highown's son."

The Abyss Shaman opened his eyes as wide as they would go and stared at Cyril. Then his voice dropped.

"I'll curse you…" He squatted down on the spot. "I think I might throw up…" He was being very rude.

Cyril stood there in a daze.

These were the Seven Sages? The greatest mages in the kingdom? His Majesty's advisers? The Abyss Shaman was rude, the Witch of Thorns dressed like a peasant, and the Silent Witch—well, she was nothing but a child!

…Hmm? A child?

Cyril's gaze unconsciously landed on the childlike witch. She was flailing her arms around, for some reason. She wasn't wearing gloves, and he saw that her hands were a little rough—swollen and red. As he watched them, the Silent Witch hung her head and began fidgeting with her fingers.

The youthful mannerism seemed somehow familiar to Cyril. "Excuse me, Lady Silent Witch. Might we have met some—?"

The Silent Witch's shoulders lurched, but before Cyril could continue, a loud voice interrupted him.

"Graaaaahhhhhhhhh! Apologies! Gentlemen, lady, please catch that cat for me!"

The voice was deep, like the roar of a bull. Cyril looked toward the source and saw a white kitten dashing toward him. Chasing it

was a tall man with a stern face, blond hair, and light-blue eyes. The kitten's hairs all stood on end; it was scared senseless.

The Silent Witch was closest to the kitten's trajectory, so she stooped down and picked it up.

"…Oof!"

The Silent Witch let out a little groan from behind her veil—a cry of pain. Cyril looked closer and noticed her favoring her left hand. He gently picked the cat up out of her arms.

"Excuse me," he said. "Is your hand injured?"

"……Ah…"

The Silent Witch stopped herself from looking up and quickly hung her head again. Cyril could only see the fabric of her hood. He tried to say something, but the cat in his arms started to fuss, so he held it out to the tall man, who seemed to be its owner.

The man took the kitten and offered them a solemn bow. "Oh, I thank you! From the bottom of my heart!"

His loud voice seemed to shock the cat; its head jerked up to look at him.

"You can be quite loud, Prince," said the Witch of Thorns casually. "You probably scared it."

"What?! Really? I'm so sorry for startling you, Adrian," said the prince, apologizing softly to the cat in his arms. It mewled back at him. The man took a small piece of dried fish out of his pocket and gave it to the cat.

Wait. Prince? But wouldn't that make him…?

The prince—a tall blond man—looked at the cream-colored kitten held by the Witch of Thorns, and his stern features relaxed. "Ah, and there's Rodevake. I can't apologize enough for bothering you, Lord Sage."

"I'm used to it by now," said the Witch of Thorns. "Oh, can you hold both?"

"Yes," said the man, nodding and taking the other cat as well. His arms were thick as logs and covered in rippling muscles; both cats seemed safe and secure in their grasp.

After adjusting his grip, the prince turned to Cyril. "Sorry about that, dear guest. Mother loves these cats. Thank you so much for catching them."

Cyril, panicking, dropped into a polite bow. "N-no, sir, no thanks necessary, Prince Lionel, Your Highness!"

Yes, this tall blond man was Felix Arc Ridill's elder brother by a different mother, First Prince Lionel Brem Edward Ridill. Cyril was so flustered that his hands began to feel cold beneath his gloves.

Ever since he found out he'd be visiting the palace, he'd privately hoped that he might run into Felix. But he'd never dreamed he'd run into his elder brother first, and certainly not like this.

Cyril was a supporter of the second prince and believed Felix was best suited to be the next king, but that didn't mean he could neglect his manners with the first prince. Besides, Cyril only supported Felix as an individual—his father, Marquess Highown, was neutral.

Cyril desperately hoped nothing he'd said or done had been perceived as rude, but Lionel just grinned casually at him.

"It's not every year we get someone as young as you taking part in the New Year's ceremony. Forgive my rudeness, but may I ask your name?"

"Yes, sir," Cyril replied, voice strained. "I am Cyril Ashley, foster son of Vincent Ashley, the Marquess of Highown."

"Oh!" said Lionel, his eyes lighting up. This made his stern features seem somehow charming. "You're Marquess Highown's son. I see. The Lineage of the Wise has done so much for us. I hope you'll continue to support the royal family with your wisdom."

Cyril found himself at a loss for words.

The Lineage of the Wise were the brains behind the Kingdom of Ridill—a family with immense knowledge, whose members were sometimes called "walking libraries." But Cyril was unable to proudly declare he was qualified to inherit this name. The one who actually deserved the title was his foster sister Claudia. If she'd been a boy, there would have been no doubt as to her succession.

Privately, Cyril was panicking. There had been expectation, anticipation, in the first prince's words. Cyril knew he only had to say "Thank you, your words honor me," but it was like his tongue had gone numb.

"I am not sure how much I will be able to live up to your expectations, young as I am…but I will do my best, sir."

That was as much as Cyril could manage.

Agh. What am I doing? A member of the royal family is expecting great things from me. I shouldn't be making excuses. I should be telling him that I won't let him down!

Inwardly, he paled. Lionel, however, wore an energetic smile.

"No need to get nervous," said the prince. "I'm inexperienced myself. I may be good at swinging a sword around, but my diplomatic skills are practically nonexistent. Everyone says my little brother Felix is far more put-together than I am."

"Well, um…"

"And I share their opinion. He's a better fit for the throne. But even if I don't become king, I want to defend this kingdom with every ounce of my power. So I'd like you to share your wisdom and strength with us—for the sake of Ridill."

Just then, they heard a voice calling out, "Sir, where have you gone?!"

Lionel turned around, the hem of his coat flapping, and headed off toward the voice. "My chamberlain is calling. I bid you all farewell. You have my thanks, Lord Sage! And let us meet again, future marquess of Highown!"

His back as he walked boldly away seemed very large to Cyril.

That's a man whose gaze is set on this nation's future, he thought.

Lionel hadn't asked Cyril to support *him*. Instead, he'd been clear he wanted Cyril to aid the kingdom as a whole.

Ridill was currently split between two factions: supporters of the first prince and supporters of the second prince. This divide made the country vulnerable. The reason Lionel had spoken to Cyril like that was probably because he wanted the nobles to unite and protect the kingdom's future, regardless of his own succession.

"Always makes you feel good, that prince," said the Witch of Thorns, removing his robe and brushing off the cat hair. "Casual, doesn't act like he's better than you. Knows what he can and can't do."

"Do you support the first prince, Lord Witch of Thorns?" Cyril asked carefully.

"Hmm. I could support either, as long as it seemed fun. What about you two?" he said, looking over at the Silent Witch and the

Abyss Shaman.

Neither of them commented. The Silent Witch looked down and fidgeted, while the Abyss Shaman muttered, “I think the handsome ones should be the first to fall…”

The Witch of Thorns laughed cheerfully in response to this troubling remark. “Can’t expect any decent opinions from the Seven Sages, I suppose!”

Cyril felt his image of the kingdom’s greatest mages crumbling to dust—mostly his faith in their respectability.

I should get back to my father soon…

There was still some time before their audience, but he didn’t want to worry his foster father by making him wait any longer. He stifled an exhausted sigh. He’d never thought he would run into three Sages and the first prince on a little walk meant to calm his nerves.

He bowed to the others. “I should be going as well. And I ask your forgiveness for any rudeness I may have shown to you all.”

“Hey, no need to worry about that,” said the Witch of Thorns. “You should come hang out in the gardens again sometime! I’ll give you the grand tour!”

“…Of course, sir. Please excuse me.”

Just before leaving, Cyril cast a glance at the Silent Witch. Her head was down, her little hands gripping her staff.

Something about her still bothered him—he felt like he’d seen someone a lot like her somewhere before.

* * *

Okay, um, I managed to deal with that crisis…

As Monica was covertly wiping the sweat from her brow, she heard a clattering noise. Raul had taken a handcart and was rolling it toward them. It was a simple thing, just a wooden plank with handles and wheels. Raul brought it over to Ray, then lifted him up with a “hup.” Ray was skinny, yes, but he was still an adult man. Raul would have needed quite a lot of arm strength to pick him up like that. He must have acquired it from his regular work tending to the gardens.

After Raul put Ray onto the cart in a huddle, he smiled to Monica. “Let’s get back ourselves, shall we? Oh! You want a ride, too?”

“N-no, um… I’ll walk…”

Once Monica declined, Raul started pushing Ray along in the handcart. Monica hurried after them.

Raul started humming a tune as he walked through the flower beds, but then he glanced back at Monica, as if something had just struck him. “Oh, right. Are you and Marquess Highown’s son acquainted?”

“Huh?! N-n-n-n-no, no, we’re not… I’ve *nepher* m-met him before in my life! ”

“Really? I see. You just seemed so desperate to help him when Ray rushed up to him like that. I wondered if you knew him.”

The only Sages aware of Monica’s secret mission at Serendia Academy were Louis and Ray. She couldn’t afford to speak of it to the others. For a moment she panicked, wondering what she’d do if Raul pressed her. But he seemed to quickly lose interest in the topic.

Rounding the corner of a flower bed, he stopped, then took a pair of small pruning scissors out of his bag. He clipped one of the light crimson roses blooming in the flower bed, pulled out the thorns, and handed it to Monica.

“You can have this.”

“Th-thank you.”

Why had he suddenly given her a rose? She felt more confused than happy.

Raul smiled amiably at her. “To tell you the truth, I can hear the voices of plants.”

“…Huh?”

“That rose said the Silent Witch and the Abyss Shaman are secretly doing something very interesting.”

Raul narrowed his green eyes. That alone was intimidating enough to send a chill down her spine.

Did he hear my discussion with the Abyss Shaman?!

She’d never heard of anyone who could hear plants talk. But perhaps this man could—he *was* said to be the second coming of the first Witch of Thorns, after all.

“…We slipped up. A sound collecting spell, right?” muttered

Ray, still curled up on the handcart.

He slowly got up, plucked the rose from Monica's hands, whispered something to it, then squeezed it. It wasn't much, but the rose immediately blackened and turned to dust.

Curses were engraved all over Ray's body, and he could use them freely. He'd probably activated one that made plants wither. Normally, he was a coward begging for affection, but he, too, was the head of an elite family every bit the Roseburgs' equal.

He discarded the withered rose and fixed Raul with a nasty glare. "The plants in these gardens are full of your mana… You used the flowers as relays to cast a precision sound collection spell, didn't you?"

A sound collection spell gathered audio from the surrounding area. It was a handy tool for collecting information, but extremely hard to use. Louis's contracted spirit Ryn could manage something similar, but only because she was a high spirit and very skilled at mana manipulation.

Raul put the scissors in his pocket and shrugged, looking disappointed. "Guess you found me out, huh? But isn't it much cooler to say I can hear the plants' voices?"

"What are you plotting?" demanded Ray, thrusting his staff at Raul. "Depending on how you answer, I might curse you to stub your pinkie toes on the corner of a desk once per day."

Raul raised his hands to signal his surrender. "I wasn't actually trying to eavesdrop on your conversation," he explained. "I was using the technique to look for that cat. Rodevake was up in a tree, so I wondered if the prince's other cat had gotten out, too. That's why I was monitoring the sounds of the gardens. And then I happened to hear you two talking."

"…How much did you hear?"

"I heard you say that the cursed dragon incident may have been a farce set up by Duke Clockford… Oh, and you even complimented me on how handsome I am. You made me blush a little!" answered Raul with an artless smile.

Ray looked disgusted.

"…This is why I hate this guy," he muttered to himself.

Monica unconsciously clung to her staff and trembled. Now Raul knew that they were sniffing around Duke Clockford. The Witch of Thorns was neutral—he didn't support either prince—

but he probably wouldn't just forget that Monica and Ray were potentially opposing the duke.

"A-are you going to…to tell on us to the other Sages?" she stammered, her voice shaking.

Raul shook his head. "Nah. It sounded like fun. In fact, I was hoping I could join in."

His casual tone caught Monica off guard, but Ray only glared at him cautiously.

"Oh, I know your type," he murmured. "You give out your love on a whim and betray it just as easily…"

"I never said I loved you," said Raul.

"You'll pretend you love us and get close, then fling us down into the deepest pits of despair. That's your game, isn't it? Everyone with a handsome face is like that. I will curse you…"

Ray was exaggerating, but Monica couldn't bring herself to wholly trust Raul, either.

The matter of the cursed dragon was linked to the truth behind the death of Monica's father and to the honor of House Albright. Raul, however, had nothing to gain from investigating it. At most, he would only be sating his own curiosity.

Raul lowered his eyebrows sadly. "It's not a bad deal for you two," he said. "The duke has me maintaining the gardens at his mansion. I can talk to the servants there. In fact, I could even infiltrate… How about it?"

The proposition was extremely attractive, considering neither Ray nor Monica had any connections with the duke. Nevertheless, for better or worse, they were both timid and cautious by nature. They couldn't trust him.

As they looked at him skeptically, he scratched his head full of scarlet curls and seemed to resign himself to something. "All right, I'll be honest with you," he said. "To tell the truth…"

The current head of House Roseburg was said to have inherited his gorgeous looks from the first Witch of Thorns herself. Now his beautiful face stiffened into an expression of utmost seriousness.

"I just want friends," he confessed.

"You're lying," said Ray.

"Why would I lie about that?!" cried Raul, surprised. "My ancestor's name is so notorious that nobody wants to be friends

with me!”

Raul’s ancestor Rebecca Roseburg, the first Witch of Thorns, had been able to bend more than just plants to her will. She was an astounding genius who even mastered a spell to control black flames, a technique forbidden in modern times. But she’d also been infamous as the wickedest of women. Some said she used those she didn’t like for magecraft experiments, or that she had her roses suck the blood of young men while they were still alive.

There was no telling how much of it was true, but many stories spoke of how the king was at her beck and call.

“I always hoped I could be friends with the other Sages around my age. But you two never come to our meetings!”

Raul was right. Both Monica and Ray constantly skipped out on such gatherings. Monica thought back to when she first met Raul not long after becoming a Sage.

“Hey. I’m the fifth Witch of Thorns, Raul Roseburg. We’re both young, so let’s be friends. Nice to meet you! Oh, right. As a sign of our friendship, here’s a vegetable!”

He’d then offered her a carrot, but Monica had been so nervous, she’d passed out, her eyes rolling up into her head. Ever since, she almost never spoke with him.

“It’s been so long since I saw you two that when I spotted you today, I swore I’d finally make friends with you. But then I found out you were off doing something secret all by yourselves. It’s not fair!” Raul began pouting like a child throwing a tantrum, even though he was technically two years older than Monica. “I want to do friend stuff with other people my age!”

Ray quietly observed the Witch of Thorns as he sulked. “What do you think, Silent Witch?”

“Um, well… I, um, would be happy to join forces.” Under pressure, she gave in and bowed.

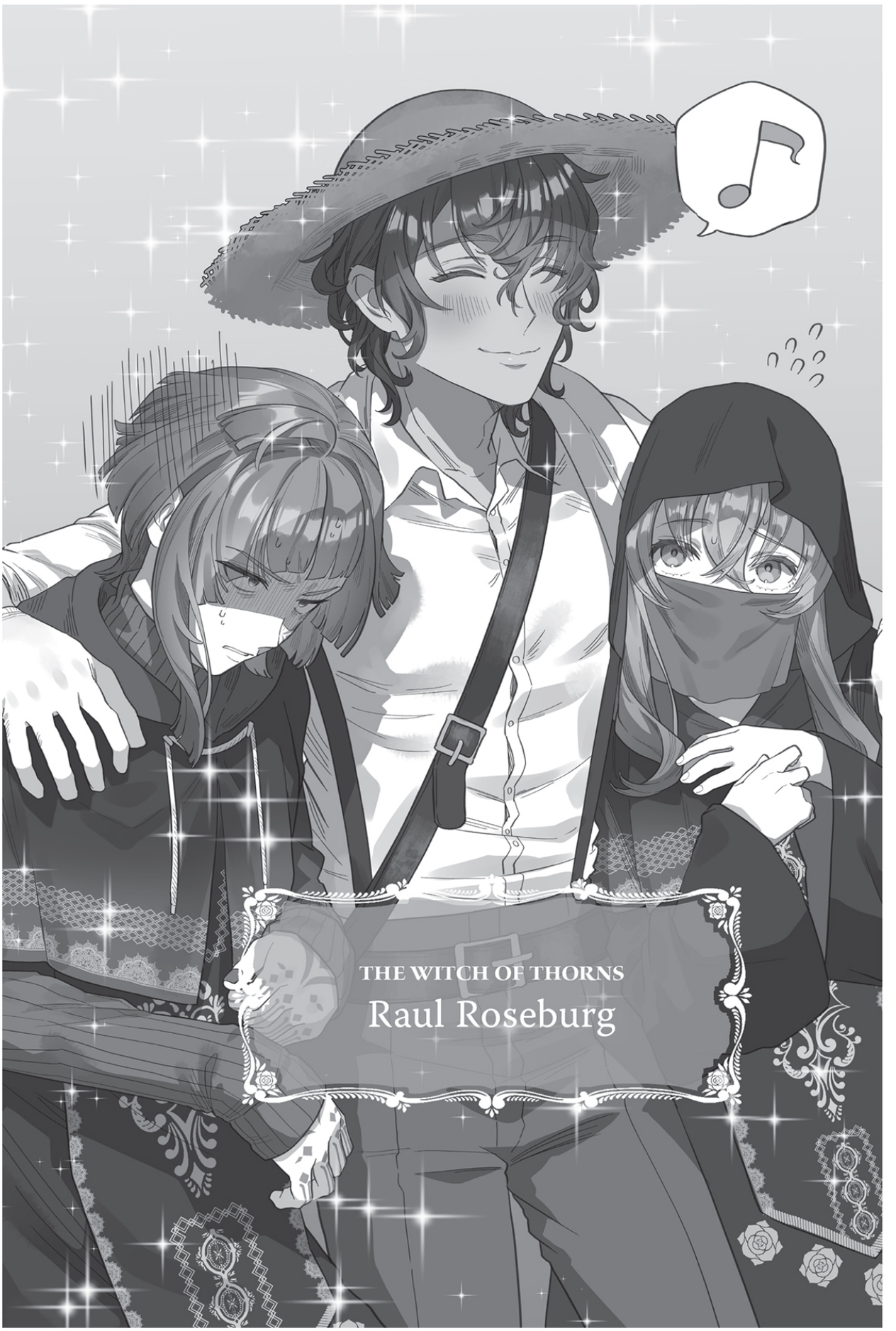
“Whoo-hoo!” Raul exclaimed like an excited child. He reached out his thick arms, putting his right around Ray’s shoulders and his left around Monica’s. “Great! Then starting today, the three of us young Sages are on this mission together!”

“Umm, er, umm…”

“It’s too much,” said Ray. “He’s too cheerful, and I’m a shaman… The barrier is far too great…”

A confused Monica looked on as Ray muttered to himself and

Raul exclaimed brightly, “Let’s do our best, all of us!”


THE WITCH OF THORNS
Raul Roseburg



CHAPTER 2

I Only Have One Thing to Say

Usually, the king personally presided over the New Year's ceremony, but because of his ailing health, First Prince Lionel and his mother, Queen Vilma, were taking charge this year. The scope of the ceremony and the decorations were as grand as always, but certain parts of the address were being simplified and shortened.

Seated in the section reserved for the Seven Sages, Monica held down the edges of her hood and covertly glanced around at the participants. Currently at the podium giving the address in a sonorous voice was First Prince Lionel Brem Edward Ridill. She'd just run into him in the gardens earlier.

Behind him were two queens. One was Queen Vilma, the first prince's mother, and the other was Queen Phillis, the third prince's mother. Queen Aileen, the second prince's mother, had passed away after giving birth to Felix.

Queen Vilma had reddish-brown hair and captivating features. She was a princess from the neighboring Kingdom of Landor, but she'd served in her former country's military and had even fought at the front line. As a result, she was quite muscular, even when compared to a man. She certainly looked like the mother of the rugged Prince Lionel.

Queen Phillis, on the other hand, was a short, pretty, blond-haired woman with a mild, feminine demeanor. She was very talented in management and administration, however, and rumor had it that she'd personally rebuilt her family's finances.

Finally, sitting in the seats closest to the podium were Second Prince Felix Arc Ridill and Third Prince Albert Frau Roberia Ridill.

Monica mentally reviewed the basic information Raul had shared with her before the ceremony. As she did so, she turned her gaze to the seat next to Felix's—the one assigned to the man closest to the royal family. The one seated there had a cold look about him. His blond hair was speckled with gray and tied back,

while his blue almond-shaped eyes stared straight ahead.

This was Darius Nightray, also known as Duke Clockford.

Monica swallowed, then burned all the numbers making up his face into her mind with perfect accuracy.

Before, she'd been uninterested in politics and had never tried to remember the faces of anyone at such gatherings. That was why she'd failed so miserably when she first enrolled at Serendia Academy; she hadn't even known what Felix looked like.

First, she intended to memorize the names and faces of everyone present and get a picture of their relationships to one another. Once she'd committed all their faces to memory, she turned to the king, seated atop his throne.

Ambrose Chraedol Ridill was a man just entering old age with blond hair and a beard, and he was currently staring listlessly out at the proceedings. Despite this, he seemed gentle and mild. This was the man who ordered Louis, under utmost secrecy, to guard the second prince. It had all begun with him.

It doesn't seem like he's, um, very healthy…

His eyes were unfocused, but it seemed to Monica as if he were looking down at a great chessboard from far above.

* * *

"Heeey! Monica! Let's go to the feast!"

Once the New Year's ceremony was over, Monica holed herself up in her guest room, planning to stay there until sundown. But Raul was now at her door, holding the hem of Ray's robe in a death grip.

"Why me…?" complained the shaman. He looked ready to die on the spot.

Raul's long eyelashes fluttered as he winked. "No need to worry! Mr. Louis and Mr. Bradford will be there, too!"

"Those old guys will just be downing booze… Ugh, I don't want to be near them…"

"If you don't like liquor, there's plenty of food. Ray, Monica, I think the both of you should eat more. You're both so lanky."

Ray's dreary face scrunched up, his expression an exquisite

mix of displeasure, despair, and irritation. “And now we’re on a first-name basis,” he muttered. “I don’t want a *man* calling me by my first name…”

“Look, you can call me Raul, too! We’re friends, right?” Raul grinned and clapped Ray on the shoulder.

Ray’s skinny frame wobbled, then he leaned helplessly into the wall. “Friends… Friends,” he murmured. “Where is the line between friendship and platonic love? I just want to be loved by a girl. I don’t need *friends*. Being friends with a man more handsome than me… This sucks…”

Raul used his free hand to grab hold of Monica’s robe as she stood in the doorway, flustered. “Let’s get going! I’ve always wanted to attend a feast with friends!”

Clearly on cloud nine, Raul headed off, practically skipping. As he dragged the shaken Monica behind him, she pulled her veil out of her pocket and put it over her mouth, then pulled her hood back up to cover her head. This robe was the official uniform of the Seven Sages, so there would be no issue if she wore it to the feast. However, she *would* stand out.

When they reached the feast hall, Raul let Ray and Monica go. Humming, he swung open the doors. As soon as they stepped into the room, everyone around them turned to look.

“It’s the Witch of Thorns,” someone said. “And the current head of…”

“Wow, I *never* see Albright shamans attend feasts.”

The gazes directed at Raul and Ray seemed more terrified than deferential. Both the Witch of Thorns and the Abyss Shaman were permanent fixtures among the Sages. The heads of their respective families inherited the role, and they both had the weight of fame and history behind them. That shackled them in many respects, and more than a few people were frightened of them.

Raul didn’t seem bothered, however. Marching to the beat of his own drum, he tromped into the hall.

Monica made herself as small as humanly possible and hid behind him, trembling. But with Ray doing the same thing, there wasn’t enough space, and they were both hanging out to the sides.

As they tried their best to disappear, those around them

continued murmuring.

“Hey, could that be…the Silent Witch?”

“The Silent Witch? At a feast? Is it true?”

Monica started to hear her title crop up in nearby conversations. The other guests were probably curious because she almost never attended such gatherings. She fidgeted under their gazes.

Raul stopped and looked at her. “Come to think of it, Monica, I heard you not only slayed the Black Dragon of Worgan, but the Cursed Dragon of Rehnberg, too.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, yes…”

“I bet that’s why everyone has their eyes on you! That’s amazing! You’re so popular!”

Monica froze.

She was completely indifferent toward her own accomplishments and how others thought of her. Frankly, she didn’t really care about such things. And so, she’d never expected the two dragon-related incidents to garner so much attention.

Noooooo… N-now what? What should I do…?

She might run into Felix or Cyril here, too—not to mention any number of other students from Serendia Academy. She knew she shouldn’t have come. She had to hurry and leave…but just as she turned around, she heard a familiar voice.

“Lady Everett!”

This voice, full of excitement, set all her hairs on end.

Felix was rushing over to her. He wore an ear to ear smile on his gorgeous face, and his eyes were practically sparkling.

She wanted to flee. She really did, but a member of the royal family had just addressed her. She couldn’t possibly ignore him.

N-now whaaaaat…?!

Monica held her still painful left hand with her right and lowered her head. It was possible Duke Clockford was involved in both the cursed dragon incident *and* the death of Monica’s father. And by extension, it was possible that Felix, the duke’s grandson and puppet, was as well. How was she supposed to interact with him now?

Wholly ignorant of her inner turmoil, Felix smiled at her. “Thank you for all your help in Rehnberg. How is your left hand doing?”

Nooo…

"The magecraft dedication this morning was incredible. Your magecraft is always so intricate and beautiful. I count myself a very lucky man to have been able to see it… I'm sure this year will be wonderful."

Ahhhh…

Now she and Felix had the attention of the entire hall. They were the heroes who had slain the cursed dragon, after all. The spectators' gazes ran the gamut from admiring to scheming. Some of them wanted to use this politically, and it made Monica's stomach throb with anxiety.

Anyway… Zero, one, one, two, three, five… I have to get out of here somehow… Eight, thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-four, fifty-five, eighty-nine… Waaaahhhh! I want to run away and surround myself with numbers instead of people!

As she teared up under her hood, Ray murmured a spell and covertly pointed a finger at her. A creepy pattern appeared on her left arm and emitted a sharp light. She raised her left hand quickly, unsure what was happening

Felix paled. "My lady?! Is that the curse from the dragon?!"

Monica panicked, confused. Meanwhile, Ray rolled up her left sleeve and nodded as though this all made perfect sense to him.

"Yes. She'll need to go back to her room and rest," he said loudly. Then he whispered so that only Monica could hear. "…My curse is just making your arm glow. It will soon disappear."

Ray, who suspected the second prince of involvement with the traitorous shaman, had just created an excuse for Monica to leave without getting too close to Felix.

Lord Abyss Mage… Thank you so much! Monica thought sincerely, gripping her left hand over her robe as if she was in great pain. Then she bowed to Felix and turned to go.

"Please wait, my lady. Someone should go with you…"

Monica shook her head and rushed off awkwardly, aiming for the exit. Running at the feast was incredibly conspicuous—in a bad way—but most of the guests were drunk by now, so nobody bothered to criticize her for it.

Just a little farther. There's the exit…

Monica suffered from a chronic lack of exercise, and she was soon heaving and panting. The air in the hall was thick with body

heat and the odor of alcohol. Just breathing in made her feel sick.

"…Ah, haah… Ugh…"

As she began to feel dizzy from the smell, she ran into someone crossing in front of her. She bounced off them and landed on her rear end, on the floor. Immediately, she opened her mouth to apologize, then shut it again.

The air she'd just breathed in didn't smell like booze—it was cold. Chilly.

"My apologies. Are you hurt?" The man extended a hand to her—it was Cyril.

Monica's heart began to pound. She broke into a cold sweat. If this had happened at the academy, Cyril probably would have scolded her. "No running in the hall!" he'd have said. But right now, he was offering her his hand like a gentleman.

Nervously, she took it, and Cyril deftly helped her to her feet.

"Ah, you're the one from earlier…the Silent Witch."

"……"

"I know it may be rude to ask this out of the blue, but is it possible that you and I have met somewhere before?"

His tone and demeanor were terribly polite. He wasn't speaking to Monica Norton, student council accountant. He was speaking to Monica Everett, the Silent Witch and one of the Seven Sages.

One day, Monica would leave Serendia Academy. She knew that if she ever ran into someone she'd met while undercover in her true capacity as the Silent Witch, this would happen. She'd always understood that. At least, she thought she had.

And yet she found herself in a miserable state, and unfamiliar emotions began to swirl in her mind—almost like a child throwing a tantrum.

…I don't…like this.

She'd been shocked at how friendly Felix acted toward the Silent Witch, but the emotions she felt now about Cyril were a little different. The same thing had happened when they'd run into each other in the gardens. When he treated her like a stranger, she could feel her chest constrict.

He's showing me such respect…and I don't like it.

"Lady Silent Witch?"

Cyril peered at her kindly, perhaps thinking that the way she

was quietly hanging her head meant she wasn't feeling well.

A powerful terror took over Monica's heart. *No! No, no, no!* she shouted wordlessly, pushing aside Cyril's hands. But she had always been weak, and with her left hand still injured, she wasn't able to move them an inch. Her hand stung.

"……Ah, ugh…"

She groaned through clenched teeth, then passed by Cyril and broke into a run. He looked after her, surprised and at a loss, but didn't follow.

Nevertheless, Monica kept going. She burst out of the feast hall and continued to run. Eventually, once she'd turned several corners, she paused. She was sweating all over, and it was awfully cold. It felt like someone had dumped ice water on her.

…I thought I was prepared for this.

Monica Norton was a fictional character. Once she left Serendia Academy, she'd never be able to interact with Cyril and the others in the same way again.

That was why she wanted to make as many memories at school as she could. She'd hold them close and go on with her life. But the moment Cyril looked at her like a stranger, she'd felt her blood run cold and a sharp pain stab at her chest.

She would have much rather had him scowl and scold her like he always did.

I've become…so selfish.

Monica squatted down, all her energy gone. She hugged her knees and shut her eyes.

In the darkness, she recalled her days spent at Serendia Academy. Her casual chats with Lana; the way Glenn and Neil would sometimes visit from the neighboring classroom; how Claudia would come looking for Neil; how Cyril would stop by to check on Glenn's schoolwork and complain; and how Isabelle would invite her to tea when she went back to the girls' dorm.

Those days she spent at school as Monica Norton were very dear to her.

…Even though she knew all of it was fake.

* * *

Louis Miller, the Barrier Mage and one of the Seven Sages, was drinking wine in a corner of the feast hall, wearing a chic, formal outfit underneath his robe. At his feet lay Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage. He had lost their drinking contest and now slept, cradling a bottle in his arms.

The older man's snoring clashed horribly with the band's performance, but Louis didn't particularly mind. If the alternative was taking part in the rumors and prying into conversations he could hear from those around him, this was much easier.

"Well, well. I see you're back to your usual behavior!"

A beauty of unknown age wearing a robe over her white dress walked over to Louis, her laugh like the tinkling of a bell. It was Mary Harvey, the Starseer Witch.

Louis lowered the wineglass from his lips and offered her a gorgeous smile. "Would you like some as well, Lady Starseer Witch?" he asked. "This year's wine is sublime."

"I think I will, in fact," she replied. "How many bottles have you emptied so far, Louie?"

"Oh, I don't remember." He shrugged, feigning ignorance, as he watched the other Sages out of the corner of his eye.

Emanuel Darwin, the Gem Mage, was busy flattering the nobles in the second prince's faction. The man possessed several workshops where he manufactured and sold magical items. He was probably trying to expand his business.

Along the wall, a bit farther away, was Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman, as gloomy as usual. With him was Raul Roseburg, the Witch of Thorns. He was chatting with Ray, a plate of food in one hand.

Mary lowered her wineglass. "Oh?" she said. "I don't see Monica anywhere. I thought she was with those two."

"The Silent Witch ran away just a moment ago," said Louis.

Mary put a hand to her fair cheek. "I see," she said. A tinge of melancholy crossed her profile.

"Are you curious about something?" Louis asked her casually.

Mary's pale-blue eyes, which always seemed to be lost in a daydream, tracked the other Sages in the hall before turning back to Louis. And then the kingdom's foremost prophet began to speak.

“Think of what I’m about to say as a woman talking to herself—something not quite a prophecy, but one step before… I saw the stars earlier when I was passing through the covered walkway.” Her long eyelashes fell, and the scarlet wine sloshed in her glass. “The star of the Seven Sages is obscured,” she continued. “Perhaps we will lose one of our fellows…or maybe the very existence of our group is at risk.”

As the first star-reading of the new year, that was very ominous. Louis’s eyes narrowed dangerously behind his monocle. Many of the Sages were oblivious about such things, but Louis always kept an eye on political affairs and high society rumors.

Making sure nobody was nearby, Louis lowered his voice. “Lately, I’ve heard of movements to place the Sages under the command of the Noble Assembly. Could that be related?”

“Who can say?” said Mary.

“Well, then… Have you heard the rumors about the Gem Mage?”

Mary smiled ambiguously, neither confirming nor denying.

Oh, she knows, thought Louis, now certain of it. But he knew it would be hard to wring any confirmation out of her.

Of the Seven Sages, Louis supported the first prince, Emanuel the second, while the others were all neutral. So when Louis mentioned Emanuel, a member of his rival camp, the well-informed would choose their words carefully. If Mary made any remarks implying an alliance with one or the other, it could ignite the flame of something much bigger.

The Starseer Witch probably wants me to act.

Now that he’d heard this ominous portent, one step before a prophecy, he would be forced to do something about it. And this crafty witch knew that.

Louis didn’t like the thought of being in the palm of someone else’s hand, but he was even more loath to do nothing and risk losing his current position. Unlike a certain little girl oblivious to status and honor, *he* had no intention of relinquishing his standing as a Sage.

Maybe I’ll have Ryn investigate the Gem Mage, he thought. His contracted wind spirit was away, looking into a few things related to Louis and Monica’s mission to protect the second prince. She would soon be done with that, however.

As he mulled over the specific steps he'd take, Mary set her glass back down on the nearby table and looked at him. "There was something I wanted to ask you as well, if that's all right…"

"What is it?"

She cocked her head to the side like an innocent child and peered into his face. Her blue eyes reflected Louis's image like clear pools. "Well, Louie… I simply *must* ask how much you know."

"I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"Oh, come now. About His Highness's condition."

Louis roughly poured more wine into his glass and, in a particularly indifferent tone, replied, "Only that the doctor can't do anything."

"Oh really?" Mary took another step toward him, then lowered her voice to a sweet whisper, as if she were discussing secrets with a lover. "And who do you think will succeed him?" she asked.

"It seems rather indiscreet to discuss such topics here."

"Oh, everyone's wondering the same thing, I assure you."

This year's New Year's events would be a touchstone for determining the next king. All the nobles in Ridill—particularly the neutral ones—were keeping a very close watch on how the princes chose to lead in place of the ailing king.

The first prince had taken charge of the ceremony, and the second prince, this feast. Louis supposed he could give them both passing grades. Each had remained considerate of the king's health while keeping up a level of splendor sufficient to maintain the kingdom's prestige. Their consideration for their people and dignity in front of foreign ambassadors left nothing to be desired.

At this point, it all came down to how many neutral parties each of their factions could convert.

"The way I see it, the second prince has a major advantage," said Mary. "Especially now that Queen Phillis has aligned herself with Duke Clockford."

The third prince's faction had now joined the second prince, giving him added momentum. And Felix was currently seen as a hero for his achievements in Rehnberg. One by one, the neutral nobles were moving to his side.

Mary observed Louis, watching for a reaction, but he only

sniffed. “Don’t you think it’s a bit ridiculous for the Seven Sages to advocate for *either* prince?” he said.

“Oh? But you support the first prince, don’t you?”

“He doesn’t have my unqualified support or anything. I simply don’t like the second prince or his grandfather.” Louis crossed his arms dramatically and said, as if reciting a slogan, “Only His Majesty stands above us. Therefore, his will should be our highest priority.”

“Oh, Louie. Your smile always shines brightest when you’re lying.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Isn’t that a little harsh?”

Louis glanced around the hall. Everyone was drinking and chatting merrily, but beneath the surface, they were trying to expose one another’s schemes and allegiances. He expected the only thing on their minds was who would be the next king.

Louis sipped at his wine as a strange, grayish-purple glint came into his eye.

“Each person here thinks they’re the player, moving pieces around however they like,” he said. “But I wonder. Who’s *really* looking down at this chessboard?”

* * *

After leaving the banquet hall, Monica walked through empty hallways, her roiling emotions gradually calming down. Behind the veil covering her mouth, she heaved a sigh.

I think I’ll just go back to my room for today…

She wanted to crawl into bed, stop thinking, and fall asleep. But as she was envisioning her nice, warm blanket, she heard footsteps approaching from behind.

“Excuse me, Lady Silent Witch.”

Monica jerked at the sound of her name, then she turned around. Behind her stood a stranger—a middle-aged man. Judging by his clothes, she figured he was a servant to some high-ranking noble.

“My master wishes to speak with you in private,” he said.

“Your master?” Monica repeated, frowning. She didn’t know

who he meant.

"Duke Clockford," said the servant flatly.

Monica's heart, having just settled, began to pound again. She heard blood pumping in her ears.

…I'm scared.

Darius Nightray—Duke Clockford. A suspect in the cursed dragon incident and in the death of Venedict Reyn, Monica's father.

But I want to know the truth.

Gripping her robe at the chest with her right hand, she slowly opened her mouth.

"Very well. Please show me the way."

* * *

The man brought her to the most formal reception room in the palace. She supposed she should have expected as much from the most influential man in the kingdom.

"Your Grace, I have brought the Silent Witch."

"Enter."

The voice on the other side of the door was by no means loud. Still, it took on a strange echo in Monica's mind.

The servant prompted her to go inside. She pulled her hood low over her eyes, made sure her veil was still in place, and then headed into the room.

Sitting on the sofa was a man over sixty who wore his gray-flecked blond hair tied at his back. It was him—Duke Clockford, Felix's maternal grandfather. Behind the duke's sofa were two robed mages—high mages, judging by the length of their staffs.

"Thank you for coming, Lady Silent Witch," the duke said shortly, gesturing to the seat across from him.

As Monica sat down, the servant brought them tea for two and exited the room. Meanwhile, one of the mages chanted a spell and erected a soundproofing barrier to prevent any eavesdroppers. This spell was quite advanced, and few could use it. The mage was clearly very talented.

Monica observed the duke from beneath her hood, leaving her

tea untouched on the table. The man was old, but his features were handsome, speaking to an attractiveness in his youth not unlike Felix's.

But in contrast to the calm, friendly smile Felix always wore, Duke Clockford emanated enough gravity and dignity to make anyone facing him shrink away.

No other noble in the kingdom has as much influence as he does, she thought.

She was merely sitting across from him, and yet his aura threatened to overwhelm her, to swallow her up whole. She clenched her fists on her lap and tightened her core, trying to at least keep from trembling.

The duke didn't pick up his tea, either. Instead, he narrowed his eyes at Monica. "So you will not remove your hood even for me," he noted.

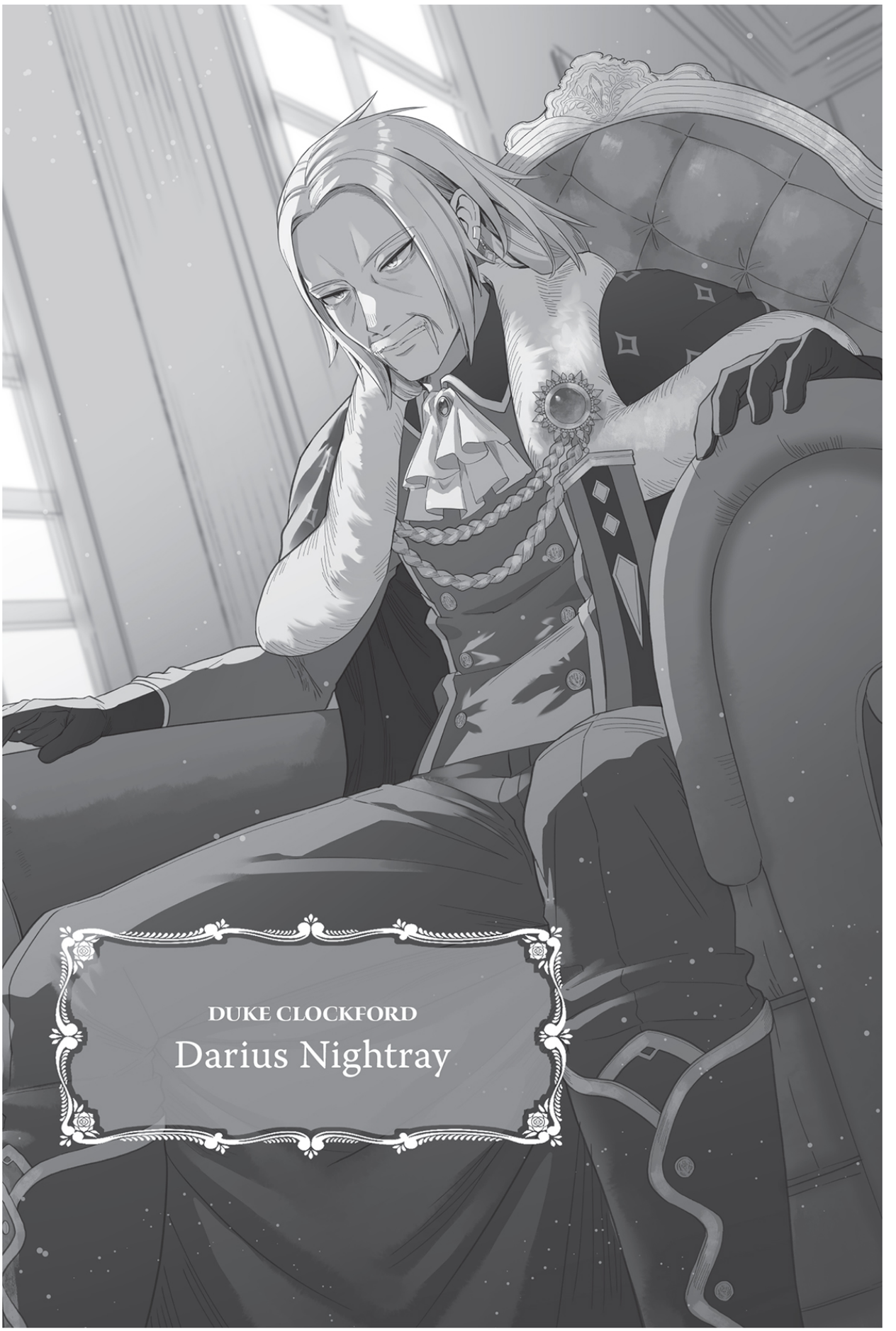
His voice was so intimidating that this remark alone made Monica want to remove her hood immediately and prostrate herself in apology.

But she didn't. She stayed still, continuing to glare at the man from beneath her hood. The duke fell silent.

…Time passed, neither of them speaking a word. She wasn't sure how much time.

The first to open his mouth was Duke Clockford. "*In public places, the only headwear permitted are the king's crown, a clergyman's miter, and a court mage's robe.* Yes, you haven't committed a single breach of courtesy. A wise decision."

Monica felt she was being tested. If she'd given in and taken off her hood, the duke would have looked down on her, thinking he could easily control her with just a little intimidation.


DUKE CLOCKFORD
Darius Nightray

Obviously, she couldn't tell him that she was simply too nervous to move, and that she kept her hood on around others out of fear. She remained as still as a doll as the duke folded his hands on his lap.

"So, you would maintain your silence even before me," he said.

Monica's silence was not a counter to intimidation. She was simply too nervous, and scared she'd bite her tongue if she tried to speak. And if she asked why he'd called her here, she'd inevitably end up in hot water—her tongue would, that is.

"Very well," the duke continued. "Then I will get straight to the point."

O-oh, thank goodness. The point… Monica had thought she'd run out of mental energy before they even broached the main subject. She privately sighed in relief.

"First," said the duke evenly, "I would like to express my gratitude and respect for your accomplishments in the dragonraids threatening our kingdom—regarding both the Black Dragon of Worgan and the Cursed Dragon of Rehnberg."

To be honest, Monica had mixed feelings about his gratitude. She hadn't slain the Black Dragon of Worgan at all, and she already suspected the duke's involvement in the events in Rehnberg. *You set all that up, didn't you?* she thought, wondering for a moment if she should say it.

In the end, though, she kept her mouth closed. The man in front of her was even more skilled at negotiation than Felix. She wouldn't get any information out of him. Not easily anyway.

The only ones who know the cursed dragon incident was a setup are the Abyss Shaman and myself… And we'd better keep that information private.

If she said something careless, it might reveal her suspicions to the duke. Therefore, silence was the best move. First, she wanted to know his reason for summoning her here.

"I have a job I'd like to request of you," said the duke, "seeing as you are the most talented mage in our kingdom."

…A request? she thought dubiously.

"I would like to entrust you with the role of bodyguard," he declared. "Specifically, for the second prince, Felix Arc Ridill."

Monica let out a silent scream. *I'm already doing that right*

now!

For a moment her thoughts were in chaos, but when she thought about it more calmly, she realized that the duke didn't know about her mission at Serendia Academy. The only ones who did were Louis, the king, and a few collaborators.

Monica thought this over, making sure not to show how rattled she was. Why would the duke ask the Silent Witch to guard Felix?

Probably to get me in the second prince's camp, she thought.

Monica was currently viewed as a hero, the slayer of two dragons, and she had a lot of eyes on her. And since the public story about the Rehnberg incident was that she'd fought alongside the second prince, the duke must have assumed the two of them already knew each other somewhat.

That was why he'd set his sights on her now. If she officially became Felix's bodyguard, others would assume that she'd aligned herself with the second prince's faction. It didn't matter who she supported in reality. If she accepted the duke's request and became Felix's bodyguard, that alone would convince everyone that she was now his ally.

The only supporter of the second prince among the Sages is the Gem Mage. If I join him, it will alter the balance of power...

And that was, in all likelihood, exactly what the duke was after.

"Will you accept?" he asked.

Monica silently shook her head. To begin with, she was already acting to protect Felix under orders from the king. She couldn't accept a conflicting request from the duke.

He watched her closely. His eyebrow hadn't twitched, and he hadn't frowned. But she felt a mounting sense of intimidation from him.

And yet for all the influence and authority Duke Clockford wielded, he couldn't give orders to a Sage. All he could do was make requests. And Monica had the right to refuse him.

The duke glanced at the two mages standing behind him. "These two are very talented, straight from the Magic Corps. I can assign them to you if you wish. And if you desire anyone else, I can pluck them from the necessary organizations."

The man was feared and respected as one of the highest authorities in the kingdom. And he was doing his utmost to win over the Silent Witch and get her on his side. It was clear how

much value he saw in her now that she'd slain two dragons.

Monica silently rose to her feet and began walking toward the door. She intended this to signal that she had no more to say.

As she placed her hand on the doorknob, the duke called after her, his voice even, not flustered in the slightest. "The Noble Assembly is considering creating a Chief Sage position for the Seven Sages. I could recommend you for the spot."

Even if they *could* create such a position, they would need the king's sign-off. Duke Clockford didn't have that authority. And yet he had stated it categorically. That could mean only one thing.

He plans to extend his control to the entire kingdom, she thought.

"Felix will be king eventually," the duke continued. "I can have him appoint you Chief Sage…and he *will* do what I say."

At this, Monica's vision went blank.

The back of her head felt hot and numb all at once. Something dark rose from the pit of her stomach. A powerful emotion was threatening to overcome her. She didn't know its name, but it drove her to cast an unchanted spell.

White particles of light began to emerge from below her feet, floating up and taking shape. Soon, they became a flock of fluttering white butterflies. It was a mental interference spell. This was a forbidden technique with restricted applications, but she purposely used it anyway.

She wanted the duke to know that if he tried to force this deal any further, she would respond appropriately.

She turned around as the butterflies surrounded the duke and the mages behind him. The latter were clearly disturbed. The duke, however, didn't bat an eyelash.

"Name your price, Silent Witch," he said.

She could choose to remain silent here. She would gain nothing from speaking to this man.

Nevertheless, she leveled a stare at the duke, her eyes devoid of emotion.

"You have nothing I want," she said.

But if she had to say, there *was* one thing she wanted from this callous man, and one thing only: the truth. The whole truth. Laid bare for all to see.

Were you behind the cursed dragon? Were you involved in my

father's death? Why does the prince do whatever you say?

But she knew he wouldn't answer any of these questions. Hiding how her legs shook, she left and headed back to her own room.

She wanted to be alone there for the rest of the day.

Just before reaching her chambers, Monica spotted someone a little ways in front of her. It was a young man with blond hair in splendid formal attire—Felix. His hair was uncharacteristically disheveled. He must have left the banquet hall in quite a hurry.

"Lady Everett," he said. "I heard that my grandfather summoned you."

"……"

"What did he tell you? He didn't force any impossible requests on you, I hope."

Monica stifled a relieved sigh. *He doesn't know about the duke's request*, she thought. His voice and expression both looked genuinely concerned. The fact remained, however, that he was the duke's puppet.

Why do you do everything he tells you to?

The words nearly made it out of her mouth, but she swallowed them back down and passed by Felix's side. The prince was sincerely worried about her.

But he was hiding something.

I'm…scared of you.

As Felix called her name from behind, Monica entered her chambers and shut the door. She didn't bother lighting a candle. Instead, she immediately collapsed into bed, cradled the sleeping Nero in her arms, and closed her eyes.



CHAPTER 3

A Letter from Bernie Jones

A horse-drawn cart was traveling down the road toward Serendia Academy with Bartholomeus Baal in the driver's seat. A craftsman originally from the Empire, Bartholomeus's life had been full of twists and turns since coming to Ridill. He'd worked a job at a magical item workshop, served as a general handyman, and he'd even done chores at the Duke of Rehnberg's mansion. Now, though, he was employed by a certain young girl.

The girl had requested he look into the background of one Peter Summs, formerly a servant at the Rehnberg mansion, whose true name was apparently Barry Oats. And despite the request's simplicity, she'd offered a truly mind-boggling sum of money for his work.

The name of his employer was Monica Everett, also known as the Silent Witch. She was one of the Seven Sages, the greatest mages in the kingdom.

Can't say I know what's on the kid's mind, he thought, *but whatever it is, I'm in luck. I'll have food for a while, and if I play my cards right, I might have a chance with Rynny.*

Bartholomeus had one goal, and one goal alone: to get closer to Rynny, the girl he'd fallen head over heels for. Her true name was Rynzbelfeid, and she was the contracted spirit of the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, another one of the Sages. To that end, he'd volunteered to help with whatever the Silent Witch needed.

A put-together man like me really knows how to make things happen, eh?

He'd heard from the Silent Witch that she had infiltrated Serendia Academy as a student and was currently on a secret mission to guard the second prince. In order to stay in easy contact with her, Bartholomeus had wormed his way into a contracting company that often visited the school.

The academy's winter break would soon be over, and he was on his way there to deliver a load of foodstuffs. The cart was a simple vehicle with no roof and several wooden crates packed

with food loaded onto it—plus a young man, sitting against one of the crates.

"Hmmm, hm, hm, hmmm."

The kid was skinny, with his red hair up in spikes, and he was humming a tune. He was on his way to the academy, and had asked Bartholomeus for a ride on his cart.

His clothing was loose and untidy, but it was still of good quality. Bartholomeus, convinced he was from some well-off family, had agreed without a second thought and let him climb aboard.

"Hmmm, hm, hm, hmmm!"

For some reason, hearing the kid humming made Bartholomeus want to sing. There was plenty to lift his spirits: It was a calm day with little wind, and warmer than you'd expect in midwinter. But most of all, he knew the day he'd get to meet his beloved Rynny was close at hand. How could he stop himself from singing?

"Oh goddess whom I love, I'm off to see you, with flowers that suit you well. Please, my goddess, hold me in your merciful arms."

It was a song from his homeland about a sculptor who fell in love with his own statue depicting a goddess. Many would call such a thing ridiculous, but Bartholomeus could understand the man's feelings well.

Every artist, every craftsman, inevitably had their hearts stolen by beauty. They were all suckers for a pretty face, basically. When he'd learned that the one he loved wasn't a human but a spirit, he'd felt understanding rather than despair. After all, her beauty and grace were divine.

"*Oh goddess whom I love…*"

"You've got a good voice," said the young man. His speech was languid and slow.

Bartholomeus stopped singing and grinned. "Heh. Sorry if I was bothering you. I couldn't help myself when I thought about the woman in my heart."

"Your beloved goddess, you mean?"

"You got it. And what a goddess she is. There are two moments in life when I feel truly happy: One is when I put the finishing touches on a difficult craft, and the other is when I'm chasin' the woman of my dreams."

“Yeah, I know how you feel. About both things. Nice, ain’t it…?”

The young man’s lips curled into a grin, and he folded his hands behind his head. He wore several rings on his fingers, and when Bartholomeus saw them, he raised his eyebrows slightly.

Wow, look at those… He’s so young, but he really has it made, eh?

The red-haired boy leaned back, looked up into the sky, and began to sing, using the same melody as Bartholomeus but with different lyrics. “*Oh queen whom I love, I’m off to see you, with an arrow to pierce your heart. Even if it isn’t right, please, step on me with your merciless feet.*”

In contrast to the cheery melody, his version of the lyrics was rather dark. Bartholomeus felt a chill and unconsciously rubbed the back of his neck.

* * *

Two days before the end of Serendia Academy’s winter vacation, Monica met up with Isabelle in central Kerbeck, and they set off for school together. Her cover story was that she’d gone to County Kerbeck over the break, so it would seem unnatural if she didn’t travel back to the dorms with Isabelle.

There had been a dragonraid prognostication before the winter solstice, so the eastern provinces, always on alert for such things, were in a state of chaos. No small number of eastern nobles had declined to attend the New Year’s ceremony. Count Kerbeck, Isabelle’s father, was one of them.

Monica had been privately worried about this. Though she’d slain the cursed dragon, the winter holidays in Kerbeck probably hadn’t been much fun. But the smile on Isabelle’s face when they met was as genuine as ever.

“It’s so good to see you again, my dear sister! The break seemed to last for ages without you! And I hear you and Felix slew the Cursed Dragon of Rehnberg last month! I never expected anything less from you, my sister! Please, do tell me all about—”

“My lady,” said her maidservant Agatha, chiding Isabelle lightly for getting overexcited. “Shouldn’t you first tell the Silent

Witch about what happened the other day?”

“Oh, dear me. Yes, I do have an important report.” Isabelle corrected her posture, now ashamed of her earlier merriment. She continued, a serious expression on her face. “Somebody is going around investigating you.”

“…Huh?”

According to Isabelle, someone had visited several monasteries in County Kerbeck, asking if they had any records of a girl named Monica having lived there. The Nortons had laid the groundwork among their people and spread a rumor that Monica was in the stables at the count’s mansion. And, hearing this, someone had snuck onto their estate to confirm her presence.

Monica’s cover story, which Louis had thought up before she infiltrated the academy, had her as the daughter of the former Countess of Kerbeck, who had adopted her from a monastery. So if someone was poking their nose around all the monasteries in the area, that meant they had doubts about her identity.

“We had a body double prepared for you for the duration of the break,” explained Isabelle. “I believe we managed to convince the intruder that Monica Norton is real, but perhaps it would be best to remain cautious for the time being.”

“Um, thank you…”

Despite her words of gratitude, Monica’s mind was in turmoil. If anyone had doubts about Monica Norton, it was probably someone linked to Serendia Academy. Of all the possibilities she could think of, the first to come to mind was Felix. He’d left Duke Rehnberg’s mansion certain that the Silent Witch was someone at his school. It was more than possible he was investigating Monica as a candidate. *As far as I could tell from our meeting at the palace, it seems like he still doesn’t know who I am, but…*

If it was someone else looking into her background, she had no idea who it could be. She shivered, feeling like an unseen enemy was sneaking up on her from behind.

Isabelle took something out of her bags. “You’re very welcome,” she said. “And in light of all that, I’ve taken precautions for when classes begin again.”

“Precautions?” repeated Monica.

“Look at this,” said Isabelle, holding out a diary.

Monica took the book and flipped through it, skimming the

words within. It contained a record—much more detailed than any normal diary—of everything that had happened during Isabelle's winter vacation in tiny, cramped letters. Of particular note was the fact that Monica appeared in it.

"Today, we went on an inspection tour of Alvana. But why did we have to bring that girl along? I made her hold my things as payment for accompanying me, but she began to whine and complain immediately, so I took away her meal privileges. How good it felt!" (And so on.)

"Oh, how awful! That girl carelessly broke my favorite teacup. It was brand-new, blue like the ocean, from Falim May… And it had such an intricate climbing rose pattern on it, which I loved! Obviously, this was unforgivable, so I chased her back into the stable, where she belongs. I can't believe I must share this mansion with her! She's lower than livestock. Even a stable is too good for the likes of her!" (And so on.)

Monica was speechless. Isabelle watched her, eyes sparkling.

"What do you think?" she asked.

What *did* she think? How was Monica supposed to respond to this? "Um, well, what is it…?"

"It's a diary of my winter vacation," explained Isabelle. "The whole Norton family joined hands to create it."

Isabelle began to flip through the diary, cheerfully offering explanations of various sections. One was written with her mother's supervision, another was her little brother's idea. It was written with extraordinary detail, from descriptions of the Kerbeck mansion's interior and the coloring and design of Isabelle's dresses, right down to the patterning on the teacup Monica had allegedly broken. In fact, as Monica read it, she almost began to believe she'd really been there.

"When classes start again, I'm sure your friends will ask what you did over the vacation," said Isabelle. "And if you read this, you'll have plenty to talk about! It's perfect!"

"I, um, I see!"

Monica definitely couldn't tell Lana about any of the things she'd *actually* done during the break—dealing with the cursed dragon in Rehnberg, visiting her foster mother, participating in the magecraft dedication at the palace, attending the New Year's ceremony and banquet. But if she memorized Isabelle's diary, she wouldn't have to make excuses whenever she was asked.

But this won't be that easy to talk about, either...

In the diary, Isabelle relentlessly tormented her, forced her to go without meals, chased her into the stables, and made her lap up muddy water. How could she tell her friends any of this? But she couldn't disappoint Isabelle after she'd gone to all this trouble for Monica's sake.

For now, Monica vowed to finish reading the hefty diary by the following morning.

* * *

In Monica's absence, a thin layer of dust had accumulated in her attic room. She opened a window for ventilation, then pulled Nero out of her bag. He was still in his winter hibernation; he would occasionally wake up, drink a little water, and then doze back off again. Monica put a few pieces of cloth into an empty basket and set Nero down in it to sleep.

"Wake up soon, okay?" she said quietly, rolling up her sleeves to get some cleaning done. But just then, she noticed there was a letter sitting on her desk. The housemaster must have delivered it during the break; it was addressed to her.

Wondering who it could be from, she picked up the envelope. When she saw the name, her eyes went wide.

Bernie Jones. A friend of hers from her time at Minerva's, and someone who now considered her a rival.

Monica decided the cleaning could wait. Using a letter opener, she carefully broke the seal on the envelope.

To my eternal rival,

I hope you're doing well.

I, ever competent and talented, am studying every day to succeed my father.

I had wanted to participate in the New Year's greetings, but mourning for my elder brother continues. I regret not being able to take part.

The reason I'm writing to you like this, despite how

incredibly busy I am, is to inform you that your lifelong rival, Bernie Jones, has news for you that will surely be to your benefit.

While I would love for you to sniffle and cry and thank me profusely, once you see this news, you will probably burst into tears for another reason.

If you understand, then take a deep breath, cover your mouth so that you don't scream, and read the second page of this letter.

Monica did as Bernie said, taking a deep breath before covering her mouth and unfolding the second page of the letter.

Now that your heart and mind are prepared, I will deliver the news.

Our senior, one of the school's very few problem children, the second of this name, Huberd Dee, left Minerva's yesterday. He'll be transferring to Serendia Academy this winter.

Yes, I speak of the one and only Huberd Dee who chased you so passionately around school, attempting to challenge you to magic battles.

I doubt he knows that you are secretly attending Serendia Academy under a false identity. Even so, I can easily predict that he will challenge you to a magic battle if he finds you.

Please take care not to let him. I hope you can still carry out your mission, though you may be trembling in fear day and night.

Your lifelong rival,
Bernie Jones

Monica managed not to scream, but she did start wheezing from behind her palm. She was shaking, and she felt a cold sweat break out all over her body.

"D-D-D-Dee? Dee is transferring here?!"

Huberd Dee had been one of Monica's upperclassmen when she was attending Minerva's. He was also the nephew of the Artillery Mage, one of the Seven Sages. Despite his elite lineage, however, he'd instigated an incredible number of violent incidents. They'd held him back several times; he was considered

one of the top five problem children in the school's history.

About ten years ago, there had been a student literally called the "Problem Child of Minerva's," who had been completely unmanageable and had left a legend in their wake. Huberd was said to rival them in deed and reputation, and now he was called the "Second Problem Child of Minerva's."

Just like his uncle, the Artillery Mage, he was hot-blooded and loved magic battles. However, Huberd was far less of a listener. His audacity surpassed even Nero's. It was simply indescribable.

Monica would never forget what had happened three years ago. She was forced into a magic battle with Huberd, and was so terrified, she hit him with every offensive spell she knew, right out of the gate. To put it bluntly, she'd beaten him up—badly. Ever since then, he'd been obsessed, challenging her to a battle whenever he got the chance.

Monica had holed up in her laboratory partly because of her shyness, but another big motivator was her desire to escape Huberd.

"N-n-now what?! Wh-what do I dooooo?!"

Makeup and disguises probably wouldn't fool him. He was a boorish man, but one with a keen eye. If he ever caught sight of her, she was done for. She could see it now—him dragging her off to the magic battle training grounds. And this when she was already on edge about Felix's suspicions and the mystery person poking around County Kerbeck. *And now I have this to deal with, too?!*

Monica squeezed Bernie's letter as bitter tears rolled down her cheeks.

* * *

On the first day of school, Monica was even more wary of her surroundings than usual. *All clear to the right. All clear to the left. Nothing to the back or front, either...* Every time she walked a few steps, she'd glance around. She couldn't possibly have looked more suspicious.

"What in the world are you doing?" asked Lana from behind.

“Gyah!” yelped Monica; she’d just barely managed to swallow a scream, but the sound she produced instead was even weirder.

Lana peered at her face with concern. “Oh, no. You seem a little pale. Are you sure you don’t need to go back to your room and rest?”

“I-I-I’m, um, I’m fine. There are, um, no classes today…”

The first day of the new term was just for announcements, and classes were scheduled to start the following day. The problem was what would come *after* the announcements—a meeting of the student council.

I wonder if I can…act normally, like I did before… She clenched her left hand—she still hadn’t fully recovered—and thought back to what had happened at the castle.

While speaking with the Silent Witch, Felix had been formal and respectful. So had Cyril. They were polite, careful not to offend one of the Seven Sages.

If Lana found out who Monica was, they probably couldn’t be friends anymore. At least not like they were now.

…That’s the last thing I want to happen.

She curled the fingers of her left hand a little and felt a stinging pain shoot up into her wrist. There was so much she had to hide—the pain in her hand, her identity, everything.

As Monica quietly resolved herself, she heard a familiar voice call out “Heeey!” from behind.

She turned to find two young men walking over to her. One was tall and had dirty-blond hair, while the other was short with brown curls—Glenn and Neil. They walked side by side, making their height difference even more obvious than usual. Glenn seemed energetic today; he was waving his arm in big back-and-forth motions at Monica and Lana.

After the four of them said their hellos, they headed to their classrooms, chatting about their winter vacations along the way.

“I relaxed at my family’s house and shadowed my father at work,” said Neil.

He shared a few minor events from his life during the break, then Lana told them about Southerndole Harbor, where she had accompanied her father on a trip.

“Southerndole is simply wonderful every time I go. There are so many shops that I never get bored. What about you two?”

And there it was. The conversation had turned to Monica. As she thought hard about how to explain the contents of Isabelle's diary, Glenn took the lead.

"I went to Rehnberg during the first half of the break," he explained.

Lana's eyes widened. "Oh, my. Really? Wasn't that where the cursed dragon attacked?!"

The incident in Rehnberg was a huge event being spoken of across the kingdom, but most of the attention was focused on the two people who had slain it—the second prince and the Silent Witch. Almost nobody knew the Barrier Mage's apprentice was there, so Lana's surprise made sense.

As Monica idly thought this over, Lana turned to her.

"…Monica," she said, "you don't seem very surprised. Did you already know about this?"

"Huh?! Oh, um, no, I'm surprised."

She couldn't exactly tell Lana that she was there. Fortunately, Lana didn't press her further. "Glenn, does that mean you fought the dragon alongside Prince Felix and a Sage?"

"Well, no…" Glenn trailed off, lowering his gaze.

He was probably thinking back to the fear he'd felt facing the dragon. It couldn't be easy for him. Monica wasn't sure what to say. She was the only one who knew he'd almost died from the dragon's curse.

But before she could say anything, Glenn raised his face and grinned. "I couldn't do anything. The prez and the Silent Witch were the ones who beat it!"

"Did you see them fighting it?"

"Ah, no. I didn't get the chance."

At the time, Glenn had been unconscious because of the curse, so naturally he hadn't witnessed the battle. He seemed reluctant to mention that, however.

I wonder if he's all right…, thought Monica.

She'd only suffered a tiny bit of the dragon's curse, but the aftereffects were still bothering her. Glenn might have a high mana resistance, but in his case, it had consumed his whole body. He must still be suffering.

If I'd handled things better, he wouldn't have been cursed, she thought, hanging her head.

At the palace, she had apologized to Louis in private for not protecting his apprentice.

But Louis had seemed totally unconcerned. “I’m no fool,” he’d said. “I won’t blame my apprentice’s inexperience on someone else.”

The Barrier Mage liked to put others in his debt whenever possible, and he would always wring them dry later. But when it came to the cursed dragon affair, he didn’t criticize Monica.

Even so, she kept wondering if she could have done more to help Glenn.

“Mooo-niii-caaa,” said Glenn. “What’s wrong? You seem kinda depressed.”

Snapping out of it, she looked up and locked eyes with Glenn, who was staring at her with concern. She smiled vaguely and shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“What were you up to during the break anyway, Monica? Did you get to eat some mince pie?”

“Um, no… I had bread and pickles—”

Monica stopped abruptly and closed her mouth. She had eaten bread during winter break because her foster mother Hilda had destroyed the kitchen, but she couldn’t tell her friends that. She suddenly grew flustered.

Then she remembered the diary she’d read last night. “Umm, well… There was a whole lot of food at Count Kerbeck’s mansion. Flaky pies, a lot of soup, ginger cakes with a lot of sugar, and…”

But the Monica in Isabelle’s diary had barely eaten any of it. She’d sat in the spot farthest from the fireplace, shivering in the cold, dining on vegetable scraps, and slurping her soup.

“I dropped a slice of my ginger cake, and that girl actually picked it up and ate it like some kind of urchin. What a horrible sight! She’s like a stray dog!”

How was Monica supposed to explain that? She faltered, all mixed-up.

Lana, Glenn, and Neil looked at her with sympathy.

“…Well, we’ll get to eat proper food in the cafeteria today,” said Lana. “Come with me, all right?”

“Do you want some of the ginger cake I packed as a snack, Monica?” offered Glenn.

“Umm, I’m not sure what to say… It sounds like you had quite

the time of it," said Neil.

Apparently, the three of them now believed she'd been fed only bread and pickles while the rest of the family enjoyed luxurious feasts. It wasn't very far off from the story in the diary, so Monica just smiled vaguely and did nothing to correct their misunderstanding.

* * *

After school, she went to the student council room and found the other members already at their seats around the conference table. She wasn't late, but she felt a little guilty for arriving last. She bowed to the others a few times as she moved to her seat. The council consisted of the following:

The student council president, Felix Arc Ridill.

The vice president, Cyril Ashley.

The secretaries, Elliott Howard and Bridget Greyham.

The general affairs officer, Neil Clay Maywood.

The accountant, Monica Norton.

With the six of them assembled, Felix smiled gently and began to speak.

"I'm sincerely happy that all of us are here together again. May the blessing of Serendine, Goddess of Light, be upon the new year and our academy."

With those words, the first student council meeting of the new year began. About half a year remained in the current members' terms, but since Serendia Academy had a long break from early to late summer corresponding to the height of the social season, it would go by in a flash.

The events to be held over the next six months were mostly small in scale, such as club competitions and presentations. The biggest event would probably be the general student assembly.

The first council meeting of the new term was for going over the rough schedule for the coming months. They'd have additional meetings regarding the details of each event over the next few days.

"Ah, and another thing," said Felix once they were finished. He

narrowed his azure eyes and looked around at the other council members. “For certain reasons, I’m searching for a girl whose left hand is injured. If you find her, can you let me know?”

Monica’s pulse sped up, and her heart began to pound. She used all the muscles in her face to keep from grimacing, but still turned stiff as stone.

Neil, who sat next to her, asked, “Do you mean a female student in the advanced course?”

“She could be in the intermediate course,” replied Felix, “or she could be another student’s servant. I’m certain she’s not part of the faculty… I’ve looked into all of them already.”

He already checked all the faculty members?! The speed at which he worked was terrifying. Monica watched him with terror in her eyes.

The next question came from Cyril. “Sir, can you tell us any of her other characteristics? Her height, perhaps?”

“Unfortunately, I have very little other information. But if I had to say… She’s pretty short. Around Monica’s height, I’d guess.”

Monica desperately held in a whimper. Fortunately, she was *always* getting flustered, so nobody realized that she was practically on death’s door. But now a cold sweat covered her body.

Cyril thought this over. “Who is this girl to you, sir?” he asked eventually, choosing his words carefully.

“I suppose you might say I owe her a debt. Either way, I must see her,” said Felix, a sweet smile crossing his face. That was the smile he showed the Silent Witch.

It was just as Monica had feared. Felix was sure the Silent Witch was somewhere at the academy. She unconsciously put her left hand below the desk and held it with her right.

What should I do? What will I do? What can I do? Should I force myself to use my left hand to prove it’s not hurt? But that might make me seem even more suspicious…

As she racked her brain trying to come up with something, Elliott glanced at Cyril. “How odd,” he said casually. “Normally, you would have said something like, *If that is your wish, sir, I will find her at any cost!*”

“I thought that went without saying,” said Cyril firmly. He seemed a little restless, however. “I will gladly do whatever the

prince asks, with all my effort."

An awkward silence followed, until Bridget said simply, "Does Accountant Norton not match that description?"

Monica, feeling like she might faint at any second, let out a silent scream. *I do match it! I'm the one he's looking for! It's me! There's no doubt!*

Her diaphragm had been spasming strangely for a while now, trying to push out whimpers and sobs. But Monica held on, using all the strength at her disposal to keep her voice and expression calm.

"My, um, my left hand isn't injured," she said, removing her left glove and clenching her fist. It actually hurt quite a bit, but she desperately fought to keep that from showing.

Felix looked closely at Monica's small hand. "Yes, it's not you," he concluded.

"N-no, sir."

"Come to think of it, you're good at finding people, aren't you? You can tell the size of a person just by looking at them, if I recall… Maybe I should have had her measured," he murmured to himself.

Measure what, exactly?! Monica was at her limit. But somehow or other, she managed to hold on.

Amazing! How am I still conscious? I can't believe it!

Deeply impressed by her own progress, Monica failed to realize something.

As she continued to clench and unclench her fist, Cyril was watching her very carefully.



CHAPTER 4

Fateful Transfer Students

Lindsey Pail, the ballroom dancing teacher at Serendia Academy, looked at the list of transfer students for the second term, perplexed.

One would be in the second year of the intermediate course, and two would be in the advanced course—one in the first year and another in the third. None were joining the second year of the advanced course, for which she was responsible.

The one entering the intermediate course, however, just so happened to be Albert Frau Roberia Ridill, the third prince. And due to this royal transfer, the intermediate course teachers were all rushing about, looking rather ill.

But rather than the prince, the student Lindsey was most curious about was the boy set to join the advanced course's third year. "Why would he transfer in so late? He'll be graduating in only six months," she murmured.

"Oh, that one?" replied a man sitting nearby, sipping tea. "His family made a large donation. They want him to be a Serendia Academy alumnus." This was William Macragan, the elderly fundamental magecraft teacher. He spoke as if talking to himself, occasionally blowing on his tea to cool it. "His parents are very wealthy, so I suspect it was quite the sum."

"Do you know him, Mr. Macragan?" asked Lindsey.

"I do. He once attended Minerva's. He's the nephew of one of the Seven Sages. The Artillery Mage, to be exact."

"My," said Lindsey in surprise. The nephew of a Sage, and a former student of Ridill's top mage training institution? The boy had a very bright future ahead of him. "He must be a talented mage," she added with a smile.

Macragan sipped his tea and heaved a long sigh. Beneath his white eyebrows, his eyes seemed to look past her, as if reliving some distant memory. "Yes, he was quite talented… Certainly no honors student, though."

An unusual pathos emanated from the man. Lindsey wasn't

sure if she should pry any further, so she looked back down at her list.

…What's this?

The third transfer student's name suddenly caught her attention. She felt like she'd seen it before, on another list, different from this one.

Where was it? It seems he's transferring in from abroad…

She went backward through the year in her mind. Winter break, final exams, the school festival… Then she remembered.

"Oh, yes. He was a participant in the chess competition…"

Once she'd recalled this, she looked back down at the list. The third prince, a foreign transfer student, and the nephew of a Sage.

What an interesting bunch…

They had six months left until graduation. The list still in her hands, Lindsey prayed that time would pass without too many big surprises.

* * *

Glenn Dudley was a typical boy. He had two parents and two younger sisters. He loved physical activity and disliked studying. He often helped with chores around the house and was good at looking after people, so both his sisters were quite fond of him. He'd always figured he'd take over the family business one day and be the next to run the Dudley Butcher Shop.

But when he was eleven years old, his life changed forever.

All of a sudden, a bunch of important-looking adults—government officials, nobles, and the like—stormed into his family's home and said this:

"We bring a prophecy from the Starseer Witch, one of the Seven Sages. If Glenn Dudley takes over his family's business, this kingdom will fall to ruin."

Even a poor student like Glenn knew of the Starseer Witch. She was the greatest prophet in Ridill. After that, the adults surrounded him, brought him to the royal castle, and measured his mana capacity. The result shocked everyone. His capacity was

far greater than that of most high mages.

Magecraft wasn't something you saw every day. Glenn was surprised to hear he had the talent for it, but he was also excited. The greatest prophet in the land had seen his potential and had picked him out. He felt like the main character in a novel.

After that, Glenn was enrolled at Minerva's, the foremost mage training institution in the kingdom. And, incredibly, the steep fees required were to be paid in full by the government.

His family was overjoyed at the thought of their son moving up in the world, and Glenn was proud of himself. His innocent, boyish heart longed to learn all sorts of incredible spells at Minerva's and one day save the kingdom from a great danger, just like the hero Ralph.

He had no idea just what form this danger would take, however.

Despite Glenn's initial excitement, his days at Minerva's weren't much fun.

Most of the other kids were the children of nobles, and so the basic education courses were much more difficult than those offered at regular public schools. He did poorly even in these, to say nothing of his magecraft classes, and his classmates openly mocked him for it. They wondered why he, a commoner, was even there. They teased him for being an idiot who just happened to have a greater-than-normal mana capacity.

He was frustrated and ashamed. He wanted to get back at them somehow, to prove them wrong. And so he began to practice practical magecraft skills after only three months at the school.

Normally, this subject was added to a student's curriculum once they'd studied for six months. But Glenn was possessed by the powerful desire to win, particular to young boys his age, and so he began practicing in secret.

Though he had fallen hopelessly behind in his class on magecraft formulae, mana control was something of a specialty for him. He would simply focus his mana into the palm of his hand and mold it like clay. If he then added in whatever formula

he could remember, he could cast spells with surprising ease.

His first successful attempt was a spell to create flame. He wound up with a fireball so big, it would take two adults with their arms spread out to match its circumference. Not many students at Minerva's could create one that large. Glenn was so happy that he practiced hurling fireballs day after day—until one day, a male student approached him. The older boy was humming when he called out to Glenn.

"Hm-hmm. Heya, newbie. That's some power you got there, eh?"

Apparently, he'd been spying on Glenn's secret training. As he gazed at a boulder Glenn had scorched with his fireballs, his lips turned up in a grin. The boy was skinny and tall, with red hair. Glenn was above the average height for his age, but this boy was a whole head taller. He must have been several years older.

"Hey, you ever had a magic battle?" the boy asked. "It's when you use magecraft to fight inside a barrier."

"Not yet, no."

Glenn was still only allowed to practice fundamental mana control. That was why he was keeping his training a secret. What would he do if this kid reported him? He began to fidget nervously.

At that point, the young man made him an offer. "Then let's have one. You and me. We won't get hurt inside the barrier. That way, we can get real combat practice without any danger."

"To tell you the truth, I'm not really supposed to be doing stuff like this yet…"

"Hey, no problem. We can just sneak out to the training grounds at night. With a magical item, anyone can put up a little barrier."

Naturally, if they were found out, they would face harsh punishment. And yet the notion of secret nighttime training tickled Glenn's boyish fancies. But, tempted though he was, he shook his head, telling himself it was a bad idea.

The young man grinned again. "Your magecraft is really somethin' else, you know that? I've never seen a rookie make such a huge fireball."

"Heh, heh-heh… R-really? You think?"

"Yeah. And you'll go so much further with some combat

training.”

Glenn broke into a smile. Ever since coming to Minerva’s, people had been telling him he was a failure. He was starving for approval. And so, against his better judgment, he agreed to the young man’s offer.

“I think I’d like to do it!” he said.

“Yeah? Perfect. I’ll show ya the ropes.”

What Glenn didn’t realize, however, was that this young man was notorious at Minerva’s for being an incorrigible problem child.

That night, in the forest, Glenn was running for his life. He didn’t even have a moment to wipe the sweat dripping down his cheeks.

Between gasps of air, he desperately stifled screams and whimpers. How had things turned out like this?

A fireball blazed behind him.

“Eeeek!”

On reflex, he dropped to the ground and rolled. A rain of fire arrows poured down on him, and he couldn’t dodge them all. Several hit him in the arm, and he felt the intense pain of their tips gouging out his skin. However, there were no burn marks on his body. In fact, his clothes hadn’t even caught fire.

Inside the barriers used for magic battles, mana-based attacks didn’t cause physical harm. You could still feel pain, but the damage depleted your mana reserves instead. Those arrows had just shaved off a whole lot of Glenn’s mana.

What is this? What’s happening here? What’s going on?!

Glenn knew he had to fight back, but his head was numb with terror. He couldn’t chant. He was so panicked, he didn’t trust himself to add two and two. There was no way he’d ever manage a complex magecraft formula.

“Hmm, hm-hm-hmm? That’s right, keep on running. The hunt’s more fun when the prey is desperate.”

The young man who had invited him here grinned and advanced slowly toward him. He used a quick-chant to produce more flame arrows and then sent them flying toward Glenn.

Crawling miserably along the ground, Glenn fled for his life. But an arrow still managed to stab him in the leg. He writhed in agony.

If every attack only further depleted his mana reserves, then he might as well use it all up as quickly as he could. Then, at least, he'd be freed from this pain.

But with Glenn's abnormally high mana capacity, this was no easy task.

"No more!" pleaded Glenn, crying. "I can't! I can't take it!"

His upperclassman frowned, disappointed. "Sure you can. I *know* you can. You've got *plenty* of mana left, don't you? C'mon. Shoot at me, just to see."

He spread his slender arms wide, gesturing for the other boy to attack him.

Glenn, his mind a goopy mess of anger and terror, focused his mana. He couldn't stand the pain anymore. He decided to use it up. All of it. He wanted it all to go away.

But as he channeled everything he had into whatever half-baked formula he could think of, something inside him snapped.

His vision went white.

"Oh."

By the time the upperclassman's remark made it to his ears, Glenn was already out cold, oblivious to the havoc his fireball had unleashed.

* * *

Glenn awoke to dazzling rays of morning sun shining in through the window. The room's curtains were open; his roommate must have done that.

Lying face up in bed, Glenn covered his eyes with his hands. His palms, his face, his back—his whole body was slick with cold sweat. He felt awful.

The sound of that terrible young man's humming clung stubbornly to his ears.

"Talk about nightmares…"

When he sat up, all his muscles screamed in pain. He could

hold himself up with his arm, but that hurt, too. He was still feeling the aftereffects of the dragon's curse from winter break. The bruises had disappeared, but he'd been told the pain would persist for some time.

His roommate was nowhere to be found; he'd probably gone to have breakfast already. *Maybe I should go back to sleep…*, Glenn thought lazily, still sitting up.

Just then, he heard a pounding at the door. "Glenn Dudley! How long do you intend to laze around in bed?!"

The owner of this shrill voice, barking orders so early in the morning, was Cyril Ashley, student council vice president. Word had probably gotten to him via Glenn's roommate.

Glenn got out of bed and called out toward the door, "VP? Good mo—"

But before he could finish, he felt pain shoot through his left leg. The curse again. If he put too much weight on it, the top of his foot hurt like someone was smashing it with a hammer.

"Urghh…ugh…" He crouched down, groaning.

On the other side of the door, Cyril spoke again. He sounded worried. "Are you not feeling well? I can tell the housemaster—"

"I'm fine!" Glenn said quickly. "I just stubbed my toe getting out of bed!"

"Oh. Very well… Elective classes start today. Be sure to remember your class materials."

As Cyril's footsteps grew distant, Glenn breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve.

He didn't want anyone to find out the curse was making his whole body hurt. If that little girl Eliane heard, she'd probably be shocked.

Glenn liked his current life. He didn't want to make any of his friends or upperclassman here at Serendia worried or sad for him.

I can do this, he told himself, reaching for the uniform hanging on the wall.

* * *

It was the first day of elective classes after the winter break, and Eliane Hyatt, daughter of the Duke of Rehnberg, was packing up her things to prepare for her next class. Once she was finished, she quickly stood up and cast a pleasant smile at the classmates she usually walked with.

"I have something to turn in," she said. "I'll see you all again later."

She left the classroom, walking as fast as was appropriate for a noble girl like her. She wasn't heading to the faculty room, however—or to her elective class, for that matter.

If he's moving from his classroom to the fundamental magecraft class, he'll have to pass this way…

Eliane stopped at the corner and nervously glanced around. As she waited for a certain person to appear, she began playing with her hair for no reason.

Eventually she heard a familiar voice from around the corner. It was more energetic, more enthusiastic than that of most of the other students. This was a school for noble children, after all. At any rate, there could be no mistaking who it was.

With an extremely natural gait, Eliane rounded the corner.

I was passing through this hallway on my way to turn something in, and I just happened to run into Lord Glenn. So I stopped and said, "Good day to you, Lord Glenn. Thank you for all your help during winter break. How are you feeling?" …Yes, that's very natural. The most natural thing in the world.

Satisfied with her perfect plan, Eliane closed the distance between them—and then she froze.

A tall female student was walking next to Glenn. She had straight black hair, pale skin, and lapis lazuli eyes. She was so incredibly beautiful that anyone who saw her would sigh in admiration. It was Claudia Ashley.

While she was tall for a girl, she and Glenn were well-matched; side by side, they looked surprisingly impressive. But why was Claudia walking next to Glenn?

As Eliane stood there, stock-still, Glenn noticed her and stopped. "Oh? Hey, it's Elly. Good to see you again!"

"Y-yes, well. Good day to you…"

Once she saw the two of them together, all the lines she'd rehearsed in her head vanished. She fidgeted, unsure of herself,

as Claudia stared at her with those doll-like lapis eyes. Claudia had no interest in her. She was simply gazing at whoever was standing in front of her in the hall. Eliane, however, was very conscious of Claudia, and this stung her pride and made her feel inferior.

"I must say, Lord Glenn, I had no idea you were such good friends with Lady Claudia."

Claudia scowled slightly at the sarcasm in Eliane's voice and murmured, "We are *not* friends."

"Yeah, we're great friends!" Glenn called out loudly, drowning Claudia out.

Despite her impassive expression, it was obvious Claudia was annoyed. In a low voice, she clarified, "I was only walking with Neil…"

Belatedly, Eliane realized that there was another boy hiding in Claudia's shadow—the student council's general affairs officer, Neil Clay Maywood. He was Claudia's fiancé.

Neil was plain and small-statured, so he didn't often stand out. And whenever he was with Glenn or Claudia—who both easily caught one's attention—his presence grew even weaker. Eliane was embarrassed she hadn't seen him.

Neil directed a friendly smile at Eliane. "Hello, Miss Hyatt. I heard about the cursed dragon incident. That must have been quite difficult."

"It was. Thank you for your consideration."

Eliane wasn't particularly close with Neil, but they were acquainted. His father frequently visited Duke Rehnberg's mansion on business. Baron Maywood was a nationally recognized mediator and was well-known among Ridillian nobility. She'd heard he'd recently been traveling around, mediating disputes over the Dragon Knights' new outpost whenever they cropped up.

His family was much lower in rank than Eliane's, but one couldn't afford to disrespect the Maywoods. So Eliane suggested an inoffensive topic.

"Lord Maywood, you seem close with Lord Glenn," she said. "Are you in the same elective class?"

"Yes, we are. Fundamental magecraft, to be specific. What about you, Miss Hyatt?"

“I’m taking music class. I’m afraid I’m still very inexperienced, however.”

“I think you’re being modest. I’ve heard you play the harp before. It was wonderful.”

“Oh! Well, thank you for the compliment.”

As she spoke to Neil, Eliane kept glancing over at Glenn. *Why don’t you ask me to play the harp? If you really insist, I suppose I could put on a little performance for you in the music room after school…*

She looked at him with expectant eyes, and Glenn grinned. “When you and Neil talk, it’s kind of adorable.” He looked like an older boy watching over the neighborhood children.

Neil’s eyes took on a hollow cast; he was self-conscious about his baby face and short stature. Eliane’s mouth twitched; she, too, was self-conscious about looking like a child.

Just then, Glenn’s eyes widened in surprise. His gaze was focused somewhere behind Eliane. She turned around and saw a male student walking their way.

He was tall, with spiked red hair that seemed to blaze like a flame. He had a narrow jaw and long, thin limbs. His features reminded her of a praying mantis. His clothes were loose and untidy, and he wasn’t wearing the uniform’s stipulated gloves. Instead, he had on an earring and several large rings on his fingers.

…*A delinquent*, she thought.

Glenn was watching him with an awfully tense expression. Did they know each other?

The red-haired boy opened his mouth to yawn, then said, “Hey, I’m looking for the advanced fundamental magecraft class. Where is it?”

As soon as the question was out of his mouth, Glenn’s face twisted with anger. Eliane had never seen him make such an expression before. He was always so cheerful.

“What do you think you’re doing here?!” Glenn demanded, loudly enough to shake the window panes.

Eliane’s shoulders jolted. Claudia was impassive as always, but Neil watched Glenn in blank amazement.

The red-haired boy stuck a finger in his ear, unfazed. “Who are you?” he asked Glenn.

"……Rrrgh!"

"Have we met somewhere before? I don't remember. And if I don't remember, that probably means…"

The boy's gaze grew distant, as if he were trying to recall something. Then he turned back to Glenn, a dismissive look on his face as a thin smile formed on his lips.

"…that you're a loser, right?"

Eliane heard a grating noise, and belatedly realized it was Glenn's teeth. He was breathing heavily and leaning forward, like a wild dog ready for a fight. But before he could take a step toward the boy, Neil moved in front of him.

"Would you happen to be one of the transfer students?" he asked. "The advanced fundamental magecraft class is down those stairs and to the right. It's the third classroom."

"Hm-hmm. I see. Thanks."

The red-haired boy said nothing more. He simply turned and left.

Glenn continued to glare at his back until he disappeared around the corner.

* * *

Monica's two electives were chess and horseback riding. The first of these to be held after winter break was chess.

I'm so glad chess is up first…

There were several different parties on the lookout for her at the moment. First was Felix—he'd realized that the Silent Witch was here at Serendia Academy, and that her left hand was injured. The second was whoever had been investigating Monica Norton in Kerbeck, though she still had no idea who that was. And finally, Huberd Dee, her senior from Minerva's. Bernie had informed her about his transfer. Huberd still didn't know she was at the academy, but she had to assume he'd recognize her the moment he laid eyes on her.

How am I supposed to attend school like this, much less guard the prince…? Oof, ugh… My stomach hurts…

Since Huberd could potentially disrupt her mission, Monica

had already discussed the matter with Isabelle. She and the servants from House Norton would be taking turns observing his movements. That said, Isabelle was a first-year, Monica was a second-year, and Huberd was a third-year, which meant Isabelle would have trouble keeping track of him. And if any House Norton servants were seen loitering around the third-year classrooms, people would get suspicious.

So Monica had to be on alert at all times as well, to ensure he never got close to her. Even now, she kept a careful watch on everyone around her as she moved through the halls. When she finally reached chess class, she sat down in her empty seat and collapsed onto the desk.

Two male students sat down next to her—the droopy-eyed Elliott Howard and the flaxen-haired musician Benjamin Mording. Both of them took chess as well.

"Ah, I can hear it! A symphony of lament. Sadness and distress, pounding on the heart like rain, tears spilling from their eyes to join the downpour and flowing into the sea. And at the end of their journey, they shall reach a single answer. Will it be the determination to face despair? Or the resolve to lose everything? Ahhh, what sights did those travelers see? The final movement will lay everything bare! …Your face is that of a traveler just before that final movement, Miss Norton. Are you quite all right?"

"…Umm…"

As Monica searched for what to say, Elliott narrowed his eyes. "Translated, that means, 'You look miserable. Are you okay?'"

"*Miserable!* To take a single word and gather up its musicality, and to open up one's mind and view the world through a greater lens, and then to *play* that music and perform it—*that* is the very essence of a musician! Do you understand?!"

Benjamin now seemed lost in his own world. Monica offered him a pained smile. "Umm, I'm sorry for worrying you," she said. "I'm okay."

She had a mountain of problems to deal with, but for now, she just wanted to forget all that and focus on chess.

Professor Boyd, the bald-headed chess teacher, opened the door and entered the classroom. He was built like a mercenary, covered in rippling muscles.

"Settle down," he called out to his students. Then he glanced

toward the hall. “We have a transfer student. Come in.”

When she heard the words “transfer student,” Monica immediately pictured her senior from Minerva’s, the one she’d just been worrying about—Huberd Dee.

Oh no… Could it be him?!

As it turned out, Monica’s worries were unfounded—but the transfer student *was* someone she knew.

The boy walked in, tall with black hair, his steps like a soldier’s. He stood at ease, then raised his voice. “My name is Robert Winkel. I’m a first-year in the advanced class. I look forward to receiving your instruction. Thank you.”

In perfect sync, Elliott and Benjamin both turned to look at Monica. They were just in time to see her eyes roll back in her head as she began to lose consciousness.

* * *

After losing to Monica in the chess competition, Robert Winkel had proposed to her so they could keep playing together and had been roundly rejected. Though he was originally from the Kingdom of Landor, he had been studying at the Temple-Affiliated University in Ridill. But as soon as he returned from the competition, he immediately applied to leave that institution and enroll at Serendia Academy. His teachers had gone white in the face. They’d tried to stop him. But Robert’s resolve was tougher than steel.

He wanted to become the greatest chess player in the world. That was the only reason he’d come to the Kingdom of Ridill in the first place—it had more players than Landor. Sure, there were plenty of strong opponents for him back at the University, but he had already surpassed them all. It was only natural he should wish to enroll at a school with better players.

And most importantly, coming to Serendia would allow him to challenge Monica Norton, the one who had defeated him, as often as he liked. And if he could get her to accept his proposal while they were still students, he could play chess with her as much as he liked even *after* graduating. It was his plan for a perfect life.

But Robert was worried about something.

He was proficient in chess, book learning, horseback riding, and swordsmanship, but when it came to love and romance, he was a rank amateur. He had no knowledge of what sorts of things made a girl happy.

So after leaving the University, he decided to go back to his homeland of Landor for a time and ask his four elder brothers what to do, sure that his ever-reliable siblings would give him some beneficial advice.

He'd gone to them and asked very seriously, "If there was a girl you really, really wanted to woo, what sort of things would you try?"

Robert was the youngest child, and when he asked this question, his brothers' eyes lit up.

"You've grown so much, Robert!"

"Our little Robert used to think of nothing but chess!"

"I can't believe our adorable little brother's all grown up!"

"He's finally found a girl!"

His brothers had whooped and hollered, and then they'd each given him their own special advice.

His eldest brother flexed his powerful arms and said, "Women love a man with muscles! Robert, you've got great muscles already. Use them to attract her. Especially your arms, you hear? Women are all weak to a man's arms!"

Robert mentally took note of this. *Arm muscles. Got it.*

His next eldest brother flashed him a sweet, beguiling smile. "What's most important is how compatible your bodies are. Robert, I saw yours a lot when you were little, so I can make this guarantee. You're sure to satisfy any girl *down there*. Have confidence, be bold, and go on the offensive."

Out of all his brothers, the second eldest was the biggest womanizer, and had the most experience. If he said Robert's size *down there* was important, then he figured that was probably true.

His third eldest brother had longish hair he swept back with a

comb. “I think our elder brothers would do well to use their heads a bit more. If you want to make a girl happy, there’s no better way than with a poem. Write a poem filled with your feelings for her, and she’ll be overjoyed.”

“I’ve never written a poem before,” Robert said dubiously.

“No problem,” insisted his brother firmly. “When in need, use flowers. Metaphors, similes. Something simple, like, *I walked through the garden, and it reminded me of you.*”

This was quite vague, but Robert was impressed. His third brother was a master of the pen, and the things he said always hit differently.

His youngest elder brother picked up one of their pet dogs and said gently, “Our family has *three* cute puppies, and they’re all so clever! *That’s* the best way to approach her. See, Robert? Anyone would be over the moon to join a family with such lovely dogs. Don’t you agree? I’m sure your girl will think so, too.” His brother held up the stern-faced military dog and rubbed his cheek against it. “I mean, just look at how cute they are!”

Robert made another mental note: *Make sure to tell her about the family dogs.*

And so, armed with his brothers’ advice, Robert Winkel had once again crossed the border into Ridill and made his way to Serendia Academy—all to find Monica Norton, challenge her to a rematch, and convince her to accept his engagement proposal.

* * *

“Hey. Miss Norton, wake up. Hey!”

Monica awoke to Elliott shaking her shoulder and realized it was already time for free play. *Oh, that’s right. Chess. Let’s play chess. I can empty my mind by playing chess…*, she thought, coming back to herself just as a boy strode boldly toward her. Needless to say, it was Robert. It was the middle of winter, but he had his jacket off and his shirtsleeves rolled up as far as they would go.

He stopped right in front of her. “It is good to see you again, Miss Monica.”

“Y-yes!” she replied, her face pale as she vigorously nodded.

Robert took a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. “I wrote a poem for you.”

“…What?”

“Please listen.”

Then, with an earnest expression, he began to read the poem aloud in a clear, sonorous voice.

“When I looked at the white flowers in the garden, they reminded me of white knights.
Your knight fork on move thirty-nine was truly beautiful.
I want to play chess with you again.
I will never forget how you moved the pieces.
—Robert Winkel”

He’d modulated his baritone to sound pointlessly sweet. The classroom went dead silent; his words seemed to echo across the space. The other students, in the middle of their chess games, listened with bated breath.

Elliott, in the seat right next to Monica, looked like he had no idea what to say. And Benjamin was muttering to himself, “Was that a poem? Really? But it had no *music*… No *beauty*…”

“Robert Winkel, please be quiet during matches,” warned Professor Boyd brusquely.

Robert obediently hung his head. “Yes, sir. I’m terribly sorry for making a nuisance of myself in this sacred hall of chess. Please forgive me. I wanted to convey my feelings to her as soon as possible.”

Monica, now the center of attention, felt a stinging pain in her stomach. From context, she figured Robert’s poem was his way of telling her he wanted to play another game of chess with her.

If he’s just asking for a match… That’s, um, that’s fine, right?

As she wondered what to do, Robert took out another piece of paper and held it out to her. “And please take this.”

“Um, err, what is it?”

“It is a sketch of my family’s dogs. Not to brag, but I believe I

drew them quite well."

Monica gingerly took the paper, which was folded in half, and gently spread it out. On it were three…objects…of some sort that seemed to have four legs each. According to Robert, they were his family's pet dogs. On the whole, the drawing was jagged, with many harsh lines. It would have given Cyril Ashley's blobby sketches a run for their money.

Umm, he's waiting for me to say if I like the drawing…isn't he? As she wondered what to do, he continued.

"I also ask that you please reconsider the matter of our engagement."

Wait, how did he get there?! Monica was dumbfounded, her mouth agape. Next to her, Elliott and Benjamin paused their game, grave looks on their faces.

"I have a bad feeling," murmured Elliott. "It's the competition all over again. This is going to get very annoying…"

"Ahh, what a disaster," murmured Benjamin. "His approach has a fatal lack of music. He is utterly devoid of sensibility…"

Their words didn't reach Monica. Robert leisurely took a seat across from her and began to arrange the pieces on the board. "Let us begin our match."

"Oh. Uh, okay…"

She didn't understand why he was doing any of this. *I guess he just wants to play chess*, she thought, deciding not to overthink it.

As she slowly set up her side of the board, she glanced at Robert's uniform; it had been bothering her for a while now. "Umm… Isn't it, um, cold to have your sleeves rolled up like that?"

"It is no problem at all. I work out every day."

"Oh. Okay…"

Monica wondered if this was some kind of cultural difference. Perhaps everyone in Landor rolled up their sleeves in the middle of winter.

As she was mulling this over, Robert spoke again, as if he'd just remembered something. "Oh, yes. There's something else."

"Um, what is it?"

"My brother said I'm pretty big. So I think I will be able to satisfy you, Miss Monica."

What's big, exactly? ……His height?

Confused, Monica simply said, “Oh,” and left it at that.



CHAPTER 5

Third Prince Albert's Big Plan to Make Friends

A week had passed since classes began, and Monica—who'd had to stay alert all day, every day—was utterly exhausted.

First, there was horseback riding class. To keep Felix from finding out about her injured left hand, she'd stayed as far away from him as possible and practiced quietly on her own. Somehow, she'd made it through.

Then there were the times she had to move through the halls from one class to the other. She was always on pins and needles, worried she'd run into her old acquaintance, Huberd Dee. And as soon as she arrived and breathed a sigh of relief, Robert would ask to play chess with her.

Robert had just transferred into the first year of the advanced course, and he stood out more than Monica had anticipated. Being from the Kingdom of Landor alone made him a novelty, but he also quickly climbed to the top of his grade in swordsmanship class, and he got excellent grades in regular classes, too. With a boy like that coming to visit Monica day after day, it would have been stranger if there *weren't* any rumors.

When Lana saw her stricken face and asked Monica if everything was all right, she'd been able to tell her about her problems with Robert, at least. But telling someone didn't make it any easier to deal with.

So on days when she didn't have any student council work, Monica would slip out of the classroom before Robert arrived and spend her time in the library instead. Serendia Academy's library was huge and well-stocked; it was a great place for killing time, and there were plenty of spots to hide.

Serendia had separate buildings for the advanced course and the intermediate course, and both were connected to the library via covered walkways.

The library at her old school, Minerva's, had more books related to magecraft, but Serendia had many, *many* more on

every other subject. Every time Monica visited the library, she found herself quietly overwhelmed by its collection.

Today, she was looking for a book on biology. She needed a lot more knowledge on the subject to properly understand her father's book. She was hoping to look up some of the terms she hadn't understood and read through some of the essays he'd quoted.

And maybe I'll learn something about the Black Grail…

There had been a message tucked in her father's book—she suspected it was written by Porter, the owner of the bookstore where she'd gotten it. *Visit the shop again when you discover the truth of the Black Grail.* Monica had no idea what the Black Grail was, but she assumed it was linked to her father's research, since the note had been stuck in *his* book. And so, while she did her research, she was also secretly checking to see if the words "Black Grail" meant anything in the realm of biology.

I can't ask Miss Hilda. She doesn't want me looking into Dad's death… I have to search for this on my own.

She found one of the books she was after and opened it up to check the contents. As she did so, pain shot through her left hand, and she grimaced. Her grip strength was still weak, so it was hard to hold open a thick book like this one. Deciding she couldn't stand in the aisle to read, she took the book back to a reading space.

While looking for a seat, she spotted a familiar head of dirty-blond hair nearby, and her eyes went wide. It was Glenn Dudley. Out of everyone Monica knew, he was the last one she'd expect to find in a library.

He had a book open in front of him, and he seemed to be studying. But the feather pen in his hand remained still, and judging by the scowl on his face, it appeared he was having trouble.

Wondering what he was studying, Monica stole a peek at the open book. When she saw the contents, she inadvertently yelped.

The sound must have gotten Glenn's attention. He looked up from his book and said, "Oh. Monica, are you here to study, too? Wanna sit together?"

"Umm, well…"

Monica quietly took a seat, then glanced again at his book. He

was reading about quick-chanting—an extremely difficult technique. She doubted Glenn would be able to make much use of it at his current level.

"Glenn, are you…studying magecraft?" she asked.

"Sure am," he replied. "I wanted to learn how to quick-chant… Otherwise I'll be useless in real combat."

She looked at his face from the side. His expression was stiff, no sign of his usual cheer. When Monica heard this, the first thing to come to mind was the Magic Corps, a military group specializing in magecraft. The Corps emphasized four main points in their entrance exam: quick-chanting, maintaining two spells at once, knowing spells outside your native element, and flight magecraft. Among those four, quick-chanting was especially crucial.

A mage's greatest weakness was how long it took them to chant. By using quick-chanting, that time could be more than halved, reducing their vulnerability. However, since it involved aggressively abbreviating complex equations, one had to have a very good understanding of the math to pull it off. In other words, it demanded a good aptitude for magical formulae. As far as Monica could tell from the ones Glenn had scattered across his paper, his grasp of formulae was nowhere near what was required.

She thought back to what he'd said a few days ago.

"I couldn't do anything. The prez and the Silent Witch were the ones who beat it!"

He'd been the same old bright and jolly Glenn as he usually was, but now Monica wondered if, on the inside, he was terribly frustrated with himself.

"Um, Glenn, are you…? Well…is what happened with the cursed dragon, um, bothering you?"

"Mmm. Well, that's part of it, but…" He trailed off and let his eyes wander. His expression was bitter, a far cry from his usual jovial attitude. "I guess there's someone I want to beat."

Monica's friend was in need, and she wanted to help him. But if she carelessly started talking about magecraft formulae, it could blow her cover. Monica Norton was supposed to be a layman when it came to magecraft.

But I… Maybe I can, um, just give him a little advice…

Nervously, Monica asked him a question. “Umm, Glenn, why do you suddenly want to learn quick-chanting?”

“Well, I ran into one of the Seven Sages during winter vacation. The Silent Witch.”

Monica’s shoulders nearly jerked, but she desperately stifled the movement.

Glenn spoke softly, his gaze fixed on the book in front of him. “She’s really incredible, you know. With her advice, I learned how to maintain two spells at once.”

Monica blinked at him. He was right—she’d given him a tiny bit of advice at Duke Rehnberg’s mansion. She’d seen him secretly practicing after the cursed dragon was defeated, and he’d still had a ways to go. But it seemed he’d kept at it all winter break.

“Glenn, that’s amazing,” said Monica. Maintaining two spells simultaneously was easier said than done. It had taken Monica longer to learn that than it had to learn unchanted magecraft.

But Glenn only smiled bitterly at her candid praise. The expression didn’t suit him. His smile was supposed to be full of joy.

“I was useless in Rehnberg,” he said. “I didn’t even leave a scratch on that dragon… The Silent Witch had to use her unchanted magecraft to protect everyone.”

Monica stiffened. *That isn’t true, Glenn. I…*

She remembered how much pain he’d been in when the curse enveloped him. *She* hadn’t been strong enough to release him from that curse.

I couldn’t protect you.

And despite that, Glenn had nothing but respect for the Silent Witch.



At last, Glenn looked up from his book, and his face softened into a bashful smile. He scratched his cheek and said, “I can’t use unchanted magecraft like she can, but if I can learn to do quick-chanting, well… I thought that might bring me closer to her level. So now that I can keep up two spells at once, I figured I’d try that next—”

Before she could think, Monica was speaking. “Glenn, you’re wrong.”

“Huh? Um, I am?” he asked, surprised. Monica’s tone was more forceful than usual.

She looked him straight in the eye. “Both quick-chanting and unchanted magecraft aren’t as big a deal as you’re making them out to be.”

“Huh?”

“They’re *only* ways to speed up your magecraft. That’s all.”

Monica might be the only one in the world who could use unchanted magecraft, but she didn’t see it as all that valuable. The main benefit was that it let you cast quickly and in secret. That was all. The way she saw it, the technique was about the same as using a magical item that required only mana to activate it.

“It won’t matter how quick you are if your attacks don’t land,” she said. “I think the next thing you should study is how to use tracking formulae.”

Tracking formulae, as the name implied, were magical formulae that caused an attack spell to home in on its target. It was extremely handy when aiming at something moving and especially suited to facing off against someone in a confined space. This homing capability wasn’t infallible—far from it—but compared to firing a spell straight ahead, it was substantially more accurate.

Attack spells by themselves generally had very low accuracy. That was why it was incredibly difficult, even for high mages, to land a shot right between a dragon’s eyes—their only weak spot.

“Quick-chanting is very hard to learn,” Monica continued, “since each spell needs to be shortened in a different way. But tracking formulae are readily adaptable to many different attack spells. If you’re going to learn something, you should absolutely start with those.”

Glenn stared at her, eyes wide, as she rattled off all this information.

Once she was done, Monica paled. *Noooo! I… I went way too far! I just wanted to give him a little indirect advice, that's all!* Her gaze wandered as she desperately tried to come up with an excuse.

"…Or, um, that's what Lord Cyril told me once, I think," she finished.

"Oh, I see! He's great at magecraft, so if he says so, it must be right! …Actually, wait. Monica, are you studying magecraft, too?"

"No! Not at all! Not even in the slightest! I know absolutely nothing about magecraft! …It was just small talk! Lord Cyril and I were making small talk, and that was…where the conversation took us, I guess…"

Such a topic would never pass as small talk, of course, but Glenn didn't seem to doubt her. "I see!" he said, fully convinced.

He was so simpleminded, it hurt. But his simplemindedness had just saved her. Monica breathed a sigh of relief.

"Also," she said, "if you're going to study tracking formulae, there is a book on the subject by Mr. Gideon Rutherford that's very easy to understand… At least, that's what Lord Cyril said! As small talk!"

"Oh, I see. I'm gonna read that first thing."

Glenn stood up and scratched his cheek. He was looking down at Monica, a little embarrassed. "Thanks, Monica. I was a little out of sorts there… I almost started doing everything in the wrong order."

"…?"

"Well, when I saw the Silent Witch and all the amazing things she could do, I jumped straight into thinking about how cool it'd be if I could do the same. But with magecraft, you really have to spend every day hammering down the fundamentals a little at a time, don't you?"

The last bit sounded like Glenn was trying to convince himself.

Monica smiled. Then, playing with her fingers, she said softly, "Umm, well… I don't know anything about magecraft… Nothing at all… But magecraft formulae are similar to mathematical formulae, so I might be able to help, um, explain it a little…if you want."

Monica knew she was walking a dangerous tightrope. She needed to maintain her cover. But she really wanted to help her friend, to what little extent she could.

She also wanted to atone for her failure to save him in Rehnberg. But more than that, she just wanted to help a fledgling mage grow.

"Wow, that would be great," said Glenn. "Thanks, Monica!"

"…No problem. Heh-heh."

Glenn's happy grin proved infectious, and a clumsy smile spread across Monica's face.

A boy was watching Monica and Glenn's exchange from the shadows. He wore the intermediate course's uniform and had soft, curly brown hair.

So those are the ones Prince Felix likes so much. Lady Monica Norton and Lord Glenn Dudley.

The boy leisurely turned and left the library; then he headed back to the intermediate school building.

* * *

Albert Frau Roberia Ridill—the kingdom's third prince—had transferred into Serendia Academy at the end of winter break. He now sat in a private tea salon, sipping on a cup of black tea. Both the tearooms and the classrooms at this school were much larger and more relaxed than the ones at Minerva's, where he'd been before. They were much more finely furnished, too. He could sense the influence of the school's director, Duke Clockford, in all these minor details, and it made him snort in distaste.

Duke Clockford was the second prince's grandfather and one of the most influential men in the kingdom. Now that Albert's mother was cooperating with him, Albert had been forced to transfer here. He was essentially a hostage, and he didn't like it.

As he sipped his tea, irritated, he heard a knock at the door.

"Lord Albert! I'm baaack!" called a boy, his words slow and drawn out.

The boy—Patrick, Albert's servant—made his way into the salon.

Albert returned his cup to its saucer and asked hopefully, "Did you figure out Felix's weakness?"

Patrick took a seat across from him, poured some tea into a cup for himself, and then tossed a sweet into his mouth. "*Mmph*... Okay, this is my repooort!"

"Don't talk while chewing! You're getting crumbs everywhere. It's unsightly!"

"Okaaay."

Unfazed, Patrick began flipping through a notebook. "All right," he said. "Fiiirst, here's what people think of Prince Felix."

"You can skip all the positive stuff. Get to the criticism."

"Well, you seee, nobody at this school is going to say mean things about him or talk about his weaknesses. After allll, this whole school is under Duke Clockford's control."

That made sense. Albert ground his teeth in frustration.

Patrick kept flipping through the pages at a nice, slow pace. "He ranks highly in general subjects, swordsmanship, and horseback riding. He's accomplished a lot as the student council president, too. He's friendly and good-natured. There's nooothing to complain about."

Indeed. Compared to First Prince Lionel, Felix was rather slim. But his sword skills were excellent, and he was an accomplished rider. Even Albert, who saw Felix as a threat, didn't have any particular complaints about him.

But there was an eerie, inhuman quality to his brother. He looked at his two siblings, and even at the king, like they were strangers... At least, that was how Albert felt.

"What about his relationships with girls? Has he laid a hand on anyone?"

"Hmm... Well, everyone says the two most likely candidates to marry him are Lady Eliane Hyatt, daughter of Duke Rehnberg, and Bridget Greyham, daughter of Marquess Shaleberry... But it's not actually all that cleeear."

At the school festival's after-party, Felix had danced with Eliane first, and he'd gone to Rehnberg for the winter holidays. In that sense, Eliane seemed to have the upper hand, but no engagement had been announced.

“Miss Eliane is the right one for him,” said Albert. “I know it.”

“You sure do like Lady Bridget, don’t you?”

“Don’t be daft, Patrick! You’re not supposed to say what you’re thinking out loud!” Albert scolded his servant, his white cheeks as red as a pair of apples. But then he caught himself and cleared his throat unnaturally. “*Ahem*. Don’t you have any other information I could use?”

“Aaactually, come to think of it, Prince Felix is fond of two students in particular.”

“Really?”

“The first is Lord Glenn Dudley, a second-year in the advanced course. He’s the Barrier Mage’s pupil, and he was with the prince in Rehnberg as his bodyguard.”

Albert’s eyes began to sparkle, and he stood up slightly from his chair. “I know that name! He’s the one who played the hero Ralph at the school festival!”

“Apparently, the prince recommended him for the part.”

Albert had attended the Serendia Academy festival on orders from his mother. The first half of the play had been nothing to write home about, but in the second half, the lead actor was switched out and the special effects started flying! There was an explosion, and then Ralph used flight magecraft to rescue Amelia, the heroine. When he’d seen that, Albert had been unable to conceal his excitement.

The third prince had been an honors student at Minerva’s, and he got pretty good grades in magecraft, too. But flight magecraft was something he’d always been bad at and had never managed to learn. So when he’d seen Glenn flying around like that, he’d been thoroughly impressed. The boy had looked just as cool as the real hero, Ralph.

“That’s not fair, Felix! It’s not fair that you have amazing people like him on your side!”

Felix likely intended to make Glenn an aide. That was Albert’s brother for you. He was always two steps ahead.

As Albert gnashed his teeth in frustration, Patrick munched on a cookie and continued his report. “*Mmph*. And the other one. There’s a girl he calls a little squirrel. Apparently, he treats her like a pet.”

“Wh-what?! He’s… He’s using a girl as a p-p-p-pet?!” Albert was

so shocked, he forgot to scold his servant for talking with a cookie in his mouth. “How inhumane! How is such a thing permissible?!”

“Ummm. Well, the little squirrel’s name is Monica Norton. She’s a second-year in the advanced course, and she’s the accountant for the student council. The former Countess of Kerbeck adopted her from a monastery, I hear. She’s a servant of Lady Isabelle Norton, the daughter of Count Kerbeck.”

“Count Kerbeck? Why, he’s a major noble in the eastern provinces! And my brother is using his adopted daughter as a… p-pet…?”

“Lady Isabelle apparently bullies Lady Monica, even at school. I heard seeeveral eyewitness reports of Lady Isabelle yelling at her and putting her down.”

“I… I feel so bad for her… Not only is she treated coldly by the family that took her in, but now Felix is treating her like some kind of pet?”

Albert hung his head for a few moments, aghast. But eventually, he looked up, anger in his eyes, and he made a declaration, bold and loud. “I’ve made up my mind, Patrick. I will win them both over to my camp!”

Felix never showed any sign of weakness, but maybe Glenn or Monica knew something. And even if Albert didn’t get the information he wanted from them, if he pulled Felix’s favorites into his own camp, that was sure to upset his brother.

Albert burned with a fiery determination. Meanwhile, his servant popped the last cookie into his mouth.

* * *

Student council work had been light recently. It would get busier with the general student assembly in two months, but until then, everyone had it relatively easy. At the moment, only Monica and Felix were in the student council room.

Monica sighed wearily as she wrote down numbers in the account book. *Once I’m done with this*, she thought, *I’ll go back to the dorm for the day…*

Her assigned tasks were no trouble, but she was all worn-out from dealing with the two transfer students: Huberd Dee, who knew her identity, and Robert Winkel, who took every opportunity to challenge her to a game of chess. Because of them, Monica had begun to spend her time in the library whenever she was feeling good, and up in her attic dorm or having tea in Isabelle's room whenever she wasn't.

Oh, that's right. Before I go back, I should return this library book. I wonder what I should borrow next…

She was still looking for books on biology to help her understand her father's writings, and hoping to find anything about the Black Grail. It would also be nice to do some magecraft research—she hadn't done any in a while. She'd thought of a way to improve tracking formulae while explaining them to Glenn, and she wanted to test it out. It sounded like just the thing for distracting her from her fear and anxiety regarding the new students.

Once I finish the paper, I'll have Mr. Rutherford look it over.

Gideon Rutherford had been Monica's teacher at Minerva's, and she owed him a great debt. He still occasionally corrected and touched up her essays, and one of his pupils—a talented woman who had begun studying under him before Louis—often gave her advice.

As she reviewed the student council's accounting records, Monica's thoughts drifted to her new tracking formula. *Tracking formulae have a duration of approximately two seconds. If that could be extended, they would be even easier to use…*

"Monica?"

To do that, you'd need to find a balance between duration and accuracy… First, I'll look into improving the tracking capability within a set range…

"Say *ahhh*."

As Monica stared at the accounting records, lost in thought, she felt something soft touch her lip. A scent tickled her nose: fragrant butter and raisins.

If I were to make the effective range equal to the range of an intermediate-level spell… The taste of raisins and the smell of butter…would be calculated using the distance and coordinate axis… Raisins are so tasty…

When Monica ate something, her focus tended to shift to her food. As she began to chew, thoughts of the baked good in her mouth took over. Made of butter cake dough, it was a little firm and had lots of delicious raisins kneaded into it.

When Monica swallowed, she snapped back to reality. “Huh?!”

Her eyes went wide as she noticed Felix’s kind, handsome face right in front of her. He was sitting in the chair across from Monica, resting his chin on his hand, watching her with an amused expression. Apparently, he’d been the one to put that snack in her mouth. If Cyril had been here, he would have been furious. He would surely have said something like, *How dare you ignore the prince?!*

“Pri… Pri-Prin… Prin-Prin-Priprince!” she stammered.

“Oh, that was quite rhythmical. You can have another, if you’d like,” said Felix, offering her a second treat.

Monica hesitated over which hand to reach out, eventually settling on both. In front of Felix, she wanted to pretend, as much as possible, that her left hand didn’t hurt.

“Um, th-thank…you,” she managed.

“You looked like you were somewhere else,” he said. “Is anything bothering you?”

Monica smiled vaguely. The new students were certainly troubling, but there was something even bigger eating away at her—something even more fundamental. And that was Felix himself.

How should I interact with him…? she wondered. Felix was on Duke Clockford’s side, and the duke was almost certainly involved in Monica’s father’s death. Others whispered about Felix, calling him the puppet prince. They were right—he never disobeyed the duke. He couldn’t.

And yet the other face he occasionally showed her—that of Ike—puzzled her and gave her pause.

Back in Corlapton, he’d told her of his interest in magecraft and called her a fellow delinquent. He’d given her that book and that pendant. On the night of the ball, he’d told her that he wanted her to find something exciting, for her own sake and no one else’s. And in Rehnberg, his eyes had sparkled as he showed the Silent Witch his paper.

When I’m talking to Ike…it feels like I’m interacting with a

completely different person…

To one side was Felix, the perfect prince who acted exactly as those around him wished and hid everything behind his gorgeous smile. To the other was Ike, a massive fan of the Silent Witch, who loved magecraft but seemed so ready to give up. The way he switched between these two personas confused her. How should she approach him?

When she fell silent, Felix narrowed his azure eyes, and a chill crept into his smile. “I heard that Robert Winkel seeks you out every day,” he said. “If he’s bothering you, I can mention it to his homeroom teacher.”

“N-no, I’m, um, I’m okay,” said Monica, shaking her head.

Felix chuckled softly. His eyes reflected the light streaming in from the window and glowed like wet gems. “Well, then let me say how I really feel… I’d rather like to hear you ask me for help.”

Despite his words, his voice was bittersweet, as if he was the one pleading.

Monica clenched her fists, enduring the pain. She tried to make herself look strong and stiffened her expression. “I can’t, um, bother you with such things, sir!”

“…I see.”

Felix lowered his long blond eyelashes, casting a shadow across his blue eyes. Monica wondered in the back of her mind if the expression she was seeing belonged to Felix or to Ike.

She stood up. “I, um, I’m done with today’s work, so I’ll be going now. Excuse me.”

As she rushed to organize her things on the desk, Felix studied her with quiet eyes.

* * *

Albert was sitting in the library after school, a book open on the table in front of him. He was pretending to read while keeping an eye on the entrance. A petite girl had just come inside—it was Monica Norton, the student council’s accountant. When Monica noticed Glenn in front of a bookshelf, she went up and spoke to him.

When Albert saw this, he lowered his voice and gave an order to Patrick, who was seated next to him. “Targets spotted. Get into position.”

“Waaait, what position?”

“Just find a good hiding spot among the shelves, got it? Pretend you’re picking out a book.”

“A good hiding spot, huuuh?” repeated Patrick. He leisurely made his way behind a nearby bookshelf.

Once Albert was sure the other boy was hidden, he followed, pretending to look for a book among the shelves. All the while, he kept an eye on his targets—Glenn and Monica. According to Patrick, they frequently studied here together. Serendia Academy’s library was shared between the intermediate and advanced courses, so this was the perfect chance for Albert—who was in the former—to make contact with them.

Okay, let’s do this!

With wonderfully natural movements, Albert approached his targets. Then, as he passed by them, he dropped his handkerchief out of his pocket. Pretending not to realize, he stopped in front of a nearby bookshelf and pretended to search for a book.

He stole a glance their way. Monica seemed to have noticed the handkerchief. She picked it up and, seeming troubled, looked first toward Albert, and then back at the handkerchief.

Yes! Good! Now talk to me!

Albert waited, but Monica kept hesitating. She glanced around, flustered, still holding the handkerchief.

What’s wrong? Just talk to me already. Or are you nervous because I’m royalty?

Monica was, in fact, extremely nervous.

Isn’t that boy Third Prince Albert?! she thought. *Yes, I saw him at the New Year’s ceremony… His eye width, nose length, and jawbone angle all match perfectly… Wh-wh-wh-what should I do? He doesn’t know I’m the Silent Witch, does he? There’s no way, right?! Ahhh, I picked the handkerchief up without thinking. What should I do with it? If I speak to him first, would that be discourteous? I—I wonder if he’ll notice me instead. Just a glance in my direction…!*

Ugh! It’s just a handkerchief! Just give it to me, thought Albert. *This is your chance to talk to an actual, real-life member of the*

royal family. Talk to me. Talk to me! Talk! To! Me!

Oh, I really, really hope he notices! thought Monica. *Please! Please, I'm begging you, notice me!*

Talk to me this instant! thought Albert. *I can't do anything until you talk to me!*

As Albert and Monica stood in a deadlock, thoughts racing through their minds, Glenn turned and saw the item in Monica's hands. "Oh, hey, what's that handkerchief?" he asked.

"That, tha-that person, that person over there, um, dropped it," stammered Monica.

Glenn plucked the handkerchief out of her hands and walked over to Albert. "Hey, you there! You dropped this."

Stifling the impulse to cheer, Albert whipped around. "Ah!" he said. "Yes, that is my handkerchief! My mother gave it to me! You there, thank you so much for picking it up for me. You have my sincere gratitude!"

He spoke so flatly and unnaturally that Patrick, still hiding, chuckled in spite of himself. But Albert, very proud of his effort, continued saying the lines he'd prepared in advance.

"As thanks, I'd like to invite you both to tea. Would that be all right?"

"We just picked up your handkerchief, that's all," said Glenn. "No need for dramatics. Right, Monica?"

Monica, her face breaking out in a cold sweat, nodded vigorously.

But Albert couldn't afford to back down here. "That simply will not do! As Albert Frau Roberia Ridill, third prince of this kingdom, it would be dishonorable to neglect those I am indebted to!"

When Albert casually dropped his royal title, Glenn's eyes widened. He examined Albert's face closely. "The third prince? That would make you…the prez's little brother, right?"

"Indeed, I am! Felix Arc Ridill, president of the student council, is my elder brother."

"Oh, I see. Well, the prez is always looking out for us." Glenn flashed the boy a smile.

Albert pretended to be seeing Glenn's face for the first time and raised his voice. "Ah, now that I've had a good look at you… Are you not Glenn Dudley, the one who played Ralph at the

school festival? Your performance was absolutely stunning. I've always wanted to ask you about it. And the young lady is welcome to come along!"

"Hmm," said Glenn. "We really should get back to studying…"

Albert was getting nowhere. Vexed, he clapped his hands and called out, "Patrick! Patrick!"

"Lord Alberrrt," said Patrick. "You shouldn't be so loud in the library."

Reining in his urge to yell *You're not saying what we planned*, Albert assumed the air of an arrogant master and gave his servant an order. "Show my guests to the tea salon!"

"Yes, sir," he replied. Then, turning to the others, he continued, "I'm so sorry about this, you two. Lord Albert has no friends, so he's not used to inviting people to tea parties."

None of this was in Albert's script, either. He furrowed his brow in frustration, but Glenn and Monica were now looking at him with sympathy.

"Oh, well in that case," said Glenn.

Monica agreed. "If, um, it's just for a little while…"

How did it end up like this? thought Albert. He'd planned to pull this off with such elegance and grace. Why was he now being pitied for his lack of friends?

While he wasn't fully satisfied with the situation, phase one of his master plan had apparently ended in success.

* * *

Patrick led Monica and Glenn to the best private tea salon in the intermediate course building. A bouquet of flowers decorated the table, and tasty-looking sweets were piled on gorgeous, gold-patterned white plates. There was even a cream-filled pie. When Monica thought of pie, she imagined a thin slice of dough spread with jam or fruit. Cream pies were extremely rare. Butter and white sugar were already luxury items, and fresh cream was even harder to get. It was completely out of reach for commoners.

"Go ahead," encouraged Albert. "Take a seat."

Monica and Glenn each took a chair. Monica was making a valiant effort not to grimace, despite the pins and needles she felt in her stomach. *H-has he realized I'm the Silent Witch?* she wondered. *He hasn't, has he? He couldn't have, right?!*

Everything's going according to plan! thought Albert, *I've done a great job getting the two of them here. Now it's time to put my negotiating prowess to the test. I must win both of Felix's favorites over to my side!*

Glenn and Patrick, meanwhile, were both spellbound by the cream pie atop the table.

That looks so good! thought Glenn.

I can't wait to eat that, thought Patrick.

As everyone's minds raced, Albert's tea party began. The first one to open his mouth was Glenn.

"Don't mind if I do!" he said, ignoring good manners and abruptly grabbing some cream pie. After a few bites, he declared, "Wow, this tastes really expensive!"

There was cream all around Glenn's mouth. Monica watched, terribly worried that this would anger Albert.

But the third prince didn't seem to have taken the slightest offense at Glenn's behavior. In fact, he seemed *happy* Glenn was eating the delicacy he'd ordered for the occasion. The young prince sipped his black tea, looking rather smug.

Monica stealthily observed him. He had straight blond hair, hazel eyes, and an air of competitiveness. Though Albert was also a prince, he didn't much resemble his brother. Like most boys his age, he wore his emotions on his sleeve. This was the exact opposite of Felix, who was impossible to read.

"Monica, this pie is amazing!" exclaimed Glenn.

"Oh, um, I, uhhh…" Monica thought it might be best to wait until the person of highest rank began eating.

"Patrick," said Albert.

Patrick smiled, then took the biggest plate of pie and picked up a fork. "Hooray! Thank you!" he said.

"Not that, dummy! Get some for Miss Norton!"

"Oh. Yes, sir!" Shrewdly keeping his own food close, Patrick took another slice of pie and put it on Monica's plate.

Albert looked toward Monica, sniffing proudly. "You may eat, Miss Norton. I know Count Kerbeck doesn't feed you very well."

“N-no, that, that isn’t…”

Monica shook her head. But to the others, it just looked like she was trying to protect the count’s good name.

Albert gazed at her with sympathy. “No need for that. I’ve heard the rumors. It seems that not only are you neglected by House Norton, but you are treated as…um, as a p-pet by the student council.”

“A pet?!” Monica was speechless.

Albert’s voice fell to a mutter. He looked a little embarrassed. “I had no idea that my brother had such depraved tastes. I’m sure he forces you to do all kinds of things, shameless things that I can’t even imagine… No, we needn’t discuss it. I am a man of discretion, and I would not force a lady to speak of such things. But if it’s painful, if it’s a struggle, I would prefer it if you were honest and said so.”

“Um… Uh, what?”

Monica didn’t know what Albert was imagining, but she got the feeling he was leaping to all kinds of conclusions.

As Monica reeled at Albert’s shocking statements, the two gluttonous boys were having a leisurely chat of their own.

“You see, with this pie,” said Patrick, “if you slather on some strawberry jam, you can make it even more delicious!”

“What a perfect balance of sweet and tart!”

“Yes, I could eat the whole pie! Oh, here, let me pour you some more tea.”

What a peaceful world they lived in. Monica wished she could visit that world. But she couldn’t leave Albert with all these misunderstandings.

“Um, I… Er, about the prince, it’s…” She struggled to answer. After all, she couldn’t exactly say they were fellow delinquents.

Albert’s eyes looked sad. “Miss Norton, will you not leave my brother’s service and enter into my patronage instead? I can promise you three meals a day if you do—and snacks.”

What now? Felix had been made into a villain, all because of Monica. She had to support him somehow. But she got the distinct feeling that anything she said would only dig this hole even deeper.

As she stammered out some more “ums” and “ahs,” Glenn downed his tea, exhaled loudly, and then got in his own two

cents. “The prez is a good person! He’s no villain!”

“But the rumors…,” began Albert, refusing to back down.

With cream still all over his mouth, Glenn made a serious face and spoke clearly. “I don’t know much about rumors, but I can tell the prez is a good guy just by looking at him.”

How nice, thought Monica. She looked down, privately mocking herself. *I wish I could just come out and say that I think the prince is a good person.* But the shadow of Duke Clockford hung over her, keeping her from trusting the prince. It made her angry with herself.

Albert, on the other hand, seemed frustrated with Glenn’s comment and frowned. Deep wrinkles formed on his forehead.

“…It’s always like this,” he murmured. “Everyone always takes his side.”

His earlier arrogance was gone now, and he spoke like a sulking child.

Patrick placed a plate of pie in front of him. “Lord Albert, sweets are perfect for when you’re depressed.”

“I’m not depressed!” cried the third prince. “Why would I be depressed?!”

“And I’ll put lots of strawberry jam on it, okay?”

“I like apricot jam better!” huffed Albert, regaining some of his energy.

Glenn, who was licking the cream off his mouth, turned to the third prince. “So basically,” he said, “you want to be friends with Monica, right?”

“Um, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t…,” said Monica softly.

Ignoring her, Glenn beat a hand against his chest. “Now that we’ve shared some delicious food, we’re already friends! Me, Monica, Albert, and Patrick. We’re all friends!”

Could a statement like that count as lèse-majesté? Monica began to sweat.

“Friends…,” muttered Albert to himself. And then, as if to confirm, he looked at Monica. “Miss Norton, allow me to ask you something. You are not friends with Felix, correct?”

“Umm, well, Prince Felix is my upperclassman, and I respect him a lot…”

“Then you’re *not* friends, yes? So if you become friends with me… Yes, that is sure to frustrate him.”

Albert said the last part very quietly, and Monica had trouble making it out. Then he nodded to himself, satisfied, and took an elegant sip of tea.

"I see. Then we're friends. Yes, friends… Friends indeed. In that case, I wouldn't mind inviting you to another tea party in the future. After all, we *are* friends."

"Lord Albert, I'm so happy for you," said Patrick.

"Heh-heh. I'm in a good mood, so I suppose I'll allow you to have some more pie, Patrick."

"Oh, um. I'm sorry. We ate all of it already."

"But what about my seconds?!"

Glenn watched as Albert flew into a childish rage and Patrick responded with his usual relaxed attitude.

"You two really get along well," he said with a grin.

Um, anyway, thought Monica, *this means my cover isn't blown… right?*

She breathed a sigh of relief, then took the first bite of her slice of cream pie.



CHAPTER 6

The Kidnapping of Monica Norton

Byron Garrett, the president of Serendia Academy's magic-battle club, dashed through the woods that served as the club's training grounds.

In a magic battle, only magecraft-based attacks were effective—a special barrier ensured it. Because of that, the enemy's strikes couldn't hurt you. But you could still feel pain, and more importantly, you lost an amount of mana proportional to the damage you took.

As you might expect of the club's president, Byron was one of the best combatants in the school. Right now, however, he was almost out of mana.

What's going on? What are *these attacks?*

Near Byron, other members of the club were going down one after another. The strikes were coming at an unbelievable pace, and the attacker wasn't even in their club.

He was a new student who had suddenly barged in after classes and challenged them to a magic battle.

"Hmm, hm, hm. Hmm, hmm…"

The new student hummed a tune and waggled his finger. Flaming arrows rained down on Byron. They were coming incredibly fast.

How is this happening?!

Magecraft required chanting. But this guy couldn't be chanting—he was *humming*!

It's almost like…

Only one person in the world was able to use magecraft without chanting. And that person was one of the Seven Sages.

"The Silent Witch?" said Byron in spite of himself.

The new student tossed his head back and began to cackle.

He's vulnerable! Byron quick-chanted a flame spell. But the moment the fireball appeared in his hands, more fiery arrows zoomed at him from behind his opponent.

Ugh, again! He didn't chant!

Byron began chanting the spell for a defensive barrier to block the arrows, but he didn't make it in time. They plunged into his arm and shoulder. While they wouldn't leave a mark, they still hurt like hell. It felt like they were gouging out his flesh and then broiling it. Meanwhile, his mana reserves plummeted. Then he collapsed to the ground.

The new student sighed. "That wasn't very exciting," he said. "I expected more from such a famous school. If this is the level of the students here, it's pathetic. Minerva's was way better."

Those words lit a wrathful flame in Byron's heart. He felt humiliated. He could admit he'd been powerless against the new student, but he couldn't stand by while the boy insulted his school.

"Listen, new kid! Don't underestimate Serendia Academy…" He clawed at the ground, barely holding on to consciousness. He was lying facedown, and dirt got in his mouth as he spoke. Not that he cared. "There are…students here that are better than me…"

Like Cyril Ashley, who used ice magecraft, and Glenn Dudley. The latter's abilities were still unknown, but he was a Sage's apprentice.

I'm sure this guy wouldn't stand a chance…against them…

The new student looked down at Byron. "Are they monsters?" he asked coldly.

"…What?"

"I'm *asking* if they've got a screw loose. If they're cold, merciless, and arrogant. You know, monsters."

What was he talking about? "Sounds like…you're the monster here…"

"Oh, right, I get it. None of you have ever seen a *real* monster, huh?"

As the new boy finished his sentence, a piercing voice cut through the woods.

"This is the student council! We received word of an out-of-control magic battle taking place in the training grounds! Disengage the barrier at once and suspend combat!"

This was Byron's rival—Cyril Ashley. As Byron listened, his consciousness faded.

* * *

Monica had a hard time speaking. She was always stammering, barely able to get out her thoughts. But the words she was about to say were important and the last thing she wanted to stumble over. She'd been practicing them in secret for a few days now.

She tensed her core, then opened her mouth.

"Lana… Happy birthday!"

As her friend breathed heavily from nerves and excitement, Lana broke into a smile and said, "Thank you."

About two weeks after classes began came the fourth day of the fourth week of the month of Alteria—Lana Colette's birthday. It just so happened there was no student council meeting that day, so Monica, Lana, and Claudia borrowed a private tea salon after school. Now they were having a tea party to celebrate.

Claudia had been the one to reserve the salon and prepare the tea and snacks. Monica had brought coffee brewed in her father's pot—the coffee Lana had once said was delicious.

"And, um, here's a present," said Monica, taking a sachet out of her pocket and holding it out to her friend.

"Oh, thank you. A rose sachet? It's so cute!"

"Heh-heh…"

The small bag was made of unbleached fabric, tied with a pink ribbon, and filled with rose petals.

Monica had asked the fifth Witch of Thorns to share some of his roses with her, and she'd used the petals for this sachet. Once Monica told him she wanted to make a present for her friend, Raul had been more than willing to help. "A homemade present for a friend! That's so nice," he'd said.

In other words, this sachet was very special—it was made with roses from the famous Roseburg family that would hold their scent for a very long time. Of course, Lana had no way of knowing that.

"It smells nice," she said, smiling. "And thank you as well, Claudia. I never thought you, of all people, would set up a tea party."

"How nice it would be if arranging it were all one had to do… Happy birthday."

“Yes, yes. Thank you.”

Lana seemed to have grown accustomed to Claudia’s difficult personality. She simply thanked her for her efforts, then began drinking the coffee Monica had prepared. She’d added plenty of milk, of course.

“I really love your coffee, Monica,” said Lana. “I bet it would be really popular if you sold it at a coffeehouse.”

“Heh-heh. You, um, you think so?” said Monica.

“You remember I went to Southerndole during the break, right? Well, they import all sorts of different coffee beans, and yet it was still hard for me to find any I actually liked…”

Southerndole was a large port city located in the west of Ridill. Lana explained that she wanted to start up a business there after she graduated from Serendia, and that she’d gone during the break to conduct a preliminary inspection.

“Oh, yes,” said Lana. “I also attended a meeting of merchants there. It seems many traders have been packing up and moving to the Empire lately. The new emperor likes novelties, so he’s been lowering tariffs and giving merchants preferential treatment.”

“And our foreign affairs ministry is raising a stink because of the lower tariffs, aren’t they?” added Claudia.

“That’s right. The merchants at the meeting wanted to start up a new business venture in Southerndole to try and fight back. My father intends to invest in them as well.”

Monica couldn’t quite wrap her head around what Lana and Claudia were talking about. She sat, quietly sipping her coffee, until Lana cast a glance in her direction.

“So, Monica,” she said. “What are *you* thinking of doing after graduation?”

“…Huh?”

Monica’s eyes widened. She hadn’t expected this question. She’d never considered such things. She was only at school to protect Felix. Once Felix graduated, her mission would be over, and Monica would go back to her life as one of the Seven Sages.

She smiled awkwardly at this stark reminder. “Um, I haven’t really…thought of anything yet.”

“Then why not help me with my work?”

“Huh?” said Monica, surprised.

Lana pursed her lips and began to twirl her hair with a finger. “Well, you’re good with numbers, right? I was thinking you could handle the accounting. And I’m, uh, not just saying that because we’re friends or anything,” she said quickly.

“…Indeed,” murmured Claudia. “Monica has experience as a Serendia Academy student council member. What’s more, she’s serving during the second prince’s term. That will win you a lot of trust with any noble clients.”

Apparently, being on the student council at Serendia carried more weight than Monica had thought. According to Claudia, many government officials and ministers working in the court had been student council members. Now Monica understood why so many students aspired to join the council.

“That’s right,” murmured Lana. “Former student council members are in very great demand. And it would be heartening to have Monica with me.”

Monica’s heart leaped at those last words. Lana was relying on her. Lana said it would be heartening to have Monica with her. Lana *needed* her.

…That makes me happy.

But as joy welled up within her, guilt stabbed at her heart. Monica would be leaving school in half a year. She wouldn’t even be able to graduate alongside Lana.

“Well, it’s over a year away,” Lana continued. “Give it some thought. If you need Count Kerbeck’s permission, I can help persuade him.”

Apparently, Lana had misinterpreted Monica’s grimace as concern about her family’s approval. Monica gave her a vague smile and a nod in response. But she knew she’d never be able to take her friend up on her offer.

As Monica was leaving the tea salon with Lana and Claudia after their humble birthday party, she heard shouting from down the hall. It was Cyril.

“Argh! Where did you go?! Present yourself at once and submit to questioning!”

Cyril was far enough away that even Monica, with her sharp

eyes, could only make him out by the color of his hair. His voice, however, was so loud, it sounded like he was right next to her.

Upon hearing her elder brother's apoplectic shouting, Claudia —with the languor of someone who had spent all her energy for the day—murmured, "I wonder when he'll realize that voice of his is an institution of the school…"

"Come on, that's going a little far," Lana quietly chided her.

Claudia smiled, her eyes hollow. "Yes, you're right. An institution can be positive… Allow me to correct myself. It's a *nuisance*."

Usually, when Cyril was shouting, he was scolding Glenn. This time, however, Glenn was nowhere in sight.

Has there been some kind of trouble? wondered Monica. If so, then maybe she ought to help out as a member of the student council.

"I'm going to go, um, check it out," she said, excusing herself and heading toward Cyril. Elliott was with him, rubbing his arms in irritation against the chill coming off Cyril. When Elliott noticed Monica approaching, he raised his hand.

"Heya," he said. "Time for work, little squirrel."

"Um, has something happened?" she asked nervously.

Elliott nodded bitterly. "The new third-year kid went way overboard in a fight against the magic-battle club. Every single member is in the infirmary with mana deficiency."

Monica gasped. The new third-year student. An out-of-control magic battle.

She could think of only one person who fit the bill.

"Um, that student…is his name…?"

"Huberd Dee. He transferred from Minerva's Mage Training Institution."

Monica just barely stopped herself from groaning in dismay. *I knew it. He hasn't changed at all!*

Back when Monica was at Minerva's, Huberd was always going overboard in magic battles. He'd been suspended several times for it.

As Monica paled, Cyril grunted, still giving off waves of rage and cold. "I was told he stubbornly continued to attack his opponents after they were already defeated—a malignant act of the highest degree. Absolutely intolerable."

“By the time Cyril and I heard about it and ran to the grounds, Huberd was already gone,” explained Elliott. “And he hasn’t come back to the dorms, either, so it stands to reason he’s still in the school building.”

And now, Cyril and Elliott were searching for him so they could question him about his actions.

“Anyway, that’s the situation,” concluded Elliott. “Help us out, little squirrel.”

Oh, no. I knew this would happen.

As a member of the student council, Monica couldn’t refuse. But she absolutely couldn’t afford to run into Huberd, either.

“Then, um,” she stammered, “I’ll go look in, um, a different direction…”

“No, we should all move as a group for this,” asserted Cyril immediately.

Elliott nodded. “Yeah. You wouldn’t be able to do much by yourself even if you *did* find him.”

“…Aw…”

Monica fidgeted with her fingers, beginning to sweat. What should she do now? She couldn’t think of a good way out. At this point, her best options were to pray they didn’t find Huberd or run and hide as soon as they did.

Please, keep him away from us!

As she followed Cyril and Elliott, she covertly touched her left ear—the secret signal to let Isabelle and the servants of House Norton know she needed help.

Unfortunately, Isabelle was nowhere nearby. Perhaps one of her servants would notice, but it would be difficult for them to interfere while Monica was with the other student council members.

I’ll just…have to get through this on my own…

First, their group of three traveled in a big circle around the school building’s second story, where the tea salons were located, then they headed to the first floor. With each step she took down the stairs, Monica glanced in front of and behind her. Once they were at the bottom, Elliott spoke up, sounding irritated.

“You’re acting more suspicious than usual, little squirrel.”

“Hwah? Oh, umm, well, I…”

As she hemmed and hawed, Elliott smirked. “Hah. I bet it has

to do with the new kid."

"…?!"

Had he found out that she and Huberd knew each other? Monica panicked.

Then Elliott put on an understanding look. "I suppose Robert Winkel *has* been harassing you every day, begging you to play chess."

Oh, that *new student, I see… Thank goodness. He doesn't know…* Monica tried to calm her pounding heart.

Cyril looked down at her sternly. That face usually meant he was about to scold her. She prepared herself, but his voice was surprisingly calm. "Accountant Norton," he said. "If Robert Winkel is bothering you in any way, call me immediately. I will deal with him appropriately."

Those weren't the words Monica had expected. She looked at him blankly.

Elliott looked at Cyril with a teasing smile. "You know what, Mr. Vice President? You're a real worrywart."

"If someone is making trouble for my underclassman, then it's only natural to worry."

He's…worried about me…

Once, Monica's image of an upperclassman had been none other than Huberd Dee. Huberd was selfish and cruel, the type to drag her kicking and screaming to the magic battle arena whenever he pleased. So having an upperclassman worry about her like this gave her a tingly feeling in her chest.

"Um, thank you, Lord Cyril," she said with a quick bow.

Cyril sniffed as if to say no thanks were needed—that his concern was a matter of course. Monica smiled. That was very like Cyril.

And then her face stiffened.

"Hmmm, hm, hm, hm, hmmm."

She heard faint humming from around the corner, toward the front entrance. She would never forget that sound. And it was coming toward them, fast. He was practically right on top of them.

I need to hide!

Monica glanced around, but there was nothing to conceal her. If only they'd been in a classroom. Then she could have used the

desks or the curtains, at least!

The humming and the footsteps were rapidly approaching. There was no time left. Her wide eyes darted back and forth until they stopped on Cyril's and Elliott's backs. With her extraordinary math skills, she could tell at a glance which of them was bigger.

She swiftly ran behind Elliott and made herself as small as she possibly could.

* * *

Cyril scowled at the eerie humming, just as the source of the noise rounded the corner and came into view. He was a skinny boy with red hair, spiked up like it was on fire—just the one Cyril had been looking for.

"Huberd Dee!" he yelled, spraying chilly air everywhere.

Huberd stopped humming and came to a halt, then looked down at Cyril. Cyril could see how sloppy the boy's uniform was. He wanted to say something about it, but told himself it would be better to start with the bigger issue.

He spoke carefully, his voice hard. "Huberd Dee, I heard you persistently harassed the members of the magic-battle club in a match earlier today. If you have anything to say in your defense, I'll listen. Please come with us."

Huberd observed Cyril closely, scanning him from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes. His gaze was very rude.

As Cyril scowled, Huberd cocked his head to the side. "Hmmm, hm, hm, hm, hmmm? Wait, are you the one who let loose all this cold air?"

"Hrm. I apologize if I made you feel cold," said Cyril, immediately clutching the broach at his collar.

Cyril had mana hyper-absorption syndrome, which meant he was always emitting his extra mana as cold air. He knew this caused the other students no end of discomfort during the winter, and he felt quite bad about it. He also knew this phenomenon got even worse the more riled up he was.

He took a breath to settle himself, intending to discuss things calmly. But suddenly, Huberd strode up to him and, with his ring-

covered hand, tugged on the ribbon tie near Cyril's neck.

Cyril's calm immediately evaporated. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Made by Emanuel Darwin, the Gem Mage," said Huberd. "A magical item that absorbs mana, then emits it… Hmm. And there's another formula added in that subtly adjusts the effects based on how much mana you have in reserve. The protective formulae are beyond first-class. Someone did real good work on it." Huberd's eyes moved from the broach to Cyril. "You've got mana hyper-absorption syndrome, don't you?"

Cyril didn't much like having someone who wasn't even a medical professional guess his condition so easily. The ailment was something he had a complex about.

As he scowled, Huberd grinned, his malice on full display. "Mana hyper-absorption only happens if you push your body past its limits. If you need help from a magical item, then your symptoms must be pretty severe. How far did you go, exactly? Hmm?"

"Release me this instant!" Cyril swatted the boy's hand away from his ribbon tie.

Huberd bent his slim body and peered into Cyril's face. "Good, very good. Mana hyper-absorption, eh? Hey, let's you and me have a little magic battle."

Before Cyril could reply, Elliott cut in. "Unfortunately, we didn't come here to have a battle with you. I suggest you leave that for class time."

"Hmm? Hmmmm?"

Huberd turned to look at Elliott—and the hem of a female student's skirt poking out from behind him. His condescending eyes widened.

* * *

Please don't let him find me please don't let him find me please don't let him find me!

As Monica hid behind Elliott, her head down and her body trembling, she saw a pair of shoes approach. They weren't Cyril's

—which meant they must have been Huberd's.

"Hm, hm, hmmm?"

She heard a hum as the shoes drew closer. She saw them stop in front of Elliott, only to quickly circle him.

He's gonna find me!

Panicking, Monica burst out from behind Elliott. She had to hide somewhere. Oh, what she wouldn't give for a curtain. She wanted to wrap herself up in the fabric. And just as she was thinking this, what should her eyes fall upon but Cyril's jacket.

It was her only way out. She went behind him, pulled up the hem of his tailcoat, and squeezed herself underneath.

Cyril raised his voice in shock. "What are you doing, Accountant Norton?!" He spun around and moved a few steps away. Monica, flailing, traveled with him, still buried under his jacket.

They moved around the hallway like that for a while, but eventually Cyril stopped.

While Monica was hiding under Cyril's jacket, she failed to notice two things: first, how concerned Cyril looked as he watched her shaking, and second, that someone had come around behind them. And now, that someone's arms were grabbing Monica around the torso and dragging her out from her hiding spot.

Monica paled as a certain someone's voice echoed in her ears.

"Hmmm, hm, hm, hmmm… 'Accountant Norton'?"

"Ah, wah… Ah, ahh…"

Monica, still being held up from behind, turned around. Her gaze met Huberd's.

She could practically see the words in his eyes.

I've found you.

Huberd hoisted her onto his shoulder, then exited the building through the front entrance. This time, instead of his spirited humming, Monica heard a magecraft chant—one used for flight.

"Stop right there, Huberd Dee!" yelled Cyril, chasing after him.

Monica reached a trembling hand out to Cyril. But she was too late. Huberd's flight spell activated, and he floated into the air, still carrying her.

Lord Cyril…!

She hadn't even managed to cry for help.

* * *

Third Prince Albert Frau Roberia Ridill was standing on one foot in the covered corridor leading to the library building.

"Are you *sure* this will help me learn flight magecraft, Dudley?" he demanded, somewhat suspicious.

"Flying is all about balance!" said Glenn confidently. "First, I want you to practice going straight down the corridor using only one leg."

Next to Albert was Patrick. He wasn't planning to learn flight magecraft, but he was having a lot of fun hopping around on one foot anyway. "Lord Alberrrt, let's have a raaace!"

"Argh! You're on! Hah!"

The two boys began to hop down the corridor. But then, after only a few hops, Albert lost his balance and fell on his backside.

Patrick, who was a little bit ahead of him, turned around. He was still on one foot. "Lord Albert, are you okaaay?"

"Curses! Patrick, you're not supposed to go ahead of your master!"

As Albert shouted, Patrick put on a puzzled expression and looked up toward the sky. "Huh?"

Had he spotted a rare bird or something? Albert picked himself up and started yelling again. "How dare you look away when your master is talking, Patrick!"

"That person's using flight magecraft, too. Looook," said Patrick, pointing.

He was right. Someone was soaring through the air. A male red-haired student in an untidy uniform, with a girl thrown over his shoulder. She was short and had light-brown hair—and Albert recognized her.

"Is that…Miss Norton?" he said.

Monica was flailing, trying desperately to escape the boy's hold. Unfazed, the boy cut through the air above the covered corridor and flew into the woods.

Glenn scowled as a powerful anger crept into his voice.

"Why, you…!"

He quickly chanted a flight spell and launched off in pursuit.

* * *

In the student council room, Felix Arc Ridill scanned through a report in between clerical tasks. It was for an investigation he'd personally requested into the girl with the injured left hand.

The Silent Witch—Lady Everett—is here at Serendia Academy.

Even the second prince was struggling to account for every student's whereabouts during the incident in Rehnberg. The investigation was going to take a lot more time. It was frustrating, but he could feel himself getting ever closer to his idol, and that brought joy to his heart.

Ah, I want to see her true face soon. I want to hear her voice. What should I talk about first when I meet her? I want her to tell me about the Alteria chimes she created for the New Year's magecraft dedication, about what kind of formula she used to adjust the ice's strength and move them all individually. And her curse-resistant barrier, the one she used during our confrontation with the cursed dragon—that was spectacular, too. She must be a true genius to come up with a spell like that so quickly. I want to ask her about the basic arrangement of the barrier's elements…

A lonely sigh escaped him as he flipped through the report. Essentially, it stated that there had been no further progress.

Just then, the door to the council room burst open and Elliott Howard rushed in.

"Hi, Elliott," said Felix calmly. "What's the matter?"

Elliott clawed madly at his olive-brown hair and muttered, "It's an emergency."

Felix wasn't especially perturbed by this. After all, his meeting with the Silent Witch was close at hand. In the face of such bliss, all other problems seemed trivial.

Elliott's face twisted with panic and pessimism as he addressed the confident prince. "The new guy kidnapped the little squirrel," he said.

Felix froze, his azure eyes widening.

* * *

Huberd arrived in the section of Serendia's woods used for practical magecraft classes, still carrying Monica. When they touched down, he let her off his shoulder but didn't release her. From behind her, he reached around and grabbed her jaw with his left hand, then squeezed her cheek with his right.

"Heeey. Been a while, Everett."

Monica made little whimpering noises in her throat.

Huberd was one of the reasons she'd shut herself away in Professor Rutherford's laboratory during her time at Minerva's. After all, whenever their eyes met, he'd drag her off to the magic battle training grounds whether she wanted to go or not.

I'm scared I'm scared I'm scared I'm scared I'm scared…

Ah, but she couldn't keep quiet. She had to tell him she was on a top secret mission and ask him not to get in her way.

Mustering up every last ounce of her courage, she managed to squeeze out a few words. "R-right now, I'm, um, Monica Norton. I'm on an important mission, and I'm…in disguise. S-so please, don't, don't call me Everett."

Huberd fell silent and appeared to think for a moment, though his hand on Monica's jaw stayed firmly in place.

Eventually, he spoke, addressing a point above her head, as if talking to himself. "Hm-hm-hmm… If my uncle had known you were at Serendia Academy on a mission, he'd have warned me not to cause you any problems…"

Though they didn't look much alike, Huberd's uncle was Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage—one of the Seven Sages like Monica.

"If he doesn't know, that means it's a political matter being kept secret even from the other Sages… Come to think of it, the second and third princes are both here, too, aren't they? …Hmm. That means you're probably either protecting one of them, or investigating one of them, right?"

Huberd looked and acted like a ruffian, but he was extremely sharp. He could understand the whole picture from only a few fragments. It seemed he hadn't changed since Monica's time at Minerva's.

"Please," she begged. "Don't t-tell anyone about me…"

"Oh, yeah, sure. I'll keep quiet for you. Won't tell a soul."

In her despair, Monica spotted a ray of hope.

Ahh, she thought. *Back then, he wouldn't listen to anyone. Maybe he's softened up a little after all this time.*

She didn't notice him licking his lips just over her head.

"That said," he continued, "if we're going to make a deal, there's gotta be something in it for me, too, right?"

"…Huh?"

The fingers around her jaw tightened. She froze; she had a bad feeling about this. A cold northerly wind blew past her feet—no, wait. That wasn't the wind.

"Release my underclassman at once."

The voice was familiar, but instead of its usual clear, sonorous quality, it was now low and thick with rage. Cyril approached them, spreading a chill colder than the north wind, his feet crunching over frost. His eyes seemed to glare with a blue light.

Huberd hummed, sounding delighted. "Hmmm, hm, hm, hm… And what if I say no?"

Cyril quick-chanted as he swung out his right hand. There was a loud, piercing noise, and a long chain of ice burst from the frost-covered ground. It bound Huberd, tying his wrists together.

At the same time, someone overhead yelled, "Monica! Over here!"

Glenn reached down from above and picked her up by the armpits, then carried her away from Huberd and touched down behind Cyril.

Huberd looked at the ice chain binding his hands and grinned. It was eerie how much fun he seemed to be having. Cyril and Glenn watched, their expressions grim.

Just then, footsteps sounded from behind them.

"Transfer student Huberd Dee."

The voice wasn't loud, but it carried. And it, too, was colder than usual.

Trembling, Monica turned to look. Felix Arc Ridill and Elliott Howard were approaching them.

Felix stopped, a chilly smile on his handsome face as he set his gaze on Huberd. "Kidnapping one of our council members isn't very polite," he said. "If you have anything to say in your defense, do so now."

Huberd's grin only grew wider. The ice chaining his hands together jingled.

“I’m a student here,” he said. “And just look at the terrible ordeal I’m going through. Aren’t you going to do anything, Student Council President?”

“What an odd thing to say,” said Felix. “We’ve merely restrained you.”

“This is hardly *kidnapping*,” Huberd continued. “I just wanted to have a nice little chat with a familiar face… Isn’t that right, Monica?”

Monica’s breath caught in her throat. If she insisted that Huberd *had* kidnapped and threatened her, Felix would deal with him appropriately. But then Huberd would probably expose her identity as revenge.

Determined not to speak carelessly, she stood silently until Huberd used a quick-chant. It was a fire arrow spell.

His flaming bolt destroyed the ice chains, and he spread his arms wide as the glittering shards scattered.

“All right. We’ll do things your way,” he said. “With a good, old-fashioned duel. A magic battle it is.” Huberd used a ringed finger to point at Cyril and Glenn in turn. “Come at me. As many as you like. If you can beat me, I’ll stop bothering Monica. But if I beat all of you, she’s mine. And I’ll make her quit the student council.”

Monica, tears welling in her eyes, shook. “N-no, I don’t w-want to quit the student council,” she whimpered.

“Then I’m sure you have no complaints, right, Monica? Hmmm? …You *know* you can’t refuse.”

Monica knew Huberd only wanted to fight them for the fun of it. He’d do anything to get his fix, whether it was provocation or threats—he wasn’t picky. Right now, he was threatening Monica to provoke Cyril and Glenn, and she had no way of stopping him. Not when he knew her weakness: her true identity.

“Fine by me!” Glenn was the first one to take the bait. “I’ll crush you!”

Without wasting a moment, Cyril spoke up, too. “Sir, please give us permission to duel.”

“Very well,” said the prince.

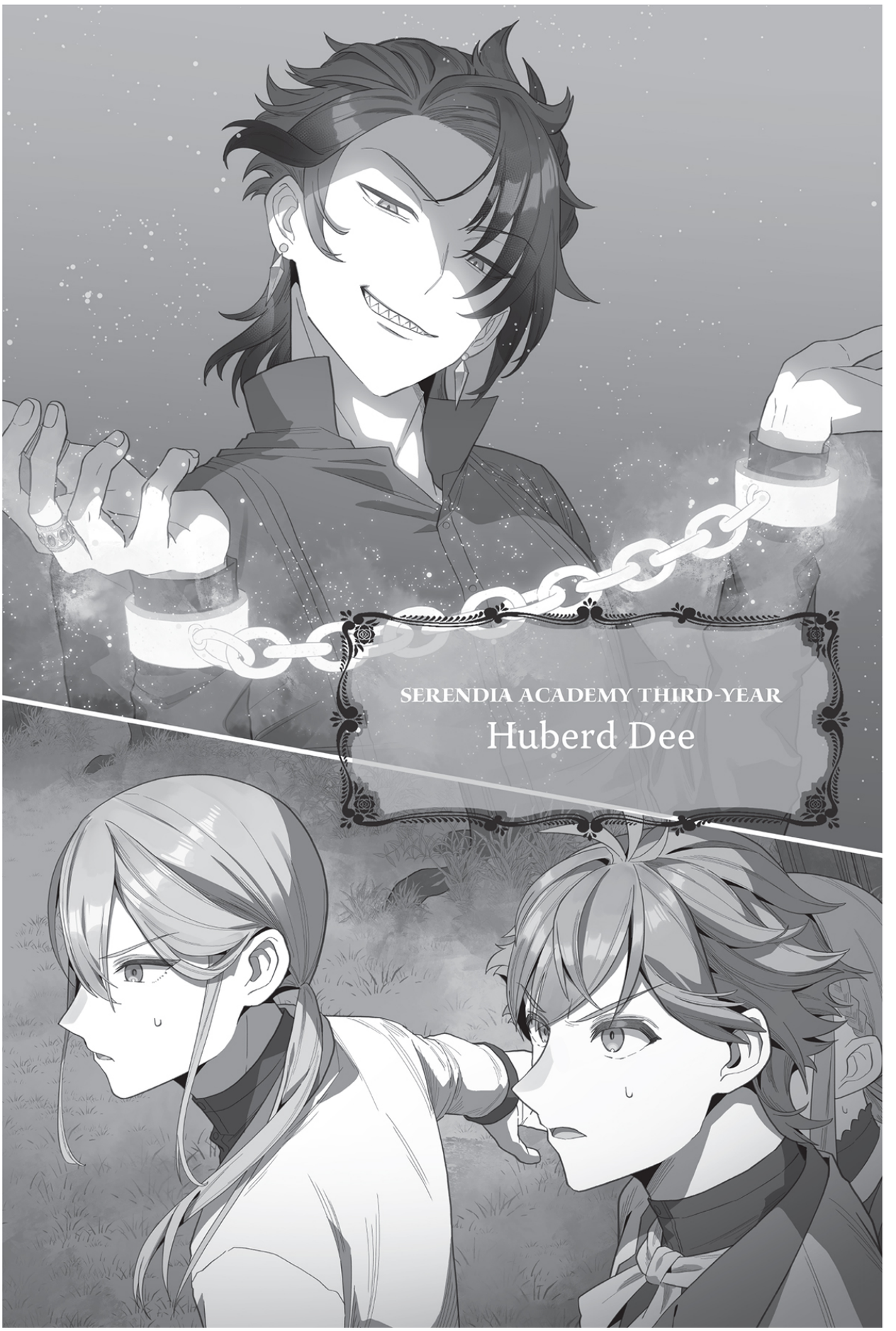
Only one person on the student council could fight in a magic battle. Felix set his gaze on Cyril, his voice colder than ever before.

“Student Council Vice President Cyril Ashley, this is an order.

Win this duel. We cannot afford to lose our precious accountant."

"As you command."

And thus the duel was set, with Monica Norton as the stakes.


SERENDIA ACADEMY THIRD-YEAR
Huberd Dee

How…? How did it come to this…? Unable to flee into her world of numbers, she simply repeated this question over and over in her mind.

Behind her, Elliott sighed in annoyance. “They’re fighting over a little squirrel… This must be the most pointless duel in the world.”

I want my human rights back, thought Monica, from the bottom of her heart.



CHAPTER 7

Duel and Hunt

“Magic battle this, magic battle that. You all speak of them so easily. It’s very difficult to set up and maintain the barrier for them, you know. And when the combatants have this much mana capacity, the barrier needs to be even stronger, or it will simply be too dangerous. What? You want people to be able to watch as well? Wait, wait. Do you have any idea how long that will take to set up? …I can call in help, but it’ll be three days. I wish you’d be a little more considerate toward an old man like me.”

At these words from Professor William Macragan, the duel over Monica Norton was set to take place in three days’ time.

And while she waited, Monica sank into a pit of depression. She was so exhausted, she could barely eat.

Despite Bernie’s warning, Huberd had still found her. And now he was dueling people over her. Plus, if Cyril and Glenn lost, Monica would have to leave the student council. She’d fall completely into Huberd’s clutches.

Monica knew precisely what fate awaited her if that happened. Huberd would force her to battle him at length, over and over, until he was satisfied.

Oh, how did it come to this? she wondered. *If I’d just managed something… But what else could I have done in that situation?*

And no matter how much she whined and sobbed, her usual conversation partner, Nero, was still asleep for the winter. Ryn hadn’t paid her attic room a visit in some time, either. Maybe she was busy.

This time, even Isabelle was unable to help. “I’m a failure of a collaborator… A failure of a villainess…,” she’d said. Now she was depressed, too, which only made Monica feel worse.

On the day of the duel, during afternoon break, Monica was once again sitting slumped over her desk with her head facedown. She didn’t even have the energy to go to the cafeteria.

She'd caused so much trouble for Cyril. She'd even gotten Glenn involved. Her whole mission was in jeopardy. Why did she always mess up like this?

As she sat, mentally reprimanding herself, she heard someone murmuring above her.

"You look like a dried fish, so black it's about to be thrown out."

"Lady Claudia…"

As Monica sluggishly looked up, Claudia grabbed her by the back of the neck and forced her to stand. When Monica began to wobble, Lana reached out and supported her from the side. Claudia took her other side, and the two of them practically dragged her out of the classroom.

When they got out into the hall, they headed not toward the cafeteria but away from it. Because it was lunchtime, there were very few people around.

"Lana? Lady Claudia?" asked Monica. "Where are we going?"

"The duel is after school today, isn't it?" replied Claudia. "We can't have the prize all shriveled up. You'd be a laughingstock."

"Prize… Shriveled…"

"You at least need to hydrate."

Claudia stopped in front of an empty classroom, opened the door, and tossed Monica inside. Though Monica was still wobbly, she managed to get her footing—and then her sunken eyes went wide.

"We've been waiting for you, Monica!"

Glenn waved to her energetically. Neil was next to him. They'd set up a rug on the empty classroom's floor and covered it with snacks and drinks. It was like they were having a picnic.

Monica stood there, mouth agape.

Glenn beckoned to her. "Come on, over here!"

Lana prodded her in the back, and Monica quickly took a seat on the rug. "Um, what is…this…?"

"Heh-heh-heh. This is my special class-cutting spread!" said Glenn, looking very proud. He reached into a bag near the rug's edge and pulled out some dried fruit and a card game.

Monica paled. She couldn't just sit here and skip all her afternoon classes.

Then Neil, an honors student, said gently, "We have a blanket

and a cushion, too, so you can rest if you'd like. It seems you haven't slept lately, Miss Norton, so maybe you should nap until classes are over."

"But I… I…," she stammered.

Lana pushed a cup of hot tea into Monica's hands. "Whatever has come over me?" she said, "For some reason, I really feel like skipping classes today!"

"Lana, um…"

"Please join me, Monica. You will, won't you?"

A big tear rolled down Monica's cheek and landed in her tea, making ripples. And once the tears started coming, they didn't stop. Monica sat there, teacup in her hands, sniffling and sobbing. Her face was an utter mess.

"I'm, I'm sorry… I… It's my fault… I'm causing…so much trouble…"

As she rubbed her eyes, Lana and Glenn clenched their fists.

"You're such an idiot!" exclaimed Lana. "The only one causing trouble here is that transfer student! He's the one who set up this stupid duel!"

"That's right!" agreed Glenn. "You've done nothing wrong, Monica!"

Monica sniffled, then bowed to Glenn. "I'm, I'm sorry. It's my fault that now…now you have to duel…"

"I mean it, don't worry about that!" he assured her. "I was already planning on challenging him!" Glenn's smile shone like the sun.

Claudia joined in with a thin smile of her own, quiet like the moon. "As the prize, you're allowed to be shameless. Just throw out a line like, *No, stop, don't fight over me!* and be done with it."

"But they're not fighting over me… They're fighting *because* of me!" Monica burst into tears again.

Neil cut in, flustered. "L-Lady Claudia, you're having the opposite effect! Um, Miss Norton, that's just her way of cheering you up. She was the one who put all this together in the first place, so…"

"My, Neil," said Claudia. "You're truly the only one who understands me."

Even now, Claudia was acting just as she always did. Lana shot her an exasperated glare from the side, then handed some food to

Monica. It was a piece of thinly sliced bread wrapped around boiled, deboned meat and vegetables.

Glenn immediately chimed in. “I made that!”

He normally preferred thick cuts of meat, but he’d sliced everything here into small pieces to make it easier to eat, and had even boiled and deboned it all.

Monica thanked him and began nibbling the bread. Now that she thought about it, she hadn’t had any real food since the day the duel was declared. The bread’s filling was held together with sauce made by simmering the vegetables. It was chunky but had a gentle flavor, bringing out the natural sweetness of the greens.

“This is really, really good… Heh-heh.”

Realizing now how hungry she was, Monica began chomping away at the bread. Then, all of a sudden, the door to the classroom flew open.

“Claudia! What is the meaning of this?!”

“You even brought food in? This seems like quite the party.”

The one shouting, eyebrows arched in anger, was Cyril. Next to him was Felix, a wry grin on his face.

Claudia elegantly took a sip of her black tea, then savored it for a long moment. It was only once she was done that she took notice of Cyril. “Oh, hello, Brother,” she said.

“What are you doing, having a tea party in an empty classroom?!” he demanded. “You should have requested a tea salon!”

“That wouldn’t count as cutting classes…”

“I can’t *believe* you’d talk about such behavior right in front of the prince!”

Claudia didn’t smile, but she brought her fan to her lips, as if to conceal one. “Oh? Then would you overlook it if we were more discreet?”

“…Argh!” Cyril clammed up.

Glenn immediately stepped forward and offered Cyril and Felix each a piece of bread covered with a thick spread of rillettes. Then he whispered to them like some dishonest merchant striking a back-alley deal. “Prez, VP… I hope this will convince you to stay quiet.”

“I refuse!” shouted Cyril.

Next to him, Felix reached out and took the piece of bread,

then put it in his mouth.

Cyril turned to the prince, eyes wide with shock. “Sir! P-please, wait! I need to test it for poison!”

“That’s quite all right,” said Felix, gulping down the last bite and smiling mischievously. “And now that I’ve taken the bribe, I have no choice but to stay quiet.”

“…If you say so, sir.” Cyril backed down, disappointed.

“Oh, another thing,” said Felix. “Regarding the duel after school today. The first-year Robert Winkel has announced that he will be participating.”

“Huh?” said Monica.

Felix was talking about the boy who had transferred to Serendia just to play chess with her. The one who kept his sleeves rolled all the way up even in the middle of winter. Apparently, upon hearing about the duel, he’d gone all the way to the student council room to say he’d take part.

“N-now I… I’ve gotten yet another person involved…,” she stammered.

“There’s no need to worry,” said Felix. “He just wants you to join the chess club.” His voice was calm, intended to soothe her. But then he added icily, “I’ll turn him down, of course.”

According to the prince, Robert had come to him and said, “If I win, I’ll earn the right to play chess with Monica, right?” As always, he had chess and chess alone on the brain. But in this situation, his dedication was rather refreshing.

Everyone’s the same as always… Yes, exactly the same…

Behind that consistency, Monica realized, was the kindness and consideration of all the people around her. Not one of them had asked what had happened between her and Huberd, even though it must have been obvious to the sharper ones among them that the two of them were acquainted.

I’ve caused them so much trouble, and yet they’re all acting exactly the same as always.

Monica was dreadfully familiar with how the people around her could turn against her at a moment’s notice. When her father had been taken away by a government official, all of the neighbors who used to be so nice to them had changed instantly. They’d thrown stones at her father without hesitation.

When Monica learned unchanted magecraft, her classmates

and teachers all began treating her differently, and Bernie grew distant.

So when Lana and the others stayed the same, it made Monica so happy, she could cry.

I have to… I have to tell them how I feel.

Monica clenched her fists and opened her mouth. “Thank… Thank you, everyone.”

Lana and Glenn smiled, as if assuring her she didn’t have to worry. Claudia remained impassive, and Neil offered her a wry grin.

Felix smiled gently, and Cyril looked at her with a complicated expression. She bowed to each of them and said, “Um, I’m, um, sorry about all the trouble I’ve caused. I… I don’t want to quit the student council.”

“And I don’t want to let go of an important student council member,” said Felix. “And you don’t, either, right, Cyril?”

“Naturally,” said Cyril with a nod, folding his arms haughtily. “In fact, we wouldn’t let you go even if you wanted to. I’m going to keep working you to the bone until we graduate. You had better be prepared.”

This line was very much like Cyril. Monica gave him a lopsided smile. “You’re just the same as always, Lord Cyril.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!”

He scowled at her, but right now, that only made her happier.



* * *

The duel was to be held in the woods on campus inside a special barrier, and it had been set up so that viewers could see the battle projected onto a white curtain hung in the student council room.

On a bench in front of the curtain sat all of the student council members except Cyril, who was participating. Lana sat next to Monica, and Claudia sat with Neil, snuggling against him. Originally, only council members were supposed to be present, but Felix had made an exception for these two out of consideration for Monica, who was still quite worn-out.

On another bench a little ways away were three more exceptions.

Elliott narrowed his droopy eyes and whispered to Felix. “Hey, I understand Miss Norton’s friends coming along, but what’s up with those three?”

“They must have caught wind of the duel somehow,” said Felix.

Felix’s younger brother Albert had flumped onto the bench and was now sitting with his arms folded. Next to him was his servant, Patrick.

“I’m Dudley’s friend, got it?! You heard me—his *friend*! And as his friend, it’s only natural to come cheer him on. Isn’t that right, Patrick?!”

“Lord Albert, pleeease don’t speak so loudly. You’re bothering everyone.”

As the two of them carried on energetically, Eliane Hyatt sat to one side, holding her fan to her mouth and fidgeting.

“I’ve come because Lord Glenn helped me during winter break,” she insisted. “It’s common courtesy to cheer him on like this. I assure you, I have no other reason to be here.”

Albert and Eliane, neither of whom had been invited, continued to enthusiastically make their excuses.

Meanwhile, Monica—the duel’s prize—was already at her limit, mentally and physically. She didn’t look one bit like a heroine watching men valiantly duel over her. Instead, she

looked more like a prisoner who'd just been told she would hang, or a sickly girl on her deathbed.

At Lana and the others' insistence, she'd skipped afternoon classes and taken a nap. If not for that, she wouldn't have even made it to the council room. She felt nauseated.

As she clutched her stomach, William Macragan came in. The short, elderly fundamental magic teacher ambled across the room with his cane and set up a crystal ball in front of the white curtain. This was the magical item that would project the match so they could view it.

Huh? Monica watched him curiously.

It required at least two mages to maintain the barrier for magic battles, but Macragan had come alone. Was the other one in the woods?

Come to think of it, Mr. Macragan said he'd be calling in support for this… I wonder who he meant.

"There we go," he said with a huff. "It's about to begin, everyone."

As Macragan chanted, the crystal ball glowed faintly, showing an image of the school's forest. Under wintry skies covered in ash-gray clouds, three male students awaited the signal to begin the duel.

The first was Cyril Ashley. Nicknamed the Icy Scion, he was one of the strongest students at the academy. Then there was Glenn Dudley, apprentice to one of the Seven Sages. His popularity had skyrocketed after he played the hero Ralph in the school festival play. Finally, there was Robert Winkel, a transfer student from the Kingdom of Landor.

If any of these three could defeat Huberd, Monica would be free of him for good.

While the special barrier was active, physical attacks would be nullified, and only magecraft-based attacks would do any damage. Being hit wouldn't injure the combatants, however—it would only drain their mana. That said, they could still feel pain from the attacks. And once a participant's mana reserves fell below a certain level, they would be considered defeated.

The barrier contained a magecraft formula that safeguarded the participants' physical bodies so they wouldn't be hurt, but the idea that Cyril and the others might wind up in terrible pain

horrified Monica.

"Monica," said Lana, "this Dee guy—is he really that strong? He's fighting three people at once."

Monica struggled to think of a reply. How much could she tell them about Huberd? If she revealed the wrong things, they might realize that she'd attended Minerva's.

"Um, I guess… I'm not really sure…," she muttered.

"He's the Artillery Mage's nephew," said Claudia drearily. "We must assume he's skilled at fighting."

Huberd's uncle, Bradford Firestone, was considered the most powerful fighter among the Seven Sages. The only one who could properly defend against his attack spells was the Barrier Mage Louis Miller.

But Huberd's fighting style was the inverse of the Artillery Mage's; the latter packed everything into a single hit, while the former liked to draw things out.

Just looking at mana capacity, Lord Cyril and Glenn have a big advantage, but…

Everyone in the magic-battle club had lost to Huberd and collapsed from mana deficiency, leaving them unable to answer any questions about the fight. That made Monica very anxious.

After all, Huberd Dee's true strength wasn't magecraft—it was hunting.

* * *

Glenn, Cyril, and Robert all waited near the forest's entrance for the starting bell to ring.

Huberd was already deep in the woods. Generally, one began a magic battle some distance away from one's opponents. Otherwise, the winner would be whoever could finish chanting first—an entirely different kind of contest.

Glenn started with some light stretches and warm-up exercises. Being cursed had left his whole body racked with pain, but his symptoms had eased considerably in recent days. He was still a little numb, but compared to how he felt after training

sessions with his master, this was nothing.

Once he'd confirmed he was in good condition, Glenn asked a question that had been on his mind. "We can't use physical attacks inside the barrier, right?"

"You're asking that *now*?" Cyril shot back. "Don't you know the rules?!"

"Of course I do!" Glenn insisted quickly. "I'm talking about the other guy! You, there!"

Glenn pointed at Robert, who was clenching and unclenching his leather-gloved hands. A sword hung at his hip.

"Physical attacks are all nullified in magic battles," said Glenn. "That sword won't help you any."

"I know that. It won't be a problem," replied Robert.

Glenn had only seen Robert briefly at the chess competition and didn't know much else about him. All he'd heard was that the boy was a transfer student from the Kingdom of Landor and was in the same elective as Monica.

Robert was supposedly younger than Glenn, but he was around the same height and was considerably more muscular. He clearly trained regularly. Glenn was privately impressed.

Cyril glanced at Robert. "…Blademagic, then?"

"That's correct." Robert nodded and began to chant as he drew his sword. When he did, mana created a coating of water that covered the blade's surface.

Blademagic was a technique even Glenn had heard of. It was used mostly by the knights of Landor, Ridill's neighbor. Ridill had some blademagic users as well, but very few were first-rate. It was a difficult technique that required skill in both magecraft and swordplay.

Glenn watched curiously as Robert disengaged the spell and returned the sword to its sheath.

"I will say this up front," said Robert. "I am participating in this duel to get Miss Monica to join the chess club. Therefore, I will be the one to defeat Huberd Dee. I shall not let either of you take that honor."

Cyril's slender eyebrows twitched, and he fixed Robert with a glare. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that. Accountant Norton belongs to the student council. To give her to another club would be to go against the prince's wishes."

“We are fighting for rights to Miss Monica, are we not? Then I see no problem.”

“Now you’re bending the rules!” Cyril scowled. His forehead wrinkled, and he looked deeply displeased. A chilly air had already begun to manifest around him. “The prince assigned *me* the duty of taking down that transfer student. You two may stay here and twiddle your thumbs until I get back.”

“Whoa, hold your horses!” said Glenn with more force than usual. “I’d like to be the one to knock that guy’s lights out. Please let me do it! I… I have to beat him at any cost!”

“No, I shall be the one to defeat him,” insisted Robert.

“It will be me!”

“No, me!”

The three of them glared at each other for a few moments, but nobody seemed willing to back down. There was only one solution—they would all have to compete to see who could defeat Huberd Dee first.

The start of the battle was drawing near, and none of the combatants seemed ready to cooperate.

“There’s just one thing I want to ask before we start,” said Glenn.

“What a coincidence,” said Cyril. “I have a question, too.”

They both looked at Robert—more specifically, at his exposed arms.

“Why are your sleeves rolled up?” asked Glenn.

“It’s winter,” said Cyril. “Aren’t you cold?”

Robert flexed for the two boys, letting his muscles ripple. “I’m showing off my manliness.”

Cyril and Glenn decided to forget they’d asked.

* * *

Meanwhile, Huberd Dee was walking among the trees, humming to himself. His preparations for the hunt were already complete. Now he just had to wait for his prey to come to him.

His uncle, the Artillery Mage, could raise the power of a single attack to incredible heights. It was like an art form to him. But

Huberd didn't think the same way. To him, the most important thing was how much fun he could draw out of the hunt.

"Hm-hm-hmmm… I wonder how much these three will entertain me."

Huberd leaned against the trunk of a nearby a tree and closed his eyes. For him, this magic battle wasn't a duel—it was a hunt. The stronger his opponents, the better. In fact, he wished they were *leagues* more powerful than he was.

Because the stronger the prey, the greater the pleasure in hunting them.

The mana hyper-absorption guy's spells are very precise. The flight magic user has an insane mana capacity. The other one had a sword, which probably means blademagic… Now, who to eliminate first?

As he licked his lips, he heard a bell ring in the distance. That was the signal to start.

Immediately, he triggered a detection formula and picked up someone moving at an incredibly high speed. Judging by how fast they were going, they must have been using flight magecraft.

Huberd pushed himself off the tree trunk and cracked his slender neck a few times. "The first to the slaughter… I'll make a warning out of him."

* * *

As the bell rang to start the battle, Glenn activated a flight spell and soared high above the trees.

He couldn't use detection spells or location magecraft. The only spells at his disposal were the one he used to fly and the one that produced fireballs. He'd just have to search for Huberd with his eyes. Fortunately, the trees in the forest had shed their leaves for the winter, and Glenn spotted him right away.

The last time Huberd challenged him, Glenn had been forced to run away, wailing pathetically. He'd been driven into a corner and had lost control of his mana.

But I'm not the same guy I was back then!

Maintaining his flight magecraft, Glenn began to chant. He

produced a large fireball, as big as the arm span of two adults. Then he flung it at Huberd below.

“Take this!”

The woods were protected by the barrier, so his spell wouldn’t set them on fire. He could attack with his full power without any fear.

As the fireball hit, there was a loud booming noise, and a whole lot of smoke was thrown into the air.

Don’t let your guard down, Glenn reminded himself.

Staying in the air, he immediately began chanting another spell. *Keep attacking until your enemy stops breathing*—that was something his master always said.

But before he could create his second fireball, a ray of light pierced through the smoke. A lightning arrow—probably an attack spell from Huberd. Glenn used flight magecraft to evade it.

I’m so glad I figured out how to keep two spells up at once! If he kept dodging attacks in the air while staying on the offensive, he’d have a chance—a thin ray of hope.

“Hm-hmmm. You’ll be first.”

Glenn gulped. The voice had come from behind him.

The enemy had used flight magic to circle around and come at him from the rear. The next moment, Huberd fired a lightning spear.

Glenn twisted, just barely avoiding a direct hit. But the shot glanced his right arm.

“Argh!” Glenn cried out in pain. His consciousness flickered, and his flight spell failed.

Physical attacks were nullified inside the barrier, but that only applied to attacks, not to accidents. If Glenn fell from a high place, he’d slam into the ground. In the worst case, he could even die.

But as he fell, a slope made of ice appeared directly below him. He slid down it and managed to land safely.

“Ugh! Don’t make me baby you!” shouted Cyril in frustration.

“Thanks, VP!”

“You’d better have a nice, long think about your reckless behavior!”

In the end, Cyril couldn’t abandon his underclassman. After the slope, he formed an ice wall around Glenn. The beautiful

glass-like structure served as a solid shield, blocking Huberd's lightning arrows as they rained down onto the ground.

"Looking up isn't enough!" shouted Cyril. "You've got to keep an eye on your surroundings! He probably knows remote magecraft!"

At the mention of remote magecraft, Glenn realized how he'd been hit. Huberd used the smoke as cover to get behind Glenn, and while he was moving, he'd triggered his lightning arrow remotely to make it fire from the ground—all to fool Glenn into thinking he was still below him.

Remote magecraft was an advanced technique that allowed a mage to trigger a spell from some distance away. It was inaccurate and imprecise, making it unsuited for direct attacks. But it had other uses, such as the decoy tactic Huberd had just employed.

"Blast. The wall won't hold up," said Cyril. "Dudley, can you use any defensive barriers?!"

"I only know flight and flame magecraft!" Glenn called back.

"And you call yourself the Barrier Mage's apprentice?! Argh! Just get behind a tree!"

"Got it, boss!"

As the wall of ice shattered, Glenn and Cyril dove behind a large tree trunk. When they peeked around it, they saw Huberd leisurely touch down. His confidence was infuriating.

They both launched attacks—Glenn shot fireballs, and Cyril, ice arrows. But it was to no avail—Huberd used flight magecraft to dodge the former and blocked the latter with a barrier.

Grinding his teeth in frustration, Cyril whispered to Glenn. "Watch his movements closely. He blocks my attacks but always dodges yours."

"Huh? Uh, and that means…?"

"It *means* he can't block your fireballs with a defensive barrier. If one of them hits him, he'll take damage for sure."

Glenn's flame magecraft was powerful but slow and imprecise. Cyril's ice magecraft was precise and adaptable, but it wasn't as powerful and could be blocked with a barrier.

Cyril understood this and instructed Glenn accordingly. "I'll chase him down. You focus on hitting him. Do *not* miss."

Cyril began to chant a spell. This one took longer than the last.

Glenn watched him from behind, firming his resolve.

If I want to make sure my attack will hit him…

Huberd was hovering low to the ground, fiddling with his earring as though he had nothing better to do. “Not attacking?” he said with a smirk. “I can go first, if you want.”

Huberd used a quick-chant to produce more lightning arrows, then fired them at Glenn and Cyril.

Just then, Cyril finished his chant and shouted, “Freeze!”

A wall of ice materialized, blocking the lightning arrows—then continued to spread toward Huberd, who was still in the air.

“Now! Get him, Glenn Dudley!”

Glenn shot his fireball. It hurtled toward Huberd, who was trapped by the wall of ice. With Glenn’s firepower, he should be able to send both Huberd *and* the wall flying.

“Not good enough.”

Huberd dodged Glenn’s fireball by a hair, then shot into the sky. The ice wall couldn’t keep him from moving vertically. It looked like Glenn’s fireball would simply smash through the ice wall…but that wasn’t what happened.

Glenn’s lips curled into an indomitable smile. “You’re the one who’s not good enough.”

The fireball twisted to follow Huberd, as though it had a mind of its own.

For the first time, Huberd looked tense. “A tracking formula?! You can use those?!”

“Fresh out of the oven—just learned it!”

Huberd immediately quick-chanted a defensive barrier, but he couldn’t block the fireball entirely. It hit him head-on, and he began to flutter down to the ground like a bird missing a wing. Both Cyril and Glenn began chanting at the same time, meaning to finish him off then and there.

But before they could, someone burst out of the trees—it was Robert, who had been lying in wait the entire time.

“Your head is mine,” he said as he drew his blade. He must have already completed his chant, because the surface of his sword was coated in water.

Robert closed the distance between himself and his target with impressive speed, then swung his watery blade down at Huberd’s neck.

That was when he stopped moving.

It wasn't just Robert, either. Glenn and Cyril had both stopped, too. They could feel an intense pain in their backs.

"What…is this…?!" Glenn muttered.

Just as he turned to look behind them, a flame arrow pierced his chest.

The attack couldn't injure him, but he still felt all of the pain.

Glenn could feel his flesh cooking. He cried out in anguish and fell to his knees. Cyril and Robert did the same—flame arrows had hit both of them.

But why? He didn't chant at all… It's almost like he's…

"Hmmm, hm-hm-hmmm."

Humming a gleeful tune, Huberd waved his bony, angular finger around like a conductor's baton.

Once again, flame arrows rained down on his three opponents. It felt like the arrows were gouging their flesh as the fire roasted their arms, legs, and chests. Their cries of pain echoed through the woods.

Every mage needed to chant to cast. There was no way someone could use spells while humming like that.

Well, there was *one* way.

"…*Unchanted magecraft*?"

Terror and despair filled Glenn's heart just as another volley of flame arrows rained down from above. And with that, Glenn lost consciousness.

* * *

The spectators in the student council room all raised their voices in shock. The image projected on the white curtain was silent. Nevertheless, it was painfully clear that Cyril, Glenn, and Robert were screaming in agony.

Felix watched the scene without blinking and analyzed what he saw.

Huberd Dee doesn't seem to be chanting. But only one person in the world can use unchanted magecraft, and that's the Silent Witch. Was he *the Silent Witch all along? No, Lady Everett is a*

woman. That much is certain.

As Felix sat on the bench, quietly disturbed, Wildianu stirred in his pocket. Wildianu was the prince's contracted spirit—a high water spirit currently taking the form of a lizard.

If Cyril and the others lost, Felix planned to have Wildianu intervene and secretly take care of Huberd. But if Huberd could use unchanted magecraft, would Wildianu be up to the task? The spirit wasn't particularly skilled at combat.

As Felix hesitated, Monica's friend Lana shrieked. "Monica, are you okay? Monica!"

Monica's face was white as a sheet. She was pressing her hand to her mouth and trembling fiercely.

In the image on the curtain, Huberd released another volley of fire arrows, piercing his opponents' limbs for no reason other than cruelty. With each hit, Monica's throat pushed out a small whimper.

"Stop… No, stop…," she murmured, looking like she was about to throw up.

Lana, sitting next to her, rubbed her back.

"Do you need to throw up?" whispered Claudia.

Monica nodded awkwardly and stumbled to her feet.

Lana, clearly worried, moved to go with her, but Monica shook her head.

"Lana, please stay here for me and see who wins… Please."

With that, Monica hurried out the door. Normally, she was slow and awkward, but now her steps were unusually fast.

Felix thought for a moment, then stood as well. Next to him, Bridget covered her mouth with her fan and looked up at him. "Going to look after her?" she asked.

"I can't just leave her like that."

"Then I shall watch the results of this magic battle as closely as possible in your stead. I am your secretary. Everything will be recorded."

"Thank you," replied Felix with a wry grin. Then he turned and left the room.

But by the time he reached the hall, Monica was nowhere to be seen. "Wildianu, go to the battlefield and get rid of Huberd. Make it look like an accident. You're free to use any means necessary."

"What will you do, Master?" the spirit asked.

“I’ll look for Monica. I’m worried she might collapse somewhere.”

“…As you wish.”

Once Wildianu was out of his pocket and on his way, Felix began searching for Monica.

Unbeknownst to him, the girl he was looking for had already jumped out a window and was now using her unsteady flight magecraft to rush toward the woods.



CHAPTER 8

Thump!

Someone was humming an unpleasant tune.

As pain racked his body, Cyril regained a sliver of consciousness. He lifted his heavy eyelids and, through blurry vision, saw Robert lying limp on the ground and, farther back, Huberd ruthlessly kicking Glenn.

Cyril tried to chant. He could at least get in one last shot. But his tongue refused to work right.

His mana reserves had already hit rock bottom. The only reason he'd managed to regain consciousness was because his condition meant he recovered mana faster than the average person. Still, with so little left, he no longer had any chance of winning.

Even if he attacked now, he wouldn't stand a chance against Huberd. After all, his opponent could use unchanted magecraft.

But can he really cast spells without chanting?

If he could, then why hadn't he done so right from the beginning? The greatest strength of unchanted magecraft was the chance it gave one to make the first move and catch one's opponent unawares. But Huberd had saved the technique until just after Robert showed up.

Cyril thought back to the events of the match. Huberd had probably let Glenn hit him with that fireball in order to draw Robert out of hiding.

Was he trying to keep Robert from seeing him use the technique? Is there some kind of trick to it?

That was when Cyril noticed something. Huberd's hand—all those distasteful rings on his long, slender fingers were gone. Every single one of them.

…That's it!

Out of habit, Cyril tried to reach for his broach, only to realize he couldn't even move his fingers. His hazy consciousness was about to plunge back into darkness. His vision began to mist over, fading into white.

Wait, no… This mist is real.

The next thing Cyril knew, the area around him had been plunged into a dense mist. He couldn't see more than a few steps in front of him. Huberd looked like a blurry shadow.

The mist was too strange to have occurred naturally; he had to assume it was some kind of magecraft. But Huberd was the only one capable of using any spells right now, and Cyril couldn't figure out why he would bother making mist.

What's happening…? he wondered, confused.

Then he saw something—a small silhouette approaching Huberd from out of the mist. Compared to him, the figure looked like a young child. That was how small it was.

The youthful silhouette muttered something under their breath, their voice too soft for Cyril to make out.

But he *did* get an earful of Huberd's vile laughter.

"Ah-hya-hya-hya-hya-hya! I knew it! You're really something, eh, Silent Witch?!"

That was the last thing Cyril heard before losing consciousness.

* * *

Monica was still unaccustomed to flight magecraft, and she needed a pole-shaped object, like her staff or a broom, to keep her balance. But she didn't have time to search for something like that now; she leaped out the window and activated the spell, nothing below her but air.

Keeping one's balance was most difficult when turning. So Monica went straight as far as she could, and when she needed to turn, she disengaged the spell, adjusted her direction, and then cast it again.

This consumed more mana, but she was able to reach the forest very quickly. As soon as she arrived, she used unchanted magecraft to engulf the area in mist.

Artificially manipulating the weather for long periods of time was forbidden, as it risked affecting crops. But there shouldn't be any problem covering a bit of the forest in mist, and this wouldn't

take very long anyway.

Hiding in the haze, Monica advanced deeper into the woods. She'd gotten a pretty good idea of where the battle was taking place from the image in the student council room. It wasn't hard to find Huberd and the others.

Huberd was humming as he kicked someone… Monica soon saw it was Glenn. Her friend's eyes were shut tight; perhaps he was already unconscious. Monica knew that kicking an opponent in a magic battle where physical attacks were nullified wasn't meant to injure—it was meant to humiliate, to crush an opponent's dignity.

Though it was hard to see through the mist, she could make out Cyril and Robert collapsed nearby.

A chill ran down Monica's spine. She felt like she'd just swallowed a block of ice. Her fingertips were cold, but not because of the temperature.

She clenched her fists tight. Pain shot through her left hand, but she ignored it.

"Dee," she said.

The humming abruptly stopped.

Huberd cocked his head; then he saw Monica and grinned. His eyes seemed to glow, as though he were delighted from the bottom of his heart. This was the face of a hunter who had just found his prey. Monica had always been terrified of that face. And she was scared this time, too.

…But another emotion, a stronger one, had taken over.

When she'd met with Duke Clockford after the New Year's banquet, she'd felt an emotion so intense, it made her vision go white. And now she knew exactly what it was.

The tingling in the back of her head, the heat boiling up from the pit of her stomach—this was *anger*.

"I am…very angry right now…"

Monica always kept her head down; she wasn't used to feeling anger. But now, she gritted her teeth, straightened her back, and glared up at the boy looming over her.

"…so I'm going to *thump* you good," she finished, her voice low.

Huberd looked at her in blank amazement. Then he leaned back and began to cackle. "Ah-hya-hya-hya-hya-hya! I knew it! You're really something, eh, Silent Witch?!"

As Huberd's throat vibrated with laughter, he looked at Monica with sincere bliss. Normally, Monica would have turned away immediately. But this time, she met his stare with the same calm gaze she directed at the chessboard.

"This magic battle doesn't have a fixed number of challengers, right?" she said. "Then I'm going to jump in a little late…and join the fight."

"Sounds great to me. You're the only one who could ever satisfy me anyway. Keep me entertained, all right?"

* * *

Huberd Dee loved to hunt. The stronger the prey, the better. In fact, what he really wanted was to face a creature so powerful, he barely stood a chance.

And there was one creature more powerful than all the rest—one he'd never stop loving.

About three years ago, Huberd challenged a certain student at Minerva's to a magic battle.

That student's name was Monica Everett. She was a genius; she'd come up with a way to cast spells without chanting, and everyone said she was a shoo-in for the Seven Sages.

At the time, she was around fourteen years old. He remembered her looking much skinnier, sicklier, and more miserable back then. Huberd had underestimated her, thinking that it wouldn't matter if she was a genius or if she could cast without chanting if none of her attacks could hit him.

But five seconds after the battle began, Huberd realized his mistake.

Monica had used her unchanted magecraft the moment the battle started. And every single attack she'd fired had hit him.

Not having to chant put her at an advantage, but what was truly incredible was her precision—she could have hit the eye of a needle. How many calculations had she done to achieve such a shocking level of accuracy? It was positively superhuman.

Huberd had gone into the magic battle planning to hunt a

rabbit. But Monica was no rabbit—she was a monster in rabbit's clothing. She'd trounced him. And he'd never felt happier.

I want to bring her down! This incredibly powerful monster of a girl!

She'd crushed him like a fly, but Huberd still had hope. He would rack his brains and use every trap he could think of to take down his prey!

And now, standing before him, was the very monster he'd always been chasing. And even better, she was angry and ready to fight!

Huberd laughed gleefully, then began to speak.

"Bernie Jones."

The name made Monica's shoulders twitch.

"You were always begging him to save you. But when I tried to rope him into a magic battle, you suddenly got quiet, docile." Huberd looked over at Cyril. "This silver-haired kid is your replacement for Bernie here, isn't he?"

"No," she said quietly, glancing at Cyril. Her fists trembled slightly at her sides. "He's my upperclassman. Someone I respect."

That wasn't quite what Huberd had expected, but it seemed hurting the silver-haired boy did have an effect on her.

That's right, he thought. *Get mad. Then show me the full extent of your power.*

One thing was bothering Huberd, however. He wanted Monica to fight at full strength, and…

"Hey, this mist is yours, right?" he asked. "Aren't you going to dispel it?"

The mist all around them was probably meant to hide Monica from the spectators. But a mage could only use two spells at once. In other words, as long as the mist remained, Monica could only use one spell at a time. And she'd be spending mana to maintain the mist, too.

Huberd couldn't fight her at full strength like that. This was shaping up to be a boring match.

But when Monica replied, her tone was full of confidence, like she wasn't worried in the slightest.

"I only need one hand to deal with you."

He'd never imagined the timid, cowardly Monica would speak to him like that. But rather than making him angry, it filled him

with joy. “Happy to hear it. I never thought that shivering little coward from three years ago would learn to trash-talk. But you’re not the only one who’s had three years to grow.”

Huberd waved his right hand. Without chanting, he summoned five flame arrows and sent them flying toward Monica. She immediately put up a barrier to block them.

That’s one tough barrier, thought Huberd. *The Seven Sages really are something else.*

Huberd threw in an extra chant, slamming a lightning spear into the barrier. It struck along with the flame arrows, and the combined force began to overwhelm Monica’s defense. It was only a matter of time before he pushed through.

But Monica didn’t panic. Instead, she fixed Huberd with a cold glare.

“…I see you needed to chant for that lightning spear,” she noted.

“Banter? Now?” replied Huberd. “Your barrier’s about to shatter.”

“……”

Just then, the mist around them grew thicker. It was now dense enough to hide them from each other.

At the same time, Huberd felt Monica dispel her barrier. Did she plan to attack him from the mist? Huberd quickly put up a barrier of his own, preparing for Monica’s strike.

Near his feet were the three unconscious students. If Monica struck, and Huberd dodged or blocked it with his barrier, her attack could hit the others. She couldn’t make any reckless moves.

Huberd, on the other hand, didn’t give a damn what happened to the rest of them. “Come on, hit me!” he declared. “Or are you just gonna hide forever? If you don’t take this seriously, I’ll use a wide-area spell on everybody in range. Five, four, three—”

Before he could finish his countdown, an ice spear flew out of the mist. At first, it looked like just that—an ice spear—but it had an insane amount of mana packed into it, and it was very strong, to boot. *My barrier probably can’t take that*, thought Huberd.

But the projectile wasn’t moving that quickly. He could use flight magecraft to squeeze by it. So he dispelled his barrier and dodged the spear.

Even if the attack included a tracking formula, those were only effective for maybe two or three seconds. As long as he flew far enough away, it wouldn't matter. After about three seconds, the tracking formula would lose its effect.

…Or that would have been true if the attack was using a *standard* tracking formula.

"Wh-what?!"

It had been over three seconds, and yet the ice spear was still doggedly pursuing him. It seemed to have a mind of its own. Huberd didn't know of any spell capable of such a feat.

From the mist, he heard Monica's voice. "This is an advanced tracking formula I developed recently. It lasts over ten times longer than a standard formula… It can keep going for about twenty to thirty seconds."

Now everything made sense. If Monica had spells like this at her disposal, she wouldn't have to worry about hitting the others.

Huberd felt his spine tingle with excitement. Monica Everett—*the* Monica Everett—was taking him on with brand-new magecraft she'd just developed! What could possibly be better?

"…Ha-ha! You're the greatest woman alive!"

Monica was currently maintaining both the mist and her ice spear. In other words, she couldn't use any more spells.

Huberd, on the other hand, was using only one spell—flight. That said, he still had to focus on evasion. He didn't have the mental capacity to spare for anything else.

In that case, as soon as the ice spear stops homing in on me, I'll press her!

He kept dodging the spear while counting down in his head. There were around ten to twenty seconds left. The ice spear was persistent, but it wasn't fast enough to keep up with his flight spell. Huberd lowered his altitude slightly so he could land at a moment's notice.

Just then, he saw a red light flash ahead of him.

His vision went scarlet. A moment later, horrible pain shot through his right eye.

"Gah…ahhh…?!"

Huberd lost control of his flight spell and tumbled to the ground. It was lucky he'd already begun to descend, or the impact would have been a lot worse. But now that he'd fallen face-first

onto the ground, the ice spear caught up to him and plunged deep into his back.

And that wasn't all. A volley of flame arrows followed, raining down on him.

Huberd let out a throat-ripping scream. He tried to keep his mind moving as he worked to grasp the situation.

What pierced my right eye? A flame arrow? A mage can only use two spells at once. Monica was already maintaining both the mist and her ice spear. She couldn't use flame arrows, too. Then who fired them? One of the three on the ground? …No, wait. They came from me*!*

Huberd heard footsteps crunching through the dirt and rose to his knees. He looked up, his face covered in dirt and soot, and saw the Silent Witch looking mercilessly down at him.

"The thumb and middle finger of your right hand. The index, middle, and pinkie fingers of your left… Five in all. That was where your rings were before the battle. But now they're all gone."

Monica had one of Huberd's rings between her fingers. A magecraft formula was visible inside its gem.

"You planted these magical items all around here before the fight began, didn't you? You used your rings as a casting medium, and the item you used to control them—is it your earring?"

Covering his painful right eye, Huberd laughed harshly. "It's not against the rules. This is a *magic* battle, after all."

Within the special barrier, it was entirely acceptable both to use magical items and to borrow the power of spirits. After all, both required mana and were considered magecraft. Not many people did so, however. Magical items were incredibly expensive, and many of the offensive types could only be used once before they lost their effects.

The rings Huberd was using were items he'd created specifically for himself. When he channeled mana into his earring, flame arrows would launch from his rings. By reducing the power of those arrows as much as was feasible, he'd made it so the rings could be used multiple times. In this way, they were quite efficient.

Huberd, then, was using these items alongside regular magecraft. Meanwhile, everyone hit by his flame arrows would

assume he was using the spells without chanting.

Monica, however, had realized what the items were immediately. She'd collected and analyzed one while buying time with her ice spear.

"…My magical item," growled Huberd. "You rewrote its formula, didn't you?"

His five rings were constantly linked to his earrings via mana. But Monica had collected one of the rings and written over its magecraft formula—changing the item's user from Huberd Dee to Monica Everett.

Obviously, not just anyone could pull something like this off. An ordinary person would have required a lot more time, both to analyze the item and to rewrite the formula.

And she did it in mere seconds! Huberd shivered with excitement. *Ah… The Silent Witch's power is out of this world! She's a true monster!*

She hadn't simply *destroyed* his traps, she'd stolen them for her own. And she'd done it all like it was nothing!

"I once had to rewrite Mr. Louis's barrier… It took me close to a minute to disengage the dummy formula meant to prevent tampering." As Monica spoke, she rolled Huberd's ring around in her palm, looking at it like it was a toy. "It took me less than five seconds to disengage the dummy formula embedded in this. It was child's play. In the end, I didn't even need to bother with that advanced tracking formula."

In the dim, mist-covered woods, the Silent Witch's green eyes glowed as she continued in an icy whisper.

"Were you so desperate to replicate my skills that you resorted to parlor tricks? I can't imagine why… It's *only unchanted magecraft*."

At this unbelievable display of arrogance, Huberd's heart skipped a beat. It was practically *singing* with joy. What other woman could give him such thrills?



“That cruelty. That arrogance. I *love* it. Go on, give me an order. Tell me to surrender to your overwhelming power and kneel before you… Ah, my ruthless queen, I beg of you.”

Monica’s cold, impassive face faltered, and she began to look troubled. Soon, all her ruthlessness vanished and she was back to her usual, timid self.

“Um, you d-don’t have to kneel,” she stammered. “I—I just want you to promise you’ll keep my identity secret and that you’ll help me with my mission…”

“If you want me to obey, you’ll have to *discipline* me. Now give me the hardest *thump* you can manage.”

“……”

Monica channeled her mana into the ring she’d stolen from him. The other rings he’d placed nearby began to glow, and a volley of flame arrows surrounded Huberd.

With a hard voice and an impassive gaze, Monica said, “*Thump*.”

Huberd smiled blissfully as the arrows rained down upon him.

* * *

Huberd lay face up on the ground, unconscious, looking somehow satisfied. Monica gazed down at him as though he were some incomprehensible creature.

Why is this so much fun for him? she wondered.

Just as Huberd couldn’t understand her, she couldn’t understand him. Monica had no interest in thrills, triumph, fame, praise, or anything else magic battles could offer. To her, the time she’d spent cutting class with her friends seemed much rarer and more precious. Such moments were like irreplaceable treasures to Monica—much, much nicer than *this*.

Monica looked over at Cyril, Glenn, and Robert, who were all collapsed on the ground. She wished she could take them someplace warm right this instant. But she couldn’t let anyone find out that Monica Norton had been in the woods. It had been a while since she’d left the spectators’ bench. She had to hurry back, or Lana and the others would be suspicious.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for getting you all mixed up in this!

Just as she had when she came, she used her unsteady flight spell to return to the school and quietly reenter through the window.

She carefully disengaged the spell—and nearly toppled over.

Normally, she would work a formula into her spells to reduce the amount of mana used. But today, Monica had been so emotionally strained that she hadn't had the capacity to do so. Plus, she had gotten very little sleep over the last few days. Her body was at its limit.

I have to get back to the council room…or Lana will…be worried…

After dragging her heavy legs a few steps, she tripped over her own feet and went *splat* on the hallway floor.

I can't stay like this, or I'll only cause more trouble for them. I have to get up…

Contrary to her wishes, however, her consciousness was quickly fading. She couldn't even keep her eyes open.

"Monica?"

Someone's arm hoisted her twiglike body back up off the floor.

Great, now I'm bothering someone else…

Tears fell from her eyes, wetting her cheeks. Through dry lips, she said, "I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'm sorry for causing trouble…"

* * *

Monica's body was frightfully cold as Felix picked her up. Her cheeks were sunken in, and her lips were as dry as a desert.

He'd lifted her before, and she clearly weighed even less now. She probably hadn't been eating or sleeping much because of this mess with Huberd Dee.

Felix had just started off toward the infirmary when Monica's lips moved.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'm sorry for causing trouble…"

Apparently, she was still apologizing to someone even in her dreams. She probably couldn't help it. Even for trivial things that

others barely noticed, Monica would desperately apologize like she'd committed a massive, irredeemable failure.

I wish she could let these things go.

He lowered his eyelids slightly as old memories flashed through his mind.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry for always causing you trouble, Ike…"

In his memories, his friend was always crying and begging forgiveness, big teardrops pouring out of his blue eyes. He'd make himself small, like he felt guilty even for crying.

The girl in his arms reminded him of that friend from his youth. She was a timid crybaby with no confidence, and she blamed herself for everything…and yet in the most critical moments, she refused to ask for his help.

I wanted you to rely on me, he said to himself as he opened the door to the infirmary.

There was nobody inside. The school's doctor was on standby near the magic battle site, just in case.

Felix laid Monica on the bed, then ran his fingers through her dry, light-brown hair.

He had an inkling of why he was so attached to her. When he looked at her, he couldn't help seeing that old friend from his memories.

I've started to get emotional.

"You never rely on me," he said sulkily, looking down at her. "That's the problem."

Monica never came to him in her time of need. Never asked anything of him. Even worse, she'd apologize for causing him trouble. Her words and actions shook loose the emotions he'd hidden away deep inside his heart.

Exhaling, Felix looked out the window. Night came early in the wintertime, and the sun was already setting. Beyond a layer of thin gray clouds, the dark red of the setting sun and the indigo of the night sky blended gently together.

Wil sure is taking a long time.

A contracted spirit was linked to their master via an invisible thread of mana. If one concentrated, one could get a general idea of their spirit's location. He closed his eyes and traced the thread.

Felix arched an eyebrow. *He's outside the school?*

The prince had ordered Wildianu to put an end to Huberd. Why had he left the academy grounds?

While a detailed conversation was impossible, a master and his contracted spirit could exchange simple thoughts even at a distance, like “Return” or “Help me.” And Wildianu hadn’t yet requested any help.

…I’ll go have a look for myself.

Felix stared out into the darkening sky, then quietly drew the curtains.

* * *

A little earlier in the evening, a few minutes after the Silent Witch left, Felix’s contracted spirit Wildianu arrived at the site of the magic battle and was immediately confused. He saw Huberd—the cause of all this—collapsed on the ground beside his opponents Cyril, Glenn, and Robert. What in the world had happened? Who had won?

I’d like to carry them all to the infirmary, but I cannot afford to let anyone see me in human form…

Wildianu was currently in the guise of a white lizard, and he clung to a tree as he mulled over the situation. But then he noticed the brush opposite him start to rustle.

A beastly figure emerged. The creature was as large as a boar but was in fact a wolf with gray fur. On its back rode a boy of about five or six. The boy was wrapped in a cloak from the neck down, so that Wildianu could only see his face and his boots.

…Two spirits?

Though the others were the same race as Wildianu, he didn’t intend to approach them for a friendly chat. For his master’s sake, he couldn’t let anyone else find out about him. Instead, he suppressed his presence as much as he could and observed the boy and the wolf.

The boy climbed off the creature’s back, then spoke to the wolf in an awkward, faltering voice. “Sezh… I think…these people were…the ones fighting with magecraft.”

The wolf opened its large mouth. Sharp fangs were visible

within, and an adult man's low voice rumbled forth. "Which has the most mana? Which is the strongest?"

"Hmm… Their mana's all depleted right now…so I can't really tell… Can't we take all of them?"

"No more than two. Choose the lightest ones."

The boy looked at each of the four boys on the ground. "The black-haired one is muscular, so he's probably heavy. We'll leave him here. The silver-haired one looks the lightest, and as for the others…"

His ice-blue eyes turned to Glenn, and he blinked. "This one has an incredibly high capacity… For mana, I mean. It's way, way bigger than a normal human's."

"I do not understand."

"If you look really close…you can kind of see it."

"I do not understand. Put them on. Quickly."

"Okay, then," replied the boy. Something slid out of his cloak—not an arm but a branch made of ice, its tip split in half. He deftly hooked it on Glenn and Cyril, then lifted them up and placed them on the wolf's back.

They're taking them away?!

Wildianu's master was Serendia's student council president. He needed to rescue those two boys, or there'd be trouble for his master. Unfortunately, Wildianu was a poor fighter, and he didn't think he could defeat the two spirits. What's more, he couldn't afford to reveal himself in front of Glenn and Cyril.

In that case, my only choice is…

Keeping his presence concealed, he gently hopped onto the wolf's tail. The wolf, not noticing the little lizard, rode off toward the edge of the woods with Cyril, Glenn, and the boy on its back.

Though the wind was howling, Wildianu heard a low voice between the gusts. The spirit in the guise of a young boy was murmuring to himself.

"I'm sorry, humans. Please, forgive me. Please. Please, forgive me…"

* * *

A man and a woman were walking through the woods where the magic battle had taken place. The man was in his twenties and wore a Sage's robe. His long chestnut hair was done up in a braid. This was the Barrier Mage, Louis Miller. The woman was a little older—closer to thirty. She was dressed in loose traveling clothes, wore no makeup, and had her brick-colored hair tied behind her head.

These were the two people William Macragan had called in to maintain the special barrier.

"I had no idea you were near Serendia, Carla."

Though Louis was a Sage, the woman called Carla spoke to him casually, as though his rank meant nothing to her. "There's an area of particularly high mana density near the old dormitories on campus that we've had our eye on for a while. I'm here representing the Magic Geography Association to take some measurements."

"I see," said Louis. "So that's how Macragan dragged you into this."

"What I *actually* wanted to investigate was the mana density in the nearby Kelielinden Forest, but the landowner refused… Have you heard anything about that, Louis? You're a Sage, just like him."

"Why would I hear anything? That man is deep in Duke Clockford's pocket—a *very* staunch supporter of the second prince. He's an awful old codger whose only pleasure is picking fights with me at every opportunity."

"You need to get along with your coworkers better. You're an adult now, remember?" Carla sounded like a concerned elder sister.

Louis smiled, as if to say, "Yes, of course, I'm well aware." But his silence made clear his true feelings on the matter.

Carla shrugged and sighed, then turned to look ahead of them. "So what are we going to do about this magic battle? We can't blow the Silent Witch's cover while she's on an infiltration mission, right?"

"Indeed. We'll say Huberd Dee's magical items went out of control, and the match ended in a draw. I think that will be for the best. It was bad luck that one of her acquaintances from Minerva's transferred in, but…she managed to defeat *and* silence

him. I think she's doing quite good work." Louis put on a nasty grin. Then he seemed to remember something and glanced at Carla. "I'm sorry, Carla. About the Silent Witch's infiltration…"

"I won't tell anyone," she replied. "And I won't ask for any more details. I don't make a habit of digging into other people's personal affairs."

"…I appreciate it," said Louis.

At this point, he came to a stop. Before him lay two male students in Serendia Academy uniforms. One was skinny, with red hair, and the other was muscular, with black hair. Huberd Dee and Robert Winkel, no doubt.

"Oh?" said Louis. "My idiot apprentice is nowhere to be found."

He was probably afraid I'd give him a thrashing after his miserable defeat and ran away, thought Louis. But after a moment, he realized that Glenn didn't even know his master was at the school.

As he considered this, Carla looked around. "There should have been one more challenger. The silver-haired boy. I don't see him, either."

Things were getting a little strange.

Louis took a ring out of his pocket. The emerald embedded in it was his spirit's stone of contract. "I'll call Ryn and have her search," he said. That idiotic maid, Rynzbelfeid, was a high wind spirit, and she could look for them from above. She could even use her powers to carry them safely back with her if they were unconscious.

"Rynzbelfeid, spirit of wind, in accordance with the contract, be swift to my side!" he chanted, channeling mana into his ring.

No response. Louis frowned; this was very odd. Ryn occasionally ignored his orders or interpreted them in interesting ways, but this was different. It felt like the mana he'd just sent hadn't reached her—like he was pouring water into a cup with a hole in it.

"…Ryn?"

A contracted spirit was linked to its master by an invisible thread, allowing each of them to sense the other's general location and distance. But no matter how much he focused, Louis couldn't tell where Ryn was.

“Has something…severed the link?”

Louis stood, unmoving, as a cold winter wind blew past his feet. He rubbed his neck and glared sternly at the emerald ring on his finger as goose bumps rose on his skin.

Meanwhile, Carla began to chant—she was using a detection spell. Such spells weren’t very precise, and they couldn’t seek out a particular person. But if Glenn was using flight magecraft, it might be able to detect that.

Louis watched her in silence as she closed her eyes and frowned, searching for something behind her eyelids. “Louis,” she said, keeping her eyes shut, “I just got a signal from the northeast. It’s either a mid-level or high spirit…but it quickly left my detection range, so I can’t be sure.”

“Northeast?”

Northeast of Serendia Academy… Louis knew of at least one thing in that direction. He didn’t know if or how it was related to Glenn’s and Cyril’s disappearance, but his gut told him they had to follow whatever lead they had.

“Carla, might I ask a favor of you?” he said gravely.

“For my adorable fellow apprentice? Anything.”

“Send a message to the Starseer Witch.”

Depending on how things panned out, they might need to involve even more Sages. *What a pain*, thought Louis bitterly.

* * *

In the forest northeast of Serendia Academy sat a little house.

The cozy abode contained only a few pieces of furniture—enough for a guest to stay the night. To the right of the entrance was a large hearth; to the left, a shelf filled with tools; and in the center of the room was a large, conspicuous workbench.

An elderly man sat at it, and with his wrinkled fingers, he plucked up a silver flute. The object was slender, about the width of an adult’s pinkie, and it had a silver chain so that it could be worn around the neck.

The man put the flute to his lips and blew. It produced a rough, wavering *fwoo-ee, fwoo-ee*.

Behind the man stood a beautiful maid with her golden hair tied back—Rynzbelfeid, Louis Miller's contracted spirit. She stood as still as a sculpture, waiting.

The man brought the flute away from his lips, then smiled in satisfaction, a darker emotion seeping into his joy. "The Barrier Mage must be in quite a panic right about now… Ah, what a delicious feeling."

A high-pitched male voice came from near his hands. *"Heroes are born of calamity. No peaceful world would need one, would it? Please, use me, my master. I am Galanis, Flute of the False King, and I shall make you a hero!"*

A hero. The man's heart leaped at the word. In his mind, he saw the young genius who had slain two wicked dragons—Monica Everett, the Silent Witch.

The man was beside himself with envy. He couldn't stand to think of those who possessed something unique, something that belonged only to them. It drove him mad to think of such geniuses with all their talent and power.

Now, right here in his hands, he held a power of his own—the overwhelming power of an ancient magical item. It wasn't born of his own talents, but he had been the one to fix it when it was broken, so that made it his, did it not? That was the man's convenient interpretation anyway.

"You are mine alone," he whispered to the flute. "You are the manifestation of my talents."

"Quite correct! Let us be off, my master. First, we will bring the spirits of this forest under our complete control! With my power, we shall create the strongest army to ever walk the land!"



CHAPTER 9

A Distressing Invitation from a Midnight Visitor

Huberd Dee woke up and cracked his eyes open to get a look at his surroundings.

He was lying not on an infirmary bed but on a cot that had been brought into the fundamental magecraft classroom. When someone lost a lot of mana during a magic battle, there was a risk of developing mana deficiency. Since all the tools needed to deal with this condition were in the fundamental magecraft classroom, he'd been brought there instead.

Or maybe they'd purposely put him in a different room from the others to avoid a fight breaking out between him and his opponents.

Professor William Macragan sat at a table a short distance away, polishing the gemstone on his staff. Huberd knew Macragan's eyes were bad, so as soon as the man's back was turned, he quietly got up and snuck toward the hallway.

"You should stop meddling in Everett's affairs," said the old professor. "She's one of the Seven Sages now."

Huberd paused in front of the door and turned to look back at Macragan. He was still facing away, polishing his staff.

"Mr. Macragan, are you working with the Silent Witch?" asked Huberd.

"We happened to end up in the same place, so I'm just watching over her. If a Sage is concealing her identity, I'm sure she has an important reason. And it's not my place to meddle."

Though Monica didn't seem to care much about such things, the Seven Sages were the most powerful mages in the kingdom, and direct advisers to the king. They all held the special title of count of magic, giving them a very high social rank. Their words carried the same weight as a high noble's. Monica Everett was a far more powerful person than Huberd or Macragan.

Though Macragan was only watching over her for now, if Huberd caused more problems for her, the professor would

probably step in.

"Well, that stinks," he said. "If I can't play with the Silent Witch, I'll die of boredom before I can graduate."

"Or you could take your studies more seriously."

"I wouldn't mind going up against *you*, Mr. Macragan."

William Macragan, the Waterbite Mage, was a former teacher at Minerva's. Huberd had taken a combat training class with him. He knew the man was more than capable.

"Now, no bullying your elders," replied Macragan. "By the way, did you use any big spells to send your opponents flying?"

"Pfft. I don't have the mana for something like that."

"That's right. Your mana capacity isn't very high. Then were Ashley and the others next to you while they were unconscious?"

"Well, yeah. Why?"

If Macragan was asking that, did it mean one of the losers hadn't been found yet? Either way, Huberd didn't care what happened to them. He shrugged, then headed out.

He'd barely recovered any of his mana, and he was still in awful condition. But he walked through the halls with the same gait he always did. Outside, the sun had almost gone down, and the chilly night air was beginning to make its way past the windowpanes.

A little ways down the dim hall, Huberd ran into someone blocking his path.

"Good day."

It was a charming noble girl with orange curls. A young maidservant waited behind her.

Huberd knew this girl's name—she was Isabelle Norton, daughter of Count Kerbeck, the most important noble in Ridill's eastern provinces.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Huberd Dee. My name is Isabelle Norton." Isabelle curtsied and smiled politely.

During the duel, she'd been doing her best to keep people away from the woods and had been sending them back to the school building. If Monica had to go to the battleground, Isabelle didn't want anyone stopping and questioning her.

Isabelle felt responsible for Monica running into Huberd. She had underestimated how crafty and wicked he was. After the duel was scheduled, she had seen Monica grow weaker every day, and each time they met, Isabelle's chest tightened even further.

"Hm, hm, hmmm? Isabelle Norton. Count Kerbeck's daughter, right? …Come to think of it, Monica's cover name is Norton, too."

Huberd looked down at Isabelle with a dismissive stare as his lips twisted into an evil grin.

"I get it," he said. "You're helping her. Well, Kerbeck does owe a lot to the Silent Witch, I suppose."

"I'm glad I don't have to explain," said Isabelle. "In truth… I had something to discuss with you."

"You want me to help the Silent Witch on her mission?"

That should be obvious, said Isabelle to herself, keeping her tone polite and level. "I would like you to cease interfering with the Silent Witch's mission."

Her tone was refined, but essentially, she'd just told him to stay out of Monica's way.

Huberd shrugged like he didn't know what she was talking about. "Well, that stinks. I *really* love Monica, you know. I just can't help myself."

"Oh, how envious that makes me. I, too, love the Silent Witch, and yet here I am, holding back tears and pretending to be a villainess." Abruptly, her tone changed from cute and sulky to sweet and venomous. "My mother has a bit of a relationship with your family," she said. "Specifically, with your mother."

Huberd chanted a spell. He probably intended to threaten Isabelle with attack magecraft. But before he could finish chanting, Agatha stepped out from behind her mistress and strode up to him.

Huberd stopped chanting. Agatha's hand, flattened into a chopping shape, was stopped just in front of his throat.

He whistled, impressed. "She's pretty dangerous, huh?"

"Agatha doubles as my bodyguard."

Magecraft was powerful, but all you had to do to counter it was strike before your opponent finished chanting. And if you could take out their throat, a mage would be done for. Agatha understood all that and acted accordingly.

From behind her fan, Isabelle carefully watched Huberd's

expression. Even with the maid's hand at his throat, he was grinning. Isabelle was sure—this was a boy who treasured nothing and thus felt no fear. Most threats would be ineffectual. But Isabelle wasn't about to let that discourage her.

In cases like this, she just had to be annoying. A real pain in the butt.

"Can you promise me you won't do anything to disadvantage the Silent Witch?" she asked.

"If I refuse, I suppose you'll drive me out of Serendia Academy, right?"

"You must be joking." Isabelle narrowed her eyes and assumed an icy tone. "I'll drive you right out of the entire kingdom."

That wasn't an empty threat. Count Kerbeck could manage it.

The expression disappeared from Huberd's face. His cold gaze said one thing: *What a nuisance.*

Isabelle didn't flinch. She stared right back at him. She didn't care if his malice transferred from Monica onto her. In fact, she'd prefer that. She'd made an oath back when the Silent Witch had saved her and her people—that she'd do *anything* to help her.

"I'm prepared to make use of my authority," Isabelle continued. "If you bring any harm to the Silent Witch, I shall do everything in my power to make your life miserable."

"…Quite the annoying little princess, eh?"

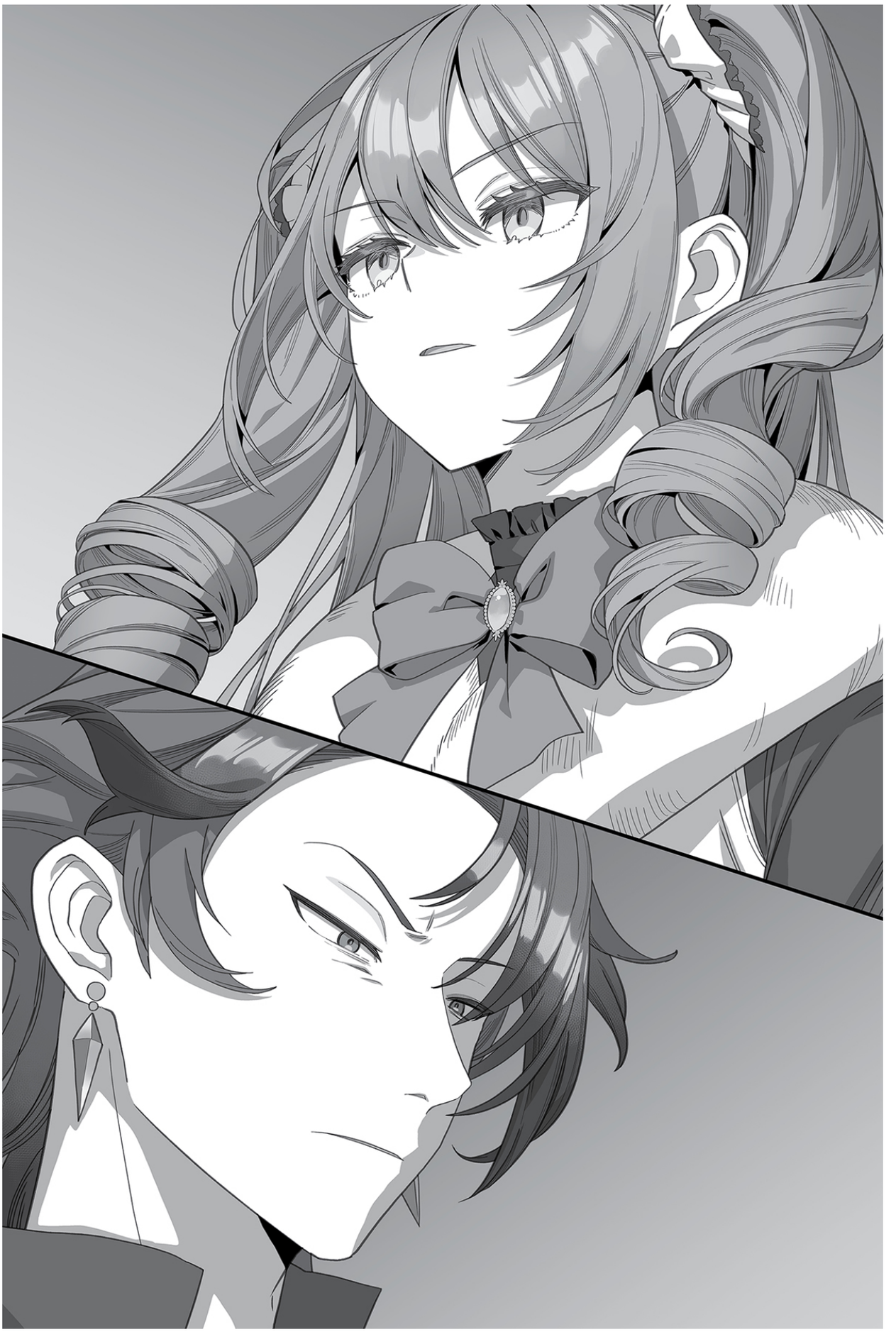
"Oh, my! As a villainess, I can think of no greater compliment."

Isabelle flashed him an especially elegant smile. A villainess had to be bold, brazen, and above all, *annoying*.

* * *

As Monica tossed and turned in bed, her nose twitched.

She could smell herbs and medicine mixed into the cold night air. This wasn't the smell of her musty attic dorm but of the infirmary.



Sadly, Monica had been here several times since coming to Serendia Academy, thanks to all the incidents she'd gotten caught up in. By now, she knew its scent well.

She could hear soft voices from beside the candlestand. It was probably Felix and the middle-aged doctor.

"…Mr. Macragan sent out a familiar, but they still haven't been found."

Felix's voice was low and tense. *What does he mean? Who hasn't been found?* wondered Monica, still lying in bed.

"In that case," the doctor said gravely, "I'll stay here for a while in case I'm needed."

"Thank you. When Miss Norton wakes up, tell her to go back to her dorm right away." With that, Felix hastened out of the infirmary.

Something had definitely happened. Monica waited in bed for a while, not moving, but once she could no longer hear Felix's footsteps, she squirmed into a sitting position.

"Um…," she said.

"Oh, you're awake?" asked the doctor.

The elderly man was well-built but soft-spoken. Monica had been in his care several times now, and she wasn't too scared of him.

Nervously, she asked, "What happened, um, with the duel?"

"Huberd Dee lost control of his magical items, and the duel was called off," the doctor explained. "Everyone involved is resting up in their dorms."

It seemed Monica's intervention had gone unnoticed. But she was still curious about what Felix had said. She looked up at the doctor searchingly, and he turned away toward the window.

"It's already dark. You should get back to your room, too."

The doctor was right; the sun had already set, and it was pitch-black outside. The other students had probably all gone home by now. Monica borrowed a lantern from the doctor and left the infirmary.

What should I do? If Nero or Miss Ryn were here, I could send them out to look, but… Nero was still hibernating, and it had been a while since Ryn had paid her a visit.

Monica would just have to gather information on her own.

She plodded back to the girls' dormitories, where she was

greeted by a very worried Lana. Monica hadn't seen her since leaving the student council room, so she couldn't blame her friend for being anxious.

"Are you okay, Monica?" she asked.

"Yep. I'm, um, sorry for worrying you… Um, how are Glenn and the others?"

"According to Prince Felix, they're already recuperating in their rooms. I'm worried about them, but we have two days off starting tomorrow. I'm sure they'll be all better by the time classes resume."

Lana was trying to cheer Monica up, but she didn't seem to be hiding anything. The rest of the student body probably hadn't been told. After a short chat with Lana, Monica headed back to her room.

Nero was curled up in his basket, still sleeping.

"…Nero, I don't know why, but I have a bad feeling about this," she murmured, collapsing onto her bed beside his basket.

She'd just woken up, but as soon as she lay down, she started feeling drowsy again. Her body was exhausted. It still needed rest.

"Oh, Nero, I hope you wake up soon…," she mumbled, then she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Clunk. Clunk. Monica woke up to the sound of someone rapping on her window.

It was pitch-black outside. She figured it must be just past midnight.

A figure was visible through the curtainless window. Wondering if it was Ryn, Monica got out of bed—then her eyes widened. The visitor was not who she'd expected.

"Apologies for showing up so late," said the man as he entered her room.

His chestnut hair was in a long braid, and he wore a monocle —it was Monica's colleague, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller.

He wasn't carrying his staff today, and he'd eschewed his robes

for more practical clothing and a winter coat made of leather.

Standing at the window, he used a quick-chant to light a candle. “My fellow Sage,” he said quietly, “would you like the simple explanation or the more detailed—and more troublesome—one?”

Louis was clearly unhappy. Monica could sense that he *really* didn’t want to explain whatever it was in great detail.

She sat down on her bed. Her gaze drifted, and she began fidgeting with her fingers. “Um, then, um, the simple one…”

Louis nodded as if to say *good*, then pushed his monocle up with a fingertip, assuming the air of an intellectual. “We need to go hang a *huge* moron, so get ready to leave.”

“Um, uh, actually, um, could you give me the detailed explanation, please…?” pleaded Monica.

Louis nodded, clearly annoyed, then sat down on the window frame and crossed his legs. Her attic room wasn’t much warmer than outside, and each breath Louis took created a white puff of air that gradually melted into the darkness.

“I’ll go in order, then. There was a magic battle at this academy today, was there not?”

“There, um, there was…”

“Mr. Macragan called me here to help maintain the barrier for it.”

Glenn, Louis’s apprentice, had participated in the duel as well. Glenn had a high mana capacity, and he’d lost control once before. According to Louis, that was why Macragan had summoned him—he was both Glenn’s master and excellent with barrier techniques. Macragan used to teach at Minerva’s, and Louis had been his student there, so he’d accepted the request without a second thought.

“When the battle was over, I decided to go pick up my idiot apprentice after his unsightly defeat… But when I arrived, the only ones there were Huberd Dee and Robert Winkel.”

“…Huh?”

“Glenn and the son of Marquess Highown, Cyril Ashley, were nowhere in sight.”

Monica felt her blood run cold. *Glenn and Lord Cyril are missing?*

According to Louis, the academy’s teachers were all

desperately trying to find the two missing boys. And, naturally, they'd covered up the disappearance so as not to cause a panic.

Their first order of business was to determine whether they'd vanished of their own accord or had been caught up in some kind of incident. For the time being, no one had demanded a ransom.

But if they wanted money, they would have taken Dee…

Huberd Dee's family owned several villas in south Ridill. They were extremely wealthy. If the kidnapper had done even a little research, they'd never have gone after Glenn, who was a commoner, or Cyril, who was adopted.

Monica unconsciously gripped her skirt. Her hands were shaking, and not from the cold.

She was afraid. She knew that everything in her life could fall apart at a moment's notice, and she knew the pain of losing someone important. She'd felt all this before, when those government officials had taken her father away.

As she sat in silence, grimacing, Louis's words grew sour. "I tried to summon Ryn to help search for them. Unfortunately, she is not responding to my call."

"Um, maybe she decided to take the day off?"

While that might sound absurd, it was quite possible when it came to Ryn. Rather than laugh this off, Louis shrugged bitterly.

"I would have given her a good slap if she had," he said. "But it seems something has severed the contract formula binding us. This has never happened before."

Glenn and Cyril were missing. Louis couldn't contact Ryn. This was an emergency.

Monica grasped the clothing at her chest. Dread was bubbling up from the pit of her stomach.

Seeing this, Louis lightened his tone. "Anyway, this may sound like a non sequitur, but as it happens, I'd sent Ryn out on an investigation."

No wonder I haven't seen her lately, thought Monica. *She's probably been busy.* "What was she investigating?"

"I heard through the grapevine that the Gem Mage has been engaged in shady deals involving antique items. I wanted her to see if he was making any sales or purchases that broke the law."

The Gem Mage Emanuel Darwin was one of their colleagues, an elderly man who specialized in imbuement magecraft. He

supported the second prince and was close with Duke Clockford. He saw Louis, who supported the first prince, as his enemy. They were not on good terms, to say the least.

"If what I heard turned out to be true, I'd have dirt on the Gem Mage, wouldn't I?" explained Louis. "And he's barely visited his workshop in the capital lately. Apparently, he's been spending all his time at his villa."

"His villa…?" repeated Monica.

"Yes. It's in the Kelielinden Forest, northeast of this school. Have you heard of it?"

"Oh! Isn't that the place with high mana density, where no one is allowed to go?"

"That's the one."

If a person with low mana resistance lingered in a mana-rich area, they were liable to develop mana poisoning. All that mana *also* tended to attract magical creatures such as dragons and spirits—making such places unfit for human habitation.

Purchasing such land and building a villa there was indeed suspicious behavior. If Emanuel had a contracted spirit, he might have been frequenting the area for their sake. However, Louis was the only Sage that had one.

"What *could* he be doing holed up there?" said Louis. "…Come, my fellow Sage, I'm sure you're just as curious."

"I, um, suppose…"

"And Ryn vanished in the middle of investigating that forest. Doesn't it make sense to assume the two are related?"

"Yes, that makes sense…"

"Now, back to the topic of Glenn and the other boy. Right after they disappeared, we detected mana belonging to a spirit northeast of the school."

"…!"

Northeast of the school. Wasn't that the location of the Kelielinden Forest they'd just been discussing?

"I don't know if the spirit was Ryn," said Louis, "but considering the situation, it's very likely related to the boys vanishing."

Monica stood up before Louis even completed his sentence. She wanted to rush out to the forest right away. She *needed* to look for Glenn, Cyril, and Ryn.

But Louis held up a hand to stop her. “I’m not quite finished, my fellow Sage.”

“There’s, um, still more?” asked Monica, restless.

Louis nodded. “I determined that it would be best to have help on this matter, so I sent a request to the Starseer Witch. But then she told me something simply *unbelievable*… You see, she has her own information network. That’s all well and good, but to tell me that *now*, of all times! I tell you, I threw my hands up in utter disgust.”

Monica sucked in her breath. Was there a fact more unbelievable than Glenn and the others disappearing?

“The Gem Mage,” said Louis, clearly fed up, “is thought to possess Galanis, the Flute of the False King, an ancient magical item previously believed to be lost.”

* * *

Cyril woke, shivering against the cold, and groped about in a daze for his bedcover.

He couldn’t find it, however. Instead, he heard the dry scraping of dead leaves.

Why do I smell dirt and grass…?

When he turned over, he heard even more noise—the crackling, rustling sounds of dry vegetation beneath him.

Finally realizing he wasn’t in his bed, Cyril jolted upright. Dead leaves went flying, then fluttered back down to rest on his legs.

“Where am I…?”

Now sitting up, Cyril froze, and his blue eyes widened in shock. He’d apparently been sleeping in some sort of cave. His voice echoed faintly off the walls. The cave was tall and wide, and he probably wouldn’t have to worry about hitting his head. There was an opening leading outside some distance away; he could make out a patch of night sky.

There were no lanterns around, but Cyril could see well enough to judge the cave’s dimensions, thanks to the presence of several hovering lights, each about the size of his little fingernail.

Mixed in among them were a few as big as his fist.

Are these…low spirits?

Right next to Cyril lay Glenn. He was still asleep, buried in dead leaves. A lot of dried grass had been piled up beneath the two of them. They had these to thank for keeping them warm. Otherwise, they might have frozen to death.

“Dudley. Wake up.”

“Mgh… VP, the meat… Will there be any meat for breakfast…?”

Cyril wanted to yell, “This is no time to be dreaming!” but he held back. This was clearly an emergency. They had to avoid raising their voices until they knew what was going on.

“Waaake uuup!” he groaned, keeping his voice as low as possible and shaking Glenn’s shoulders.

Just then, he heard someone approaching from behind.

“Are you awake, human?” asked a youthful voice.

Cyril whipped around just as Glenn opened his eyes and gave a pleasant yawn.

Standing behind Cyril was a boy of about five and a strange wolf as big as a boar.

The boy had soft, pale-blond hair and ice-blue eyes. A cloak covered everything from his neck down. It even concealed his arms, which he was holding out to cradle of pile of dead leaves.

As Cyril wondered what to say, Glenn, who had just woken up, took the initiative. “Where are we?” he asked.

“This is Kelielinden Forest,” answered the boy. His words were very clear despite his young age.

Glenn stared back at him blankly. It seemed he wasn’t familiar with the place. Cyril, however, had heard the name before.

“That’s the forest to the northeast of Serendia Academy,” he explained. “Nobody is allowed to go there because of its high mana density.”

“Yes, yes. Sezh and I brought the two of you here,” said the boy, turning to the wolf behind him. The creature had ashen fur and orange eyes—probably a mid-level or high spirit.

Cyril looked between the boy and the wolf, then asked carefully, “Are you spirits?”

“Yes, yes,” replied the boy. “This is Sezhdio, a mid-level earth spirit. I think…I’m an ice spirit.”

“…You think?” repeated Cyril, frowning. What did that mean?

The boy calling himself an ice spirit frowned. He seemed troubled. “I don’t have much power left… I don’t even remember my name. But I can control ice…so I must be an ice spirit. So please just call me ‘Ice Spirit.’”

Cyril knit his brow. Was such a thing possible? He didn’t know much about spirit ecology, but he’d learned a thing or two about them in fundamental magecraft class.

The fact that the boy could assume human form meant he was a high spirit—that much was clear. But this was the first Cyril had ever heard of a high spirit forgetting its own name.

“I brought the two of you here…because I want you to help the spirits in this forest,” the boy explained. “With so little power left…there’s not much I can do. That’s why…we’ve been searching for strong humans. Ones with lots of mana.”

“…And that’s why you kidnapped us?” Cyril said, groaning. He was beginning to get angry.

“That’s a crime, you know!” said Glenn, raising his fist.

The wolf standing behind Ice Spirit began to growl. Then a low male voice came out of its fanged mouth. “Humans created this problem. It stands to reason that humans should solve it.”

Cyril was surprised the wolf could talk. Mid-level spirits spanned a very wide range of abilities. Some could barely say a few words, while others could speak fluently. The latter type was generally more powerful. So while this Sezhdio was a mid-level spirit, he was likely just as strong as a high spirit. He could probably snap their windpipes like it was nothing.

The wolf looked back and forth between Cyril and Glenn, glaring at them with his orange eyes. “Despicable humans. Take that man with the flute and leave at once. He is causing upheaval throughout the forest.”

From what Cyril could piece together, a man who played a flute was making trouble for the spirits of the forest, and these two had brought Cyril and Glenn—humans themselves—here to solve the problem.

Glenn looked at Cyril, asking with his eyes what they should do next.

I’m the upperclassman here, thought Cyril. *I have a responsibility to get Dudley back to school safely.* The wolf looked like he might attack them at any moment; confronting him would

be a bad idea. Instead, he turned back to Ice Spirit.

“Could you tell us what exactly is going on?” he asked. “Once we’ve heard, we’ll decide whether to help you.”

Cyril made up his mind. If things went south, he’d stall for time. Glenn could use flight magecraft, so as long as Cyril bought him enough time to finish his chant, his underclassman could escape.

Cyril and Glenn sat back down on the dried grass, and the boy took a seat across from them. The wolf called Sezhdio remained behind him.

Falteringly, Ice Spirit began. “A little while ago… Um, it was around when summer started. A human came to live in this forest. The human built magical items in his cabin…a whole lot of them. But it seems things didn’t go very well.”

According to him, the human would occasionally complain that he didn’t have enough mana, or that things would go right if only he could imbue a large amount of mana into something.

Imbuing a magical item with mana was an extremely difficult art. Attack spells, in particular, had a very poor affinity with magical items; it required vast stores of mana and advanced techniques just to imbue an item with a single use of a beginner-level attack spell.

“For a while…the human went away. Then, a little after the new year…he came back to the forest…with a strange flute.”

Behind Ice Spirit, Sezhdio growled in irritation. “The flute can control spirits. Any spirit under its influence becomes that human’s servant.”

“Yes, yes. I was just barely able to resist its power…so I took Sezh and these ones and fled to the very edge of the forest.”

“These ones” probably referred to the low spirits drifting about the cave. The boy looked at them, his eyes soft and gentle.

Sezhdio, on the other hand, slapped his front paw against the ground in frustration, scattering a pile of dead leaves. “Neither he nor I can approach because of that flute. We can’t risk it. We need the help of humans, who are not affected by it. Do you understand? You must do something about that blasted man! And quick!”

As the wolf threatened them, his gray fur standing on end, Ice Spirit reached out and clung to him. His soft blond hair swaying,

the boy pleaded. “Sezh, you can’t speak to them like that. We already…brought them here against their will…”

“How much longer will you insist on your naive ways, Ice Spirit? This is why you forgot your name, why you lost your power. You are a high spirit. Does this not shame you?”

“I’m sorry. But… It’s just…”

The boy glanced between Sezhdio and Cyril and Glenn, his expression darkening. Despite his young appearance, he was trying both to understand his fellow spirit and to be considerate toward the humans.

Spirits didn’t cry. But to Cyril, Ice Spirit looked like he might tear up at any moment.

“I’m sorry, humans,” he said. “I’m really sorry…for asking you to help us… But… But…”

Cyril felt anger flare up inside him. Before he realized it, he was already talking. “It’s never wrong to ask for help when you can’t handle something on your own. Nor is there any need to apologize… Of course, bringing us here without permission, without asking—*that* was not right.”

“Yeah, you pretty much kidnapped us,” Glenn agreed.

Cyril sniffed, then sucked in a breath and puffed out his chest. “That aside, I cannot overlook this,” he declared. “When dawn breaks, we will go and meet with this human and persuade him to stop. Are you with me, Dudley?”

“Of course! I knew you’d say that, VP!”

Ice Spirit looked up at Cyril and Glenn, his face relaxing. He looked like a lost child relieved to finally be found. His ice-blue eyes almost never blinked, but there was a sheen to them, like ice just beginning to melt.

“Thank you so much, human. And other human.”

“Cyril Ashley.”

“And I’m Glenn Dudley!”

Once they’d introduced themselves, Ice Spirit smiled, his soft blond hair swaying. “Cyril and Glenn, thank you.”

* * *

“…And that is what I heard inside the cave.”

Wildianu had been eavesdropping on the conversation between the ice spirit and the boys. Afterward, he’d immediately returned to Serendia Academy and reported everything he’d seen and heard to Felix.

Wildianu was a high water spirit. He couldn’t fly or run faster than a horse, but anywhere there was water, he could outpace even a fish. Fortunately, a river ran from Kelielinden Forest to a spot near Serendia Academy, so he’d hopped in and ridden the flow, making it back in a flash. He was now atop Felix’s shoulder, in the guise of a white lizard.

With his report complete, he pressed his little head down, as if he were a human, bowing. “I apologize for doing something you didn’t direct me to do, Master.”

“No, you made the right call. Thank you, Wildianu.”

Felix now knew there was a man living in Kelielinden Forest with a strange flute that could control spirits. He also knew where Cyril and Glenn had been taken, and what they were up to.

Felix’s expression stayed the same throughout Wildianu’s report. He stood, staring out the window. The sun still hadn’t risen.

“Kelielinden Forest is the area the Gem Mage purchased a little while back, isn’t it?” said Felix.

“Isn’t that one of the Seven Sages?” asked Wildianu.

“Yes. He manages Duke Clockford’s collection of magical items at his estate.” Felix narrowed his azure eyes, still staring out the window. His lips formed a cold smile. “The Gem Mage, Emanuel Darwin… He may prove useful indeed.”

Wildianu’s master was wise. He was already devising his next plan. Though his methods might be unacceptable to most, if Felix decided it was the best option, he’d do it without a second thought. He’d put on that hollow smile and say he had no choice.

“Wil, keep watch here for me. I’m heading out to take care of something… And I might as well help our school’s students while I’m at it. After all, dependable aides aren’t so easy to find.”

Wildianu wanted to ask Felix if saving his friends was truly *secondary*, but that would be acting above his station. And besides, posing such a question to his master would only upset him.



CHAPTER 10

An Offering to a Spirit

As the sun began to rise, the blues and purples of night gave way to the oranges of daybreak. And flying across that sky, midway between night and day, was a figure much larger than a bird.

It was the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, using flight magecraft, with the Silent Witch Monica Everett on his back.

Just as Louis wore a winter coat, Monica had avoided her Sage robes and her school uniform and had chosen a plain robe, along with a veil to hide her face.

Neither carried their staff. This mission was *not* official Sage business.

As Louis soared through the sky, Monica on his back, he kept his eyes forward. “Come to think of it, my fellow Sage, I heard you were in a magic battle with someone you knew from Minerva’s yesterday.”

He must be talking about Huberd Dee, thought Monica.

Monica’s shoulders dropped. She expected him to criticize her for doing something so conspicuous while on an undercover mission.

But when Louis spoke again, she heard admiration in his voice. “Silencing him with a magic battle was quite a good play. I’m impressed.”

“……”

Instead of criticism, she’d received a compliment.

“Um, actually, I wasn’t just trying to silence him…” Monica groped about in her mind, choosing her words carefully. She wanted to explain her emotions at the time, and the change they’d wrought in her. “When he did those terrible things to Glenn and the others, I got, um, really, really frustrated… So, um, I was angry. Yes, angry.”

Before, she’d thought she only felt that way when someone disrespected numbers or magecraft.

But Huberd Dee’s actions had made her furious, and in her anger, she’d lashed out with magecraft. It was just like on the

night of the New Year's holiday, when she'd threatened Duke Clockford with mental interference magecraft.

"Um, I know I shouldn't have," she said. "I'm a Sage. I shouldn't be, um, using magecraft in anger…"

"What?" said Louis. "What's the point of magecraft if you're not using it on people who infuriate you?"

Monica got the feeling Louis was the wrong person to have this conversation with.

When she fell silent, Louis kept his eyes forward and added casually, "The only reason you never got angry before was because you didn't care about anyone else."

Monica flinched.

He was right. She'd loved math and magecraft to the exclusion of everything else, and that included both other people and herself. So nothing they did to her ever made her angry. She simply hadn't cared.

"Good and evil aside, you *used* to beat up the bad guys without any emotions whatsoever. It was pretty creepy."

"C-creepy… Creepy…?"

"I can see the forest. Let's descend, shall we?"

Louis gently lowered the altitude of his flight spell. His technique was unbelievably stable, leagues better than Monica's shaky attempts.

As they descended, Louis said, "Right now, I am angry at the Gem Mage."

"……"

"And I wish you'd share that anger, even if just a little. Because how *dare* he do something so, so idiotic?!"

* * *

Earlier, in Monica's dorm room, Louis had explained that the Gem Mage had secretly acquired an ancient magical item called Galanis, the Flute of the False King, and was gathering spirits in Kelielinden Forest.

Some ancient magical items could be used as weapons and were extremely dangerous. Even one could dramatically shift the

balance of power between nations. For that reason, the government kept them under strict supervision. The use of those deemed especially dangerous was permitted only during times of dire emergency.

In total, the Kingdom of Ridill had possession of six.

Two were safely stored away in the palace's treasure vault, while the other four had been entrusted to the care of various powerful individuals. Starweaving Mira, held by the Starseer Witch Mary Harvey, was one of those.

Galanis, the Flute of the False King, was not included in the six. It was believed lost, incinerated in the fires of war.

Of course, regardless of its history, to secretly possess such a dangerous item was a very serious crime.

Under normal circumstances, they should have reported the Gem Mage's deeds to the proper authorities so he could be appropriately punished.

…But as Louis sat on Monica's windowsill, his expression grave, he'd said, "We can't let word of the Gem Mage's deeds get out. It would damage the Sages' reputation. We have to cover this up, no matter what."

Such were the circumstances of corrupt adults.

Monica privately wondered if this was really the right way to go about things, but Louis flashed her a look like she was a stubborn child.

He continued, "You may not know this—you know little of politics, after all—but there have been movements within the Noble Assembly aimed at placing the Seven Sages under their own jurisdiction."

The Seven Sages were second only to the king, and even the Noble Assembly couldn't easily meddle in their affairs. If the Sages were put under their authority, they would lose the right to refuse the Assembly's orders.

And as it happened, Duke Clockford, who had summoned Monica on the night of the New Year celebration, was the single most influential member of that assembly.

At the time, Monica had been able to refuse the duke's request. But if the Seven Sages were placed under the Assembly's jurisdiction, she would no longer have that power.

"What do you think would happen then if a Sage caused an

issue? Why, the Noble Assembly would waste no time in stripping us of our authority."

In other words, Louis wasn't protecting the Gem Mage because he wanted to. He *had* to—in order to protect himself.

Louis recrossed his legs and rested one cheek on his fist. A twisted, sardonic grin formed on his face.

"And I know *you* don't want the Assembly constantly coming to you and making you do busywork."

"Mgh… I don't."

"Right. That's why I want to resolve the Gem Mage matter in secret. We must keep this between us Sages."

Louis explained that the Starseer Witch was already gathering up the other Sages.

Very few matters required all seven of them. But this was a grave issue—it threatened their very existence.

Monica raised her hand. "Um, so how are we going to fix it…?" she asked.

"In my opinion, it would be best if the Gem Mage were to simply *disappear*."

Louis's reply was as ominous-sounding as she'd expected.

When Monica froze, Louis sighed, his face the very picture of melancholy. "But the Starseer Witch wanted me to do things as peacefully as possible, so I decided to simply confiscate the item and teach him an only *slightly* painful lesson."

Despite this, he'd still said they were going to *hang* the man.

What does he think peacefully means…? thought Monica. His definition certainly wasn't the same as hers.

"Come on, now," said Louis. "I'm not going to raise a hand against a decrepit old man on death's door. A single punch would do him in."

Oh, thought Monica. *Thank goodness.* It seemed even Louis had a human heart.

As she quietly sighed in relief, he flashed her a smooth, refreshing smile. "The Gem Mage appears to be accumulating a great number of homemade magical items in that forest villa of his—we just need to destroy them all. Without his toys, he's nothing. Just a frail old man. Ha-ha-ha."

While modern magical items paled in comparison to ancient ones, they were still luxuries. Some were worth as much as a

house in the royal capital. And Louis was suggesting they destroy them? As Monica thought about the total cost of the damage, she began to tremble.

Louis dropped his smile. “But according to the Starseer Witch, our most important objective is to eliminate Galanis, the Flute of the False King.”

“…Huh? We’re supposed to destroy an ancient magical item, too?”

Such objects were essentially national treasures—tools you couldn’t put a price on. If Galanis was in a usable state, anyone would assume they should retrieve it unscathed.

“Why would we destroy such a valuable item?” asked Monica.

“Two reasons,” replied Louis. “The first is that ancient magical items have a mind of their own, so it’s possible this one might blab about the Gem Mage’s deeds. If that happens, there goes our secret.”

Monica thought back to Starweaving Mira, another ancient magical item she’d encountered a little while ago. It had the personality of a young woman, and while she could speak, her difficult temperament made meaningful communication close to impossible.

Monica wondered what sort of personality Galanis had. Could they possibly negotiate with it?

“The second reason is that Galanis is an *extremely* dangerous item. It could start wars all on its own. It won’t do any good, no matter who possesses it. The moment we see it, we must destroy it and collect what remains—and that’s final. Understood?”

Louis said all this in a tone so low and heavy that it made his invitation to go out and hang a man sound positively jovial.

* * *

Just as Monica and Louis alighted beside Kelielinden Forest, an owl swooped down from above. A tube was attached to its leg with a band; it was the Starseer Witch’s familiar.

Louis let the owl land on his arm, then took a tiny, rolled-up letter from the tube. As he stared at the paper, his slender brows

shot up.

"Message from the Starseer Witch," he said. "A large beast was seen entering the forest with what looked like a human dressed in white clothing on its back."

At the mention of white clothing, Monica immediately thought of Serendia Academy's uniform. Glenn and Cyril had been wearing it when they went missing.

Monica looked up at Louis and quickly asked, "The large beast—could it be a spirit in animal form?" She sounded unusually desperate. "Did the witness say whether the person was conscious or injured? Is there any more information—?"

"We still don't know," Louis said flatly, interrupting her. "But the time of the sighting matches. There is little doubt it's our missing students."

Glenn and Cyril were in the forest after all. Monica quietly clenched her fists.

Louis made a complex series of folds to the paper, then put it back in the tube. He didn't have anything to write with, but the folds would convey his message. It looked to Monica like he was expressing understanding and acknowledgment.

Louis released the owl back into the sky. "We don't know why they'd be traveling with a spirit…but at least now we have a direction." As he watched the creature go, he redonned his sturdy leather gloves and turned to Monica. "Let's go over the mission one last time. Our first task is to secure the missing boys. Quickly, before they learn about the ancient magical item."

Monica was privately relieved that Louis was treating Glenn's and Cyril's safety as their top priority. She'd been certain he would say his apprentice could manage on his own. And maybe he would have, had Cyril not been involved.

"Once they're safe, our next goal is to destroy Galanis, the Flute of the False King, and all other magical items in the Gem Mage's possession."

He narrowed his eyes and glared into the Kelielinden Forest.

Though the winter trees bathed in morning light were missing most of their leaves, Louis and Monica couldn't see very far. Not only was the forest as big as a town, its terrain was uneven. It would take a good deal of time to search the whole thing.

"Your role is to be a distraction," continued Louis. "This forest

is the Gem Mage's backyard. We don't know what sort of traps he might have lying around."

The Gem Mage was a genius at crafting magical items. It was highly likely he'd placed some around the forest imbued with attack spells like Spiralflame. In addition, he could use Galanis's power to control spirits and have them patrol the woods.

Instead of attempting a frontal assault, it would be more prudent to have one of them draw the enemy's attention, creating an opening for the others to attack.

"I'll leave the method up to you," said Louis. "There are no settlements or roads around here, so feel free to make it flashy. Within reason, of course."

"…Um, I understand."

In truth, Monica wanted to go looking for Cyril and Glenn, too. But she couldn't risk exposing her identity.

To carry out this plan, the Sages would form teams to enter the forest, secure Cyril and Glenn, and destroy Galanis. The Barrier Mage would go with the Artillery Mage, while the Abyss Shaman accompanied the Witch of Thorns. The last of them, the Starseer Witch, wasn't a fighter, so she would be standing by outside the forest.

"According to the literature, while Galanis can control spirits, its powers don't extend to spirit kings," Louis explained. "So if need be, you may summon one."

"Um, even if it can't interfere with spirit kings, can it still, umm…?"

Louis quickly picked up on what Monica was trying to say and nodded. "Yes, it appears it can control high spirits. Ryn has likely fallen into enemy hands. If you encounter her, I suspect she will attack you without hesitation."

Monica tensed. A high wind spirit like Ryn could control her element without chanting and had a staggeringly high mana capacity. Even one of the Seven Sages would have a hard time disabling her.

"If she does, you may beat her into the dust. If you wind up eliminating her, I will simply regard it as inevitable. Please do as you must."

Louis said all this easily, as if it were nothing.

This troubled Monica. If Ryn was destroyed, she wouldn't

come back. Voice full of consternation, she said, “Um, but Miss Ryn is still your contracted spirit, so…”

“Only because our interests align. She’s responsible for her own actions in this situation. I won’t begrudge you for destroying her.”

The ease with which Louis said this made Monica wonder how the two of them ended up forming a contract in the first place.

As she stood there confused, Louis’s expression turned serious. “The Gem Mage’s offensive magecraft is second-rate at best. But he is beyond first-rate when it comes to crafting magical items. In recent years, with Duke Clockford as his patron, he’s even imbued some with advanced attack spells… He may have multiple items on the level of Spiralflame. Keep that in mind.”

Louis and the Gem Mage weren’t on good terms, but it seemed the Barrier Mage still respected his talents as a craftsman. Spiralflame—the item used in the failed assassination attempt against the second prince—was probably the most powerful magical item made in modern times. It had penetrated even Monica’s defensive barrier.

Only the Gem Mage would possess multiple magical items with that kind of power. He had an incredible talent for imbuing massive amounts of mana.

During the duel, Huberd Dee had used homemade magical items to shoot flame arrows at her. But next to the work of a Sage, they were like toys. Their rate of fire was excellent, but the strength of each shot paled in comparison.

Monica tensed.

“Be ever vigilant,” warned Louis.

“…Right.”

From here on out, Monica would be acting on her own. Louis would use flight magecraft to move away and join up with the Artillery Mage.

Just then, Monica remembered something she’d wanted to confirm. “Um, Mr. Louis,” she said. “I know I’m just a diversion. But if I happen to run across the Gem Mage, do you want me to capture him?”

“You needn’t bother. Even if we catch him, we can’t turn him in. And he’ll probably die if you punch him.”

“……”

“Break all his vaunted magical items, watch as he miserably turns tail and flees, then point and laugh uproariously at him.”

“……”

“Ah, I can’t wait to see him dare to show his pathetic face at the next Sages’ meeting! Ah-ha-ha!”

They were trying to stop a colleague who had committed a major crime, and yet Monica felt like *they* were the villains.

As far as she was concerned, neither party had justice on their side. That much was certain.

* * *

Soft singing drifted into Glenn’s ears as he slept beneath a blanket of dry grass and dead leaves.

It was so quiet, so gentle, that the faint rustling of the leaves nearly drowned it out. The voice reminded Glenn of home, and the tender melody, like a lullaby sung to children, tickled his ears.

“*Today, too, I have thread in my hands—and I pull them and weave them, thinking of you—and I pull them and weave them, thinking of you…*”

Glenn cracked open his eyes. Next to him, sitting on the ground, was a figure surrounded by flickering lights. The lights swirled and spun in tune with the music, like children dancing in joy.

Glenn continued to watch, still drowsy, until the voice weaving the gentle melody transformed into a shrill shout he found much more familiar.

“Glenn Dudley! If you are awake, then hurry up and get ready!”

“Oh, hey, VP… Mornin’…”

Glenn sat up, scattering the pile of dead leaves, and looked around, rubbing his eyes.

Morning light shone into the cave. Next to Cyril was the nameless ice spirit in the guise of a young boy. Low spirits drifted all around them.

Sezhdio, the earth spirit that looked like a large wolf, sat still against the stone wall.

“VP… That song…,” mumbled Glenn, still tired.

Cyril’s gaze drifted along the ground awkwardly. “Uh, that was… The wind spirits here went to find us breakfast, so I thought I’d thank them, and…”

Next to Cyril was a row of big leaves, piled high with berries. Apparently, the low spirits drifting around the cave had gathered all this for them.

Cyril smiled as a small light came to rest on the back of his hand. “It must have been difficult to find this much in the winter,” he said. “Thank you.”

He’s so conscientious, thought Glenn.

The two of them had been kidnapped and forced into helping these spirits. And yet Cyril made sure to thank the low spirits for gathering berries for their breakfast and had even sung for them in return.

Wind spirits were said to like songs as offerings. Cyril’s had apparently pleased them greatly. The ice spirit smiled at Glenn. “Good morning, Glenn.”

“Mornin’, Mr. Ice Spirit. Is there any water to drink?”

“Sure is. I just drew some.”

Next to Ice Spirit was a washtub made of ice filled with clear water. The spirit must have created the tub. Beside it were two simple bowls, each made from one half of a large tree nut. Glenn used one to scoop up some water and drank.

The ice had made it cold—a little too cold to be drinking on a winter morning—but it did wonders to soothe his dry throat.

“Should I thank you for the water, too?” Glenn wondered aloud. “Um, what kind of offerings do ice spirits like again…?”

Ice Spirit looked troubled and shook his head. “I can’t accept any offerings. I’d rather you sing some more songs for the little ones. It’s been a long time since they’ve heard one. They’re all very happy.”

The little orbs of light flickered, as if to agree. Glenn sat down beside Ice Spirit and wrapped his arms around his knees. Apparently, he planned on listening, not singing.

This irritated Cyril, but Ice Spirit’s expectant eyes won him over in the end. Reluctantly, he began to sing.

"Little bird, little bird,
When Shelgria takes away the leaves,
Hide for me the last of autumn, deep down in Haryenisida.
I'll admire it till yellow flowers bloom.

"Little bird, little bird,
When Alteria swings and rings its chimes,
Show to me the last of autumn, deep down in Haryenisida.
I'll hold it close in the e'er silent snow.

"Little bird, little bird,
Until Romalia closes tight its eyes,
Bring to me the last of autumn, deep down in Haryenisida.
I'll sing of it till spring does wake anew."

Cyril's voice as he sang was so soft and gentle that it was hard for Glenn to believe he was the same person always yelling at him. The vice president reached all the high notes without his voice breaking and tenderly stirred his listeners' emotions.

Next to him, the low spirits flickered; their light reflected off his silvery hair, making it glisten.

The song's lyrics mentioned Shelgria, Alteria, and Romalia, the spirits representing winter in Ridill. Their names were also used in the calendar. Shelgria invited winter in, Alteria rang the chimes, and Romalia made blizzards into lullabies. Many stories were associated with each of them, such as the myth behind the Alteria chimes Glenn had rung shortly before winter break.

Glenn eyed the ice spirit as he listened to the song. The boy seemed somehow entranced as he watched Cyril.

"Ice Spirit."

As soon as the song was done, the wolf sitting against the cave's wall spoke up. He was glaring at the boy with his sunset-colored eyes. "Will you not demand an offering?" he asked, his voice low and rumbling.

"Not when we're…the ones asking for help, Sezh," Ice Spirit chided.

One couldn't tell a spirit's age from their appearance. Glenn wondered how old the ice spirit was. He might be even older than

the wolf.

“I am in no position…to demand an offering.” The boy was calm and spoke with firm clarity.

After hearing their exchange, Cyril glanced at the dead leaves on the ground. “You were the one who gathered all the leaves and grass so we wouldn’t freeze, right?”

“That’s right. I don’t have…the power to keep humans warm…”

“But you still kept us from freezing. Thank you. If there’s anything I can do to show my gratitude, just say the word.”

Clearly, Cyril thought it was only proper to demonstrate his thanks to both the wind spirits *and* the ice spirit.

And all this despite having been kidnapped.

Gotta hand it to the VP. He’s so earnest, even with spirits…

Ice Spirit looked down, unsure of how to react. The cloak hiding his limbs swayed restlessly.

Eventually, he spoke. “A flower.”

“You want a flower?” asked Cyril.

Ice Spirit nodded. “If you find a flower, please freeze it and bring it to me. That’s the offering ice spirits like.”

“I see. Very well. If I find one in the forest, I will freeze it for you.”

Ice Spirit still looked troubled, but he thanked Cyril anyway.

Sezhdio patted the ground with his thick front paw as if to hurry them along. “Enough talking. Eat, then do something about the man with the flute, human.”

Cyril responded with a difficult expression. “That’s the plan, of course… But we can’t do anything just yet.”

“What’s this? Trying to stall for time, are you? Could you be friends of the man with the flute?” The wolf’s voice was hostile.

“Sezh!” exclaimed Ice Spirit.

Cyril didn’t seem offended, though. He spoke his next words as if they should be patently obvious. “It’s too early. It would be rude to barge in on him at this hour. We must be respectful and choose an appropriate time to visit.”

The two spirits both fell silent.

Glenn stifled a laugh. *Man, the VP really is something else.*

Cyril must have been the most earnest, serious, stubborn person in all of Serendia Academy. Apparently, he even planned to treat the man with the flute, the cause of this whole mess, with

utmost respect.

“Well, then!” said Glenn. “I’m raring to go. Let’s wrap this up and get back to…school…” Glenn trailed off. He’d just remembered what they were doing when the spirits brought them to this forest. “…Oh, right. We lost the magic battle, didn’t we?”

Huberd Dee had defeated them in a duel, with Monica as the prize.

Cyril nodded, clearly upset. “I’m worried about Accountant Norton. Once this matter is resolved, we will return at once.”

“Yes, sir!”



CHAPTER 11

Men Passing Through

As the last indigo vestiges of night vanished and the pleasant blue of morning stretched out across the sky, Monica walked up to the edge of Kelielinden Forest.

Even with the sun up, the morning chill was fierce. Frost crunched under her feet.

Monica gently curled and uncurled her numb fingers. The aftereffects of the curse had mostly subsided, but her left hand still stung a little. Probably best not to move it too much.

My objective is to completely destroy all of the Gem Mage's magical items, including the ancient one—Galanis, the Flute of the False King. I'm supposed to create a diversion… But how should I do it?

Monica looked around. She could mostly guess where the other Sage had laid down traps. The Gem Mage was a genius craftsman, but not a genius hunter, it seemed. He'd left traces of upturned soil here and there.

If she wanted to blow them all away, she could use flame magecraft, though it would be a little flashy. But if the fire jumped to the dried-out trees, it could burn half the forest down. There was no barrier around this area like there had been during the magic battle.

She had folded her arms, wondering what to do, when she heard a young man's voice. It was coming from the forest.

Lord Cyril?! Glenn?!

As she panicked, she saw someone running desperately out from the trees toward her. It was a man wearing work clothes, with a bandanna tied around his black hair—neither Cyril nor Glenn.

"M-Mr. Bartholomeus?!"

"Is that you, kid?! Can't believe it's come to this… More importantly, get moving! Something really bad is comin' this way!"

She heard the sound of scraping metal from deeper in the

woods. Then something appeared from between the trees—a full suit of armor. In its hand was a longsword.

The armor must have been quite heavy. And yet it moved nimbly, as though the metal were regular clothing. Right now, it was after Bartholomeus.

The armor brandished its blade as it ran. Monica was sure they were well out of the sword's range. But a moment later, the thing's arm *stretched*. Monica glimpsed some metal threads near its shoulder connecting the armor's torso to its right arm. Each one was about the thickness of her thumb, and they were all bundled together.

The armor's filled with metal thread? There's no human inside?

The armor's gauntlet, also connected by threads, swung the longsword down at Bartholomeus. Before it could slice him in half, however, Monica put up a defensive barrier.

"Kid, that thing's not human—it's a magical item!"

Indeed, Monica saw no face behind its helmet's visor. No matter how hard she looked, she saw only more of the thick metal threads.

It was hard to believe, but those threads were somehow moving the entire suit of armor.

It didn't matter how it worked, however. If there was no human inside, Monica didn't need to hold back.

And if I want to create a diversion, it should be loud and flashy, right…?

Monica concentrated, holding her right hand out toward the armor.

"In the name of Monica Everett, the Silent Witch and one of the Seven Sages, I command this gate to open."

A gate made of green light appeared in the direction of her outstretched hand. It slowly opened, calling forth a shining wind. The powerful gust shook her robe and veil.

"Come forth from the edge of stillness—Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits!"

The wind blowing out from the open gate formed invisible blades that sheared through the magical items embedded in the suit of armor as well as the ones buried in the ground.

The magical items were reduced to scraps, and the armor was sliced apart at each point of connection—the neck, the shoulders,

the base of the thighs—and these parts all clattered to the ground.

Metal threads stuck out where the armor was sliced; only those in the torso were still weakly moving.

Does that mean the core is in the torso section?

As Monica observed the armor, Bartholomeus approached it, then took a big handful of the metal wires protruding from the neck and gave them a tug.

It was like dragging the roots of a tree aboveground. The ends of the threads all attached to an object that looked like a broach adorned with an orange gemstone.

The stone was about as big as the loop Monica could make with her thumb and index finger. It glowed faintly.

"Um, is that stone the magical item?" she asked.

"…Yeah."

The stone's glow gradually weakened until it vanished without a sound, like a candle burning out.

The moment the glow disappeared, Monica felt a chill run up her spine.

"Wait, that light—was it…?"

A person could only imbue a modern magical item with so much mana. And a spell to control a suit of armor using metal threads would need a *lot* of it. It was impossible, at least via any technique Monica knew of.

But what if you could embed a magical *creature*, with a much larger reserve of mana, into the item?

"That magical item, its power source…," she stammered.

"…It was a spirit," growled Bartholomeus. "From this forest."

Now Monica was sure. The light disappearing from the gemstone had been the dying breath of a spirit that had used up the last of its strength.

Monica held her hands, slick with cold sweat, to her chest. She tried to catch her breath. First, she had to get a handle on the situation.

"Um, why are you in this forest?" she asked.

Bartholomeus, who had learned of the Silent Witch's identity through total coincidence, had agreed to help her under the condition that she set him up with his beloved, the wind spirit Rynzbelfeid.

Monica had asked him to investigate things outside Serendia

Academy. So what was he doing here?

Bartholomeus grimaced and scratched his bandanna. “Where to begin…? It’s a long story. But when I first arrived in this kingdom, I was workin’ at the Gem Mage’s workshop.”

“Really?”

The Gem Mage had a workshop in Ridill—and plenty of apprentices, to boot. It wasn’t strange that Bartholomeus, a craftsman himself, would have been employed there.

“The Gem Mage always made his apprentices and other hired craftsmen like me do all the actual work, while he stuck to his own personal research,” explained Bartholomeus.

It happened all the time—famous craftsmen were busy and often had their apprentices fill in for them.

But Bartholomeus wasn’t done. “And then he’d sign the items we created like he’d made them himself. That way, he could sell them for higher prices. I got sick of it and left the workshop.”

Monica was stunned. It was unthinkable. But it also made perfect sense.

Wait. Then Lord Cyril’s broach…

Cyril’s broach bore the signature of the Gem Mage, and yet it had been a low-quality product lacking even a basic safety formula. Maybe one of the Gem Mage’s apprentices had created it in his stead.

And the flaw in the broach caused Lord Cyril so much pain…

Monica was silent, and Bartholomeus shrugged. His usual cheerful demeanor now held a hint of disgust.

“And what do you think that old man was up to while he made us do all his work?” he asked.

“Huh? Um, you said personal research, right? …Oh,” Monica replied, catching on.

Bartholomeus nodded, then lowered his gaze to the ruined gemstone in his palm. “That *personal research* of his was finding a way to make the spirits in this forest into a power source for his magical items. I happened to catch a glimpse of his research records, which is how I know… Just a coincidence, I promise. I wasn’t trying to sneak a peek and earn some dough for myself, just so we’re clear!”

As Monica listened, she began to think.

Parts of magical creatures, such as the scales and fangs of

dragons, were highly prized as quality materials for constructing magical items. But to make a whole spirit into an energy source was unprecedented. Most people would never even consider something so horrifying. Besides, it was practically impossible to capture a spirit in the first place.

But with Galanis, the Flute of the False King, that would no longer be an issue.

"Bein' the clever man I am," continued Bartholomeus, "I decided not to get involved in somethin' so dangerous. But one day, while I was lookin' up at the sky, thinking of my dear Rynny, I happened to spot her flying in this direction."

Bartholomeus now knew Rynzbelfeid was a spirit contracted to Louis, but that hadn't changed his feelings. And he knew that the Gem Mage was conducting research to make spirits into energy right here, at Kelielinden Forest.

"I figured it was dangerous for Rynny, so I came running. That make sense?"

It did, but it also complicated matters.

Nervously, Monica asked, "How much do you know about this method to transform spirits into energy?"

"I'll be honest. Saw the designs, no idea what they meant. I don't even know how you'd catch a spirit to put 'em in a magical item in the first place. I mean, it's not exactly *easy* to get ahold of one."

It seemed Bartholomeus didn't know about Galanis. But now that he was here to save Ryn, it would be difficult to persuade him to turn back. What's more, Monica had promised to introduce him to Ryn, though only at Bartholomeus's unilateral insistence.

She'd simply have to hide the details and get him to help her. "I, um, I want to save Ryn, too, so… Um, I'm here to, well, talk some sense into the Gem Mage!"

She decided not to say anything about hanging him, since that sounded far too violent.

Bartholomeus's eyes sparkled. "Sounds like our goals align. Let's team up, kid! We'll rescue Rynny from the clutches of that evil mage!"

"R-right!"

As she nodded, Monica thought about how much trouble this

was going to cause her.

At least Bartholomeus had a loud voice that carried far—perfect for a diversion.

* * *

Before leaving his dorm and Wildianu behind, Felix removed his uniform's decorative mantle and threw on a plain cloak. He wanted to keep the uniform on just in case he ran into anyone while on school grounds; it would look suspicious if he wasn't wearing it.

Once he was off campus, he asked a merchant he knew to lend him a horse and rode off toward Kelielinden Forest. He still hadn't slept, but he was used to pulling all-nighters.

No classes for the next two days. I'll have to settle things by then.

Felix arrived at his destination in the early morning. He glanced around, eventually catching sight of a shining gate by the forest's western edge. That was the gate for summoning Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits.

Not many in Ridill could summon this particular spirit king. It had to be either the Silent Witch or the Barrier Mage.

From what Wil told me, I'm guessing the Gem Mage has an ancient magical item in his possession… The other Sages are probably trying to retrieve it and cover the whole thing up.

Felix tied his horse behind a tree to hide it, then stepped into the woods.

The Kelielinden Forest had a very high mana density. Someone with a low mana capacity couldn't endure it for even half a day.

Cyril and Dudley both have high capacities, so they shouldn't come down with mana poisoning very quickly.

Perhaps it was a stroke of good luck that the two of them had spent all their mana in the magic battle. Mana-rich forests like these were harmful to humans, but they could also speed up a person's mana recovery.

Silencing his footsteps, Felix listened closely as he advanced through the trees. Wildianu had told him the location of the cave

where Cyril and Glenn had been taken—and that they were heading for the Gem Mage's cabin deeper in the forest. It didn't take much time to find them.

…There they are. Cyril and Dudley.

He could see the two boys farther back in the trees, dressed in their white uniforms. He also saw an unfamiliar young child and a wolf as big as a boar—the spirits who had kidnapped them, most likely. From Wildianu's explanation, it seemed Cyril and Glenn had promised to help the spirits.

To think they'd be so moved by the very spirits who kidnapped them…

Stifling a sigh, Felix thought about his next move. He couldn't afford for anyone to find out he'd come to the forest—and that included Cyril and Glenn. How would he ensure their safety without letting them see him?

Felix put some distance between himself and the others and began looking around.

…There we go.

Felix shed his cloak. The white uniform of Serendia Academy would stand out in the forest, making it a perfect way to draw attention.

I'll have them *keep those two safe.*

* * *

Guided by the ice spirit, Cyril and Glenn headed deeper into the forest. They were on their way to persuade the man with the flute to stop making so much trouble. According to Ice Spirit, the man stayed in a small house next to a spring, and that was where he created his magical items.

"There's actually a shortcut, but to stay hidden, we'll have to take a more roundabout route," said the boy. They were trying to avoid a section of the woods where the trees were sparse. The flute player probably had the spirits under his control patrolling for Ice Spirit and Sezhdio, so he could bring them under his command.

Sezhdio growled and pricked up his ears, wary of his

surroundings. “Be extra cautious with high spirits. Relva the fire spirit, Vestion the earth spirit, and a passing wind spirit whose name I do not know—these three take the form of humans and have joined our enemy.”

Spirits were considered magical beasts, all of which possessed vast amounts of mana. They could generally only live in mana-dense regions. If they wished to leave those areas, they needed to form a contract with a human. With their natural habitats becoming smaller and smaller in modern times, it was said the number of spirits was also decreasing.

Spirits can manipulate vast amounts of mana without chanting, thought Cyril. *If we end up having to fight one, we’ll never win.*

If possible, it would be best to resolve matters through discussion, but if the spirits were under someone else’s control, that would be difficult. Ice Spirit was a high spirit, but he claimed to have little power left, and Sezhdio was only a mid-level spirit. They needed to avoid combat at all costs.

As Cyril sharpened his focus, Glenn, walking next to him, muttered, “A passing wind spirit, huh…?”

“Does that ring a bell?” asked Cyril.

Glenn folded his arms and frowned. “Hmm. I’m probably just overthinking it… But either way, if we’re up against a high wind spirit, it’ll be a real pain. They’re super fast, and you can’t even see their attacks— Oh!”

Something had caught Glenn’s eye in the brush to Cyril’s right. Cyril turned to look as well.

A fox with reddish-brown fur suddenly peeked out from the foliage about ten steps away.

Glenn’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. “Oh, just a fox…” He’d hoped it was a rabbit or a deer.

Next to him, Cyril quickly chanted. “Freeze!”

A wall of ice burst from the ground, then wrapped around the fox, trapping it.

“VP?” said Glenn in confusion. “Fox meat isn’t very good.”

“Did you forget what we learned about magical biology?! It was on the test!”

“Huh?”

The wall of ice surrounding the fox glowed red, then exploded from the inside. Tongues of flame leaped out as the wall

shattered.

The flaming fox stared at them with sharp eyes—they were scarlet, an unnatural color.

“Magical creatures always keep their eye color, no matter what form they take!” shouted Cyril.

A red glow engulfed the fox, then expanded. From the light emerged a red-haired, red-eyed woman wearing a dress of thin silk. She had the appearance of being in her midtwenties, and she was beautiful, with a sharp gaze.

Ice Spirit yelped. “That’s Relva, the fire spirit!”

The young woman silently swung her right arm. Flames erupted all around Cyril and the others, forming high walls twice Cyril’s height.

There were a lot of dry trees in the forest, and any slipup might lead to a fire. But these flames didn’t spread—perhaps the fire spirit was cleverly controlling them.

Either way, the walls of fire were closing in around them and would soon turn them to ash.

This was no magic battle. There was no barrier for protection, and they could feel the bloodlust emanating from the spirit’s flames. She was out to roast them alive.

Cyril felt a cold sweat on his back. *Stay calm*, he told himself. *Stay calm…*

He looked around. They had no chance of beating a high spirit in a fair fight. Quickly, he asked Sezhdio, “Can you run with all of us on your back?”

The wolf sniffed in distaste, then lowered himself, as if to hurry them along.

“We’re getting out of here, Dudley,” said Cyril. “We’ll break straight through!”

“Roger!”

Cyril got his leg over the wolf’s back and put his arms around the ice spirit in front of him. Glenn, chanting, hopped on behind him. Cyril pointed, and Glenn fired an extra-large fireball in that direction.

“Let’s go!” he shouted.

Glenn’s fireball slammed into the wall of flames and burst, creating a large hole.

“Perfect! Now freeze!”

The woman's flames were spreading, trying to fill the hole. To stop them, Cyril deployed another ice wall.

The spirit's fire and Cyril's ice slammed together. The spirit had way more power behind her magic, but the ice was enough to buy them time. In those few seconds, Sezhdio took off.

The wolf shot through the flame wall with impressive speed, despite his heavy load, and began to flee deeper into the forest.

But after only a few steps, Sezhdio's right front leg suddenly buckled, sending him tumbling and flinging all of his riders to the ground

"Urgh… What just happened?" Cyril said, groaning and sitting up.

Then his eyes went wide. A flame arrow was stuck in Sezhdio's front leg.

Spirits didn't bleed; instead, large particles of light began to leak away.

The fire spirit Relva, in her human form, slowly approached them. All around her floated fireballs, each about the size of a fist —over twenty of them.

I have to protect us from her attack, thought Cyril, starting to chant. But before he could finish, the fireballs came raining down.

I won't make it!

The rain of fire was dazzling, almost blinding. It was about to burn them all to a crisp.

Then, suddenly, something blocked out the light. Plant vines. Each of them was powerful, thicker than Cyril's arms, and they spread out in front of Cyril and the others like a swarm of snakes.

Are those roses?

The rose vines intertwined and overlapped, forming a wall to protect them from the rain of fire. The fire spirit's powerful deluge of flame burned the surface of the vines but couldn't completely incinerate them.

Just as Relva spun around, the ground began to rise quickly in little hills. Bramble branches, all with sharp thorns, burst out from below.

They were sharper than blades, and they skewered Relva all over her body.

Being wholly made of mana, spirits didn't feel pain, nor did

they shed blood. But the light of her mana began to spill out from her injuries.

Relva covered herself with flames as one might don a cloak, burning through the branches still stabbing her. But before they were totally incinerated, more rose vines leaped up from the ground and coiled around her.

The vines seemed to be filled with moisture. Compared to the branches, they were much more resistant to Relva's flames.

She couldn't take them out fast enough, and soon even more vines were coiled around her like a swarm of large snakes, binding her in place.

Without wasting another moment, she changed back into a fox, fled through the gaps in the vines, and escaped into the forest. The remnants of her fire disappeared, melting into the air. Eventually, the only thing left were the charred rose vines.

Are we…saved?

Suddenly, Cyril remembered a passage from a book he'd once read.

The hell of thorns skewered the enemy soldiers, one after the next, staining the lands red with their blood. It was a story about the cruelest, most merciless witch in the history of the Kingdom of Ridill—the infamous Rebecca Roseburg, the first Witch of Thorns.

"Hey! Everyone all right over there?"

The cheerful voice seemed out of place as it carried through the winter forest.

Cyril turned toward the sound and found two people. One was a man with curly red hair, in farmer's clothes, while the other was a purple-haired man wearing a black hooded robe. They both stood out, though for different reasons; they were the sort of people one never forgot.

The man with the curly scarlet hair was Raul Roseburg, the fifth Witch of Thorns. The other one—with purple hair—was Ray Albright, the third Abyss Shaman.

Cyril was dumbfounded. What were the Seven Sages doing here? Ray looked at Cyril, then at Glenn, and scowled.

"Those uniforms are so bright, they hurt my eyes," he said. "We followed them, and who should we find but the pretty-faced fraudster who toyed with my emotions… Why should I protect

the likes of you? This is the worst. Curse you all…”

Pretty-faced fraudster who toyed with his emotions? thought Cyril. *Who is he talking about?*

Glenn, still sitting on the ground, joined in. “Oh, hey, it’s you! You’re that Sage I met in Rehnberg… Uh, the purple one!”

Ray’s eyes narrowed even further in distaste, and he bared his gums. A gloomy aura seemed to emanate from his person.

Calling a Sage “the purple one” was indeed quite rude. Cyril glared at Glenn, then politely bowed to Raul and Ray.

“Lord Witch of Thorns, Lord Abyss Shaman, I sincerely thank you for saving our lives.”

Raul laughed pleasantly at this show of gratitude and waved his hands. “No need to be so formal,” he said. “We’re not on an official mission or anything.”

“This isn’t an official mission…?” Cyril frowned.

Come to think of it, neither of them were wearing the Sage’s robes or carrying their staffs. But if this wasn’t an official mission, then what were they doing in the forest?

As if responding to his unspoken question, Raul winked. “We’re on vacation at the moment, and we just happened to come here for a picnic! Don’t think of me as a Sage today—I’m just a gardener passing through!”

Cyril wasn’t the only one dumbfounded by this. Glenn, Ice Spirit, and Sezhdio were also speechless.

As Cyril struggled to find a response, Ray said bitterly, “Two men out on a picnic in the forest in the middle of winter…? That cover story sounds like an absolute *nightmare*.”

“Look, Ray, this is a good chance for you to make friends. Having a picnic together is definitely the sort of thing friends do!”

“No flowers, no girls… I want to go home…”

“You want flowers? Will roses do? I can make as many as you like.”

“Blast. Blast! Why is there no girl here who will love me?!”

As he watched the Sages’ exchange, Cyril fled into his thoughts. *There must be some reason they’re keeping their actions secret. But why would the Sages be in these woods?*

It was possible they’d come to rescue Cyril and Glenn, but that would hardly require *two* Sages.

Could this man with the flute be that dangerous? Is the situation

far graver than I'd imagined…?

Raul plodded over to Cyril. *This man is a Sage. I must be on my best behavior.* Cyril straightened up—both mentally and physically.

Raul gave him a toothy grin. "I actually think a big straw hat would have made me look even more like a gardener. But someone told me it would be weird to wear one in the middle of winter. So, how do I look? Gardener-like, I hope?"

Gardener-like? What does that even mean? thought Cyril, giving it some earnest thought.

Meanwhile, Glenn brushed the dirt off his uniform and turned to Ray. "So, if the other guy's a gardener, what's the purple one supposed to be?"

Ray's pink eyes widened. "I… Well, I…" The gloomy, black-robed shaman poked his index fingers together and eventually managed a single word. "……Poet."

"Yep!" said Raul. "Just a passing gardener and poet! Pleased to meetcha!"

Here were two of the Seven Sages, calling themselves a gardener and a poet. And one of them had just said "pleased to *meetcha*." Cyril couldn't even bring himself to nod, much less to speak.

Watching out of the corner of his eye as Raul chatted cheerfully with Cyril and Glenn, Ray covertly reached into his robe and let loose a bat familiar.

He'd entrusted it with a message—the missing people were safe.

That was it for phase one of the plan. Now, while Ray and Raul were escorting the boys out of the forest, the older guys more suited to fighting would go and string up the Gem Mage, and that would be that.

Ray looked forward to going right home, having some warm milk tea, and composing a poem. Poetry was his hobby. Yes, that sounded quite nice.

As Ray rubbed his cold, numb hands together, Raul patted him a few times on the shoulder.

“So, Ray, a picnic means eating outside, right? Well, I brought a whole sack of vegetables with me. We can all eat them together!”

Suddenly, Ray felt very anxious. Did this guy even remember what they were supposed to be doing?

* * *

I made it in time, thought Felix as he silently wrapped his cloak back over his white school uniform.

The Sages had Glenn and Cyril and would protect them.

I suppose I’ll stay hidden and keep an eye on things for now.

Moving from tree to tree, Felix glanced toward where he’d seen the gate for summoning a spirit king appear.

If that was the Silent Witch’s magecraft… Ah, how I wish I could have seen her work up close…

Privately disappointed, Felix heaved a sad sigh.



EPILOGUE

Obstructing Winds

The Silent Witch bent down beside the suit of armor, now in shambles, and inspected its construction.

Bartholomeus frowned. Even a Sage couldn't possibly understand how such a thing worked just by looking at it.

Metal threads were packed inside the armor, connecting its various pieces and allowing it to move. The threads were much more noteworthy than the armor itself. They were only about as thick as Monica's thumb, and yet they were jam-packed with an unbelievable number of magecraft formulae.

Monica observed them impassively. "Hmm… I don't think I'll be able to rewrite these."

Of course not, thought Bartholomeus candidly. You couldn't just *rewrite* magecraft formulae like that.

"We'll just have to destroy it," he said, squatting next to her and rapping on the breastplate with a fist. "Apparently, this walkin' armor is called a *magical armored soldier*. It's got a gem at its core, somewhere around the belly. Armor's thicker there, naturally, so it's gonna take a lot of elbow grease to break."

As Bartholomeus explained this, it struck him again just how incredible the magical item was. A suit of armor sturdier than a human, yet also nimbler. If it was mass-produced, you could probably send them to war in place of humans.

Monica stared, unblinking, at the threads. "What if we sever the spirit it's using as a power source from the armor?" she asked.

"The spirit's basically a part of the magical item at this point. I don't think we can cut it free," explained Bartholomeus.

Using metal threads to make a suit of armor move like a human wasn't nearly as easy as it sounded. A magical item needed a *lot* of mana just to move something at all. And to mimic the precise movements of a human? The instructions would be way too complicated. Essentially, it was impossible to pull off such a feat using magecraft formulae alone.

Bartholomeus recalled the designs he'd once stolen a peek at.

“If I’m rememberin’ right, the spirit and soldier are synchronized. Meanin’ the threads and armor are part of the spirit, too.”

“I see…”

Monica reached for the spot where the threads originated and plucked out the ornamental frame and the orange gemstone embedded within.

The scattered pieces of armor and bundles of threads looked like entrails. It was an eerie sight, like a human corpse. Monica seemed unfazed, however. The way she observed the soldier was like a doctor performing an autopsy.

She looked young and unreliable, but she was still a Sage—one of the greatest mages in the kingdom.

Monica pulled threads out of the armor one after another, then spread them out at her feet. “This magical armored soldier can be roughly divided into four parts,” she said. “The armor, the metal threads, the ornamental frame, and the gemstone.”

What’s this? Bartholomeus was a bit surprised. He knew a thing or two about the soldier from having peeped at its blueprints, but Monica was just seeing one for the first time.

She continued, separating out the threads into smaller groups and inspecting them. “If I can find the connection formulae linking each part together…,” she said. “I, um, might be able to cut the spirit free without hurting it.”

The suit of armor had been filled to the brim with metal threads. The magecraft formulae on them were innumerable. Reading them all, understanding them, and locating the connection formulae was no easy task. And attacking only the connection formulae inside a moving suit of armor actively attacking you? There was absolutely no way.

As Bartholomeus opened his mouth to point that out, he heard the clanking of armor from deeper in the forest. Looking around, he found more magical armored soldiers headed their way.

And not just one—five.

“Hey, kid! Not good! Reinforcements are here!” he shouted.

Monica slowly looked up. Her youthful face showed no hint of distress or fear. Her right hand moved in a smooth motion, and instantly, the new soldiers all froze from the legs down. She’d used unchanted magecraft.

But even without their legs, they could still extend those metal threads to attack.

And sure enough, just as Bartholomeus had feared, threads emerged from their right arms, turning into whips holding swords.

"…Around the left ribs," murmured Monica instead of chanting.

A moment later, five lightning arrows—thin, like twigs—shot out from Monica's right toward the soldiers. Extending their right arms like that had created a gap between their breastplates and right shoulders. The bolts stabbed into those gaps, plunging inside the armor.

What was that…? wondered Bartholomeus

The lightning arrows had probably struck the soldiers exactly where Monica had just specified—the place the left rib cage would be on a human.

The five armored soldiers gave full-body spasms, much like a human would, and stopped in place.

Monica disengaged her ice magecraft. As the ice shattered, the soldiers fell to the ground.

Bartholomeus gulped, then asked, "What did you just do?"

With plodding, awkward footsteps, Monica trotted over to one of the fallen soldiers. Then she pointed at a cavity in the armor between the threads extending from its right shoulder and its torso.

"When the threads in its right arm stretch out really far, it creates an opening right here. That's where I sent the lightning arrows."

Monica removed the soldier's helmet, then pulled out the metal threads. A single section of the bundles had black burn marks on it—these were the ones from the left rib cage area.

"The burned part…," said Bartholomeus. "Is that the connection formula?"

"Yes," said Monica. "Attack here, and it cuts off the coordination between the armor, threads, ornamental frame, and gemstone… That way, I can sever the imprisoned spirit from the armor."

Without the connection, the soldier couldn't absorb the spirit's mana. Taking away that power source had disabled it.

Monica then pulled the ornamental frame and gemstone out and lowered her gaze. The stone glowed with a brilliant light, casting several rays along her robe.

“I did it.”

Then, nestled in her little hands, the gemstone popped out of its frame. It really had been that easy.

Bartholomeus stared at the stone. It had been glowing orange before, but now its light faded, and it took on a cloudy brown color.

And then a white, chain-like pattern circled around the cloudy gemstone.

“That’s…a sealing formula?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I’m sealing it temporarily until I can release it properly…”

Monica went to the second suit of armor and pulled out its threads and gemstone, too. One by one, she cut the spirits out of the armor and sealed them.

She’s… But how…?

Bartholomeus smiled nervously and began to sweat.

The Silent Witch had taken almost no time at all to grasp the structure of the magical armored soldiers and locate the connection formula.

And on top of that, she’d disabled them while dealing as little damage as possible.

She’d frozen the soldiers’ lower bodies to stop them in their tracks because she knew it would make them stretch their arms out to attack her.

And then she’d fired lightning arrows into the gaps in their armor, surgically striking the connection formulae near the left rib cage.

I can’t believe my eyes… The Gem Mage’s artistry was incredible, but this is really something else. Is everyone in the Seven Sages like this?

Bartholomeus had given up. He’d thought it impossible. But this little witch had accomplished the task so easily.

As he watched her with fear and awe in his eyes, Monica finished the last seal and put the gemstone in her pocket, then scampered back over to him.

“Mr. Bartholomeus, I’m, um, finished… Hyah?!”

The Sage who had just shown off her incredible genius tripped over the remnants of the armor and went careening face-first into the ground.

She sniffed and started sobbing. In every other respect, she was still just a child.

This kid's full of contradictions. And frankly, she worries me a little bit…

The Silent Witch Monica Everett was, without a doubt, an extraordinary genius. A mage of the highest class.

And yet she was careless, even oblivious, when it came to herself. It reminded Bartholomeus of his little sister back home. He scratched his black hair through his bandanna.

Monica got back up, then checked her pocket to make sure none of the stones had fallen out. Seeing that they were all unharmed, she put them back.

I have to find Mr. Louis and the others quickly and tell them about how the spirits are being used to power magical items…

She hadn't released any of the spirits yet—instead, she'd sealed them. She didn't want Galanis, the Flute of the False King, to take control of them again. If she kept them sealed for now, they wouldn't exhaust themselves to the point of annihilation.

Bartholomeus adjusted his tool belt, then turned to Monica. "Come to think of it, is that Alexander guy here today?"

"Oh, um, actually… He's taking a break…"

Bartholomew Alexander was Nero's false name when he assumed human form. Unable to tell the man he was asleep for the winter, Monica stammered and mumbled until Bartholomeus took her numb, red hand.

"Your left hand must still hurt from that dragon's curse, yeah? You sure you should be movin' it around?"

"Oh, um, yes. It still stings a little… But it's much better than before." Monica awkwardly opened and closed her hand.

Bartholomeus frowned. "Yeah, you definitely worry me…"

"…Huh?"

"A kid like you with an injured arm shouldn't have come out here alone. Do the Seven Sages always act like this?"

“Um, well…”

After becoming a Sage, Monica had holed up in her mountain cabin, engrossed in magecraft research and calculations. She didn’t know how the other Sages carried out their work, but she thought they were probably similar. They almost never worked together.

Bartholomeus sighed at her vague answer. “Well, whatever. Let’s just go… I’m coming, Rynny, my goddess. Wait for me.”

Monica followed behind Bartholomeus as he tromped along through the forest. But after just a few steps, he stopped, saw how she was trotting to keep up with him, and slowed down. He was a nice person.

Monica kept moving, careful not to get her feet tangled in the tree roots

“Y’know, I just remembered,” said Bartholomeus. “I finished that investigation you requested.”

“Huh?”

“I meant to come and tell you, but I was waiting for a good time to pretend to be a contractor so I could sneak into your school. Gee, and to think I almost forgot because of Rynny’s crisis!”

Monica tensed. The investigation he was talking about had to do with Peter Summs—aka Barry Oats—the shaman she’d encountered in Rehnberg.

As Peter died, he’d said the name of Monica’s father—and implied he was somehow related to his death.

“Before that old fogy came to Rehnberg, he was employed by Duke Clockford. But not exactly as a *servant*, you see. It seems he often visited the duke’s mansion, but nobody knows exactly what he was doin’ there.”

Duke Clockford, Second Prince Felix Arc Ridill’s grandfather, was the most influential man in the kingdom—the same man who’d offered Monica a deal on the first night of the new year.

The Abyss Shaman had told her that he’d once tried to investigate the traitorous shaman, only to be stopped by the duke’s intervention.

It seemed Duke Clockford really *was* the one pulling all the strings.

Monica gulped. “When, um, did the duke hire Peter Summs?”

she asked.

“About eight years ago,” replied Bartholomeus.

Monica clenched her trembling hands and tried to shove back down her rising distress.

…That’s a little before Dad was executed, she thought. The execution was seven years ago. Peter Summs had started visiting Duke Clockford’s mansion only a little while before.

The more information Monica got, the more her suspicion turned to conviction.

Duke Clockford is very likely connected to Dad’s death.

The same went for Felix, the man’s grandson. It was a terrible thought, and it made her insides freeze up, like her blood had suddenly turned to ice water.

But why…? Why would he do such a thing?

Monica’s father, Venedict Reyn, had been a scholar. He’d stayed far away from politics. She doubted he and the duke had any direct connection. The one linking them was Peter Summs. And Peter knew about her father’s research.

Was his work inconvenient for someone? Is it related to the Black Grail in the message from Mr. Porter?

But any further thought on the matter would be only idle speculation. Monica still didn’t have enough to draw any conclusions.

She took a quiet, deep breath and thought about the person at the root of their current mission. Emanuel Darwin—the Gem Mage, a supporter of the second prince and someone well-acquainted with Duke Clockford.

She didn’t think he was linked to her father’s death, but if she could get him on her side, he might provide her with more information on the duke. But she was a terrible negotiator. As she was wondering if she had any chance of persuading him at all, she tripped over a tree root.

“Hurgh?!”

“Whoa, watch it!” Bartholomeus quickly grabbed her arm as she toppled forward. “Careful, kid.”

“R-right.”

She’d been tripping all day. But as she bowed in thanks to Bartholomeus, she suddenly remembered something.

Oh, right. I have to reward him for gathering that information.

Peter Summs's past was something even the Abyss Mage hadn't been able to pry into. It couldn't have been easy for Bartholomeus.

"Um, Mr. Bartholomeus, about your payment…"

Before she could say she'd pay him once they were done here, he said, "Payment? Don't need it."

"Huh? Wait, but… What?"

"I mean, at first, I was like, 'Doing a job for a Sage will set me up for life!' But…" He scratched his beard and glanced at Monica. "I've got a little sister. So I tend to spoil kids your age."

"Um, but your payment—"

"Kids are supposed to ask adults for *help*. You shouldn't be asking me to work for you—you should be asking me to *help* you."

Monica had asked Bernie for help a lot back at Minerva's. But ever since becoming a Sage, she'd stopped relying on people like that.

After all, her colleague—who was over a decade older than she was—was the type of man to drag Monica off on dragon hunts.

So when requesting assistance from Bartholomeus, Monica had framed it as hiring him. She thought that was normal.

But even though she was a Sage, Bartholomeus treated her as a child and told her she should rely on the adults in her life.

Monica felt her lips twitching beneath her veil.

Bartholomeus mussed her bangs with his hand. "C'mon. Let me spoil you, all right?"

"Um, well. Thank you."

Bartholomeus smiled. *He really is kind*, thought Monica.

As she awkwardly played with her fingers, a thought struck Bartholomeus. "Right! I don't need payment, but you're still gonna help me out with Rynny! I won't yield on that!"

"Oh, yes. Right…"

"And I'll be cheering you on, too! So that things go well for you and the prince!"

Monica considered this. *He must mean he'll help make my bodyguard mission a success. He's such a nice person*, she thought, moved.

Bartholomeus stepped up to her, suddenly looking desperate. "So, I was thinking. When you introduce me to Rynny, could you

tell her I’m very kind and very cool and just all-around wonderful?”

But just then, a gust of wind cut off his words.

As Monica shivered, she noticed something. That wasn’t the north wind. This wind was full of malice. It was sent from above to crush those on the ground.

Monica instantly put up a defensive barrier.

The hemispherical barrier appeared over the two of them as invisible blades of wind slashed down.

As the dead leaves all around them fluttered up into the air, Monica saw her—a beautiful blond maid standing, feet together, atop a tree directly in front of them.

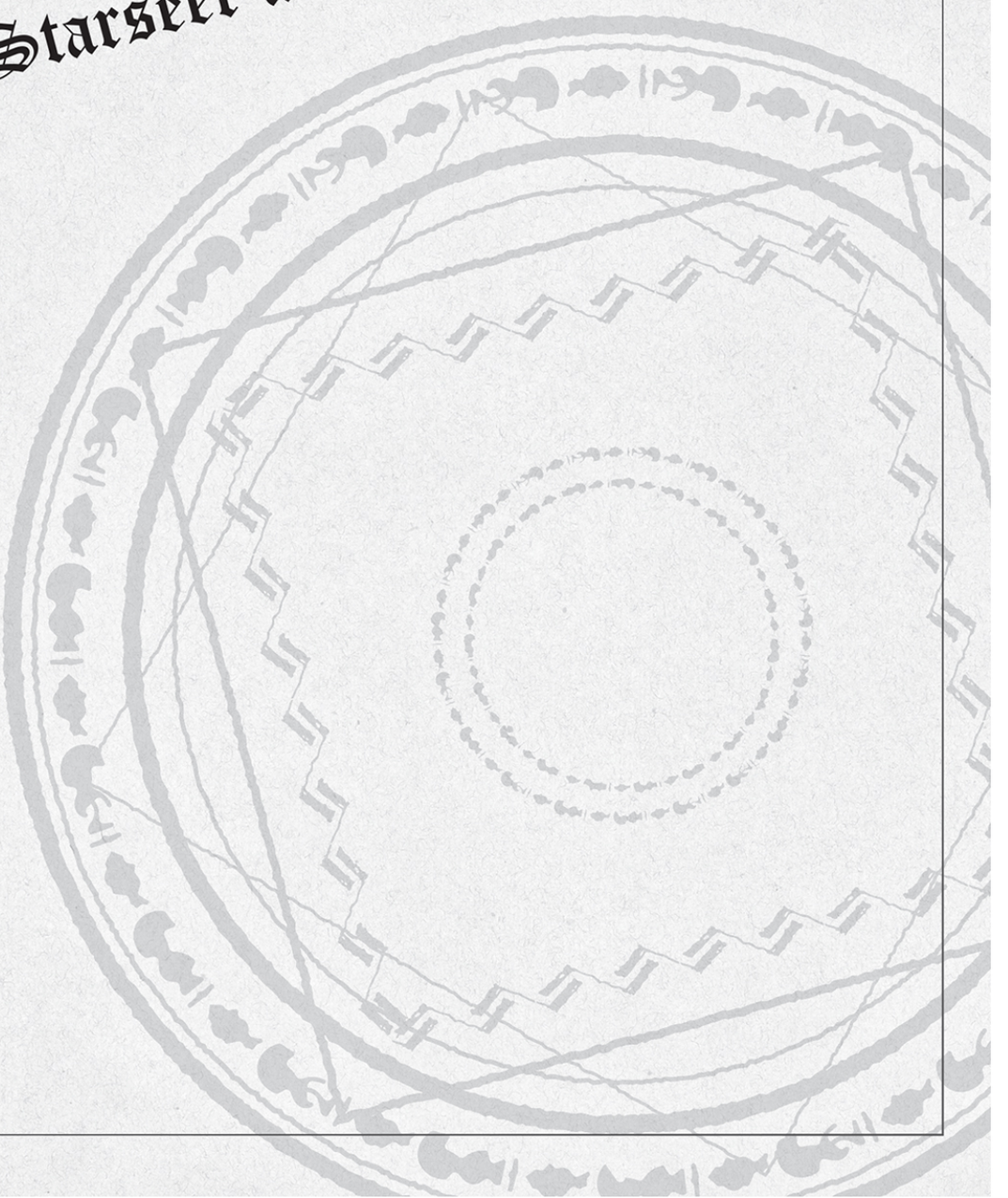
“Miss…Ryn…,” murmured Monica.

The wind spirit Rynzbelfeid, her expression impassive, set upon Monica with her blades of air.

Her hostile gusts battered them, clearly meant to kill.

SECRET EPISODE

Starseer and Starspear



Deep in the Kelielinden Forest, in a house by a spring, the Gem Mage Emanuel Darwin sat in his chair and listened to the fire spirit Relva's report. The spirit had taken the form of a red-haired woman in a thin dress; she looked at him with her scarlet eyes and slowly told him what she'd seen.

"Man with purple hair. Man with red hair. Plant-based attack."

Communicating with spirits under the control of Galanis was rather difficult—the item's main drawback. Nevertheless, Emanuel could easily put together a picture of what had happened from her report.

"The Abyss Shaman and the Witch of Thorns are here," he said.

And according to another spirit's report, someone had summoned the king of the wind spirits in the western part of the forest. That would be trouble. Even the ancient magical item Galanis couldn't control a spirit king.

"The spirit king destroyed many of the traps I placed to deter intruders, as well as several magical armored soldiers. Judging from the element, it must be either the Barrier Mage or the Silent Witch…"

He was thinking out loud so Galanis could hear. The item currently hung from his neck.

"This won't be any problem, my master! No matter how many Sages come, none of them can compare to you now!"

Galanis's words echoed comfortably in Emanuel's mind.

Mages of incredible talent were approaching. Once, he would have paled in fear.

But now he had Galanis, the Flute of the False King. He *also* had his puppet spirits, the magical armored soldiers, and a stupendously powerful secret weapon.

Emanuel put Galanis to his lips and blew a few notes to strengthen his control over Relva. Then he gave her an order. "Capture all those who step into this forest—alive, if possible. You may kill the Barrier Mage, however."

Emanuel was confident that when he showed the other Sages

his ancient magical item's astonishing power, they would be eating out of the palm of his hand…except for the Barrier Mage. He would never obey, even if it killed him.

And someone else will be quite happy to see the Barrier Mage gone. He was hoping for hostilities all along—he must think very highly of my forces here.

Emanuel's mind filled with visions of a radiant future. He smiled, entranced.

And all the while, he remained ignorant of the ancient item's terrible ambition as it squawked into his ear.

* * *

Atop a small hill with a good view of Kelielinden Forest stood a woman.

She was beautiful, with straight, smooth, silvery hair. Her name was Mary Harvey, the Starseer Witch. Right now, she was wearing a fur coat instead of her Sage's robe, and in place of her staff, she held a gorgeous jewelry box.

"You've finally crossed the line, Emmy…"

She lowered her silver eyelashes sadly, casting a shadow over her pale-blue eyes.

Galanis, the Flute of the False King, was an ancient magical item in the form of a flute that could call forth the ravages of war. If left alone, a great calamity would fall upon the kingdom of Ridill.

They had to destroy it here and now—at any cost.

As she sighed, another woman walked up behind her.

The second woman was around thirty years old, with brick-colored hair tied loosely behind her. Her face was bare of makeup, and her clothes were worn, like she'd used them for many years.

She came to stand beside Mary and said casually, "I've gotten the gist of the situation. Guess settling things peacefully won't be so easy, eh?"

"Indeed. It's quite troubling… Even I couldn't possibly cover

the entire forest in an illusion."

Mary was skilled at illusion magecraft, but she knew this was beyond her. It was quite different from covering the night sky in stars.

"If Ra-ra gets too serious, Emmy will die for sure… And if my dear Ray gets too serious, the whole forest will wither… It's quite the conundrum."

The Seven Sages each possessed incredible abilities, but most of them specialized in a specific field. The Witch of Thorns and the Abyss Mage, in particular, had powers with limited applications.

With slender fingers, Mary stroked the jewelry box in her hands.

A faint voice echoed from inside it. The sweet, sad voice of a woman inflamed with love.

"Oh, oh, yes, I understand. I do. You're right nearby, my beloved one! I love you, I love you! Come with me, my beloved!"

The woman in traveling clothes smirked. "She's quite worked up," she remarked as she gazed out at the forest.

She performed two quick-chants in a row, casting two spells. One for seeing at great distances, the other for detection. Maintaining both, she took out a cigarette and used a quick-chant to light the end of it.

In general, it was said that mages could maintain only up to two spells at once. This woman, however, had just used three without batting an eyelid.

She smiled at the taste of the cigarette. "Louis is the best for this situation, but he's been flying since yesterday. He can't have much mana left. And Ryn isn't exactly in a position to help right now."

The woman was right. After learning about the situation, Louis had flown around, notifying everyone without taking any breaks.

Of the Sages, Louis was particularly powerful in combat. Right now, however, he was far from being in top form.

"Actually," said the woman, "Momo is here, too, isn't she?"

"And what is my dear Monica to you?"

"We met a few times in Master Rutherford's lab. She's my adorable junior."

The woman held her cigarette with her left hand and rubbed

the back of her neck with the other—all while keeping her farsight and detection spells going.

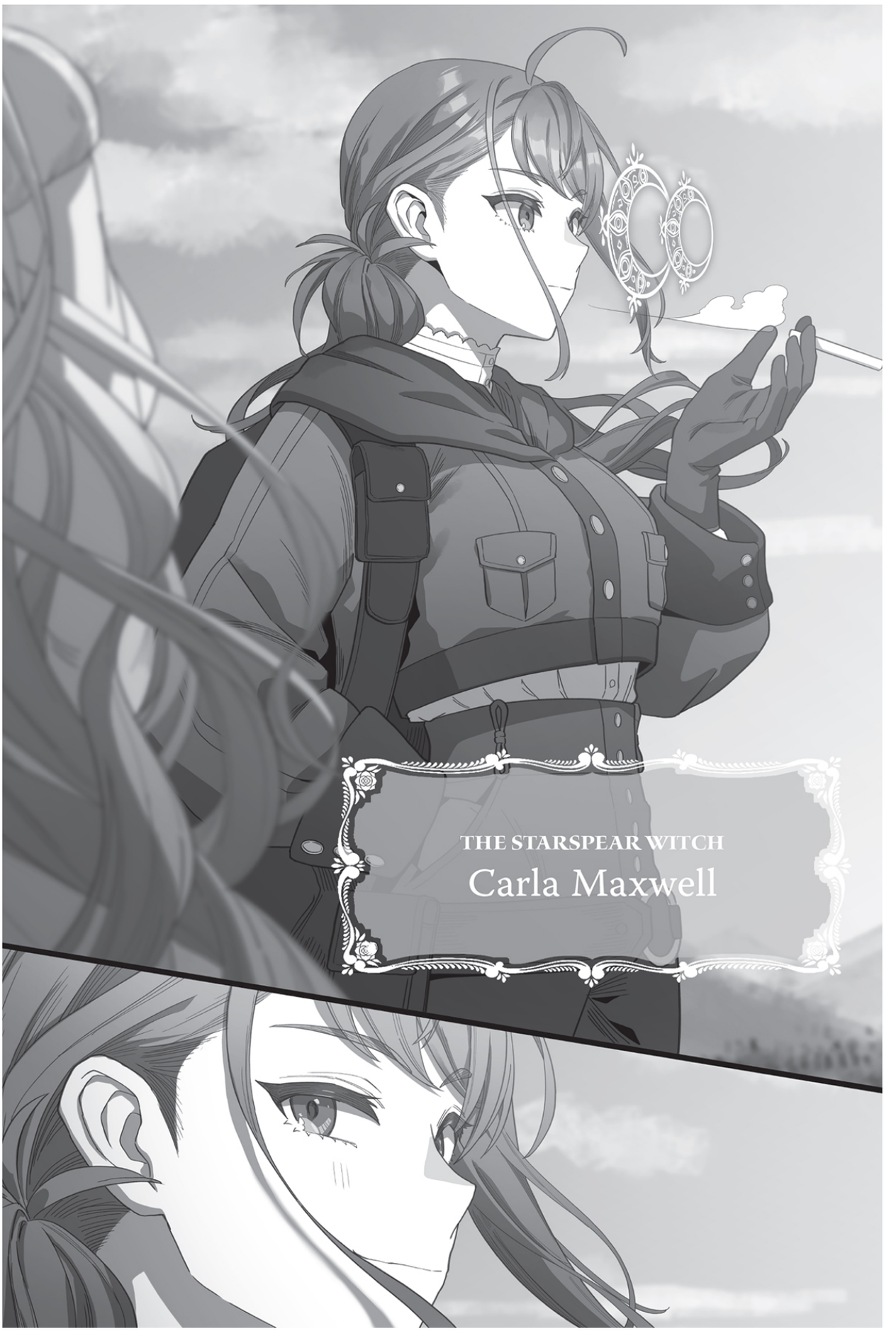
Mary knew the woman was capable of doing all this, even while her mind worked at an incredible speed.

Eventually, the woman disengaged both spells and turned toward Mary. “I don’t like sticking my neck where it doesn’t belong. But my fellow apprentice and my junior are in a tight spot. I suppose I can help you out a bit.” A mischievous, catlike smile appeared on her plain, unadorned face. “…You okay with me butting in and helping out, Lady Mary?”

“Yes. By all means, we could use you…”

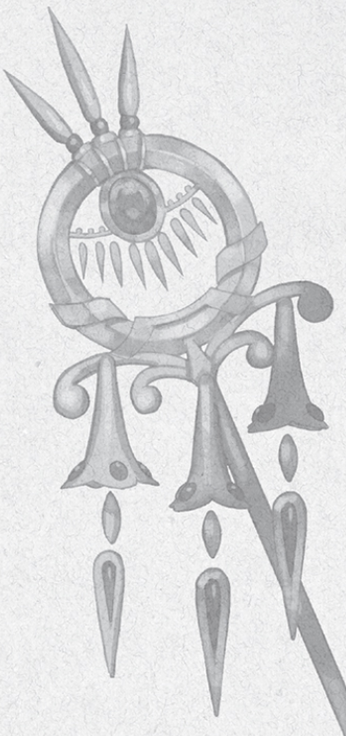
Mary nodded, then said the woman’s name—the name of a legendary genius who could maintain seven spells at once, and Louis Miller’s fellow apprentice.

“…Carla Maxwell, Starspear Witch and former Sage.”


THE STARSPEAR WITCH
Carla Maxwell

To be continued in Secrets of the Silent Witch VII





Characters So Far

Characters



Monica Everett

The Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages. After the first week of the new year, she left her Sage staff and robe in the Silent Witch's office in the castle (which she primarily uses to store garbage).



Louis Miller

The Barrier Mage, one of the Seven Sages. A pitiful individual who's already in a load of trouble. Only a few days into the new year, his apprentice has disappeared, and his contracted spirit has been stolen.

He became friends with First Prince Lionel during their time at Minerva's.



Nero

Monica's familiar. Can assume the guise of a cat or a young man, but both are false. His true identity is the Black Dragon of Worgan, once classified as a major threat.

Currently busy having pleasant dreams of meat-filled buffets.



Rynzbelfeid

A high wind spirit contracted to Louis. Her master ordered her to investigate the Gem Mage. Currently, she's under the control of Galanis, the Flute of the False King.



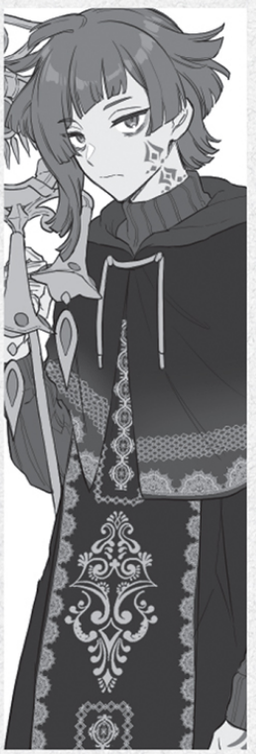
Mary Harvey

The Starseer Witch, one of the Seven Sages. Reads the stars every evening, but only rarely speaks of what she sees, as doing so could change one's destiny. Few realize the weight of her words.



Bradford Firestone

The Artillery Mage, one of the Seven Sages, and Huberd's uncle. His nephew always used to challenge him to magic battles, and hearing about his recent passion for the Silent Witch has made Bradford just a little bit lonely.



Ray Albright

The Abyss Shaman, one of the Seven Sages, and a self-professed passing poet. The poems he composes are beautiful and delicate, but when he speaks, only envy and curses come out.

He's currently surrounded by three men with loud voices and feels like he might pass on at any moment.



Raul Roseburg

The Witch of Thorns, one of the Seven Sages. Specializes in imbuing plants with mana and has a particular affinity for roses. With the highest mana capacity in the kingdom, he is a young genius who can control powerful spells passed down from his ancestors.

Currently accepting new friends.

Characters



Emanuel Darwin

The Gem Mage, one of the Seven Sages. The most skilled magical item craftsman in the kingdom. It's said that Duke Clockford encouraged him to become a Sage. A supporter of the second prince.



Felix Arc Ridill

The second prince of the Kingdom of Ridill and student council president at Serendia Academy.

Recently learned that the Silent Witch is at Serendia and is currently searching for her. Reads the paper she corrected for him every night.



Carla Maxwell

The Starspear Witch, formerly one of the Seven Sages. An apprentice of the Mage of Violet Smoke, like Louis. Also acquainted with Monica.

Currently belongs to the Magic Geography Association and travels the kingdom investigating mana density.



Cyril Ashley

The foster son of Marquess Highown and vice president of the student council.

While he specializes in ice magecraft, that doesn't mean he likes the cold. Feels like he's freezing from his own chill, but puts up with it because he thinks everyone else feels even colder.



Elliott Howard

The son of Count Dasvy and one of the student council secretaries.

Found the sight of the little squirrel burrowing into Cyril's jacket hilarious and intends to tease the two of them about it later.



Neil Clay Maywood

The son of Baron Maywood and the student council's general affairs officer. Noticed that Glenn wasn't feeling well after winter break and decided to discreetly help him out. More tactful than anyone has a right to be.



Bridget Greyham

The daughter of Marquess Shaleberry and a secretary on the student council. Hired a detective to investigate Monica. Even during the duel, she quietly kept an eye on her surroundings, waiting for her chance to act.



Lana Colette

A second-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and Monica's classmate.

Unhappy that Monica's complexion, which was finally improving, took a nosedive thanks to the chaos surrounding the duel. Now secretly planning to fatten her friend back up.

Characters



Isabelle Norton

A first-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and the daughter of Count Kerbeck. Adored by influential older women in high society, and has even more connections than Louis thinks she does.



Claudia Ashley

A second-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and Cyril's younger foster sister. Wishes she could pretend she doesn't know Cyril whenever he shouts at school, but can't because Neil, another council member, is often with him.



Glenn Dudley

A second-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and the Barrier Mage's apprentice. Lost control of his mana during his time at Minerva's, which led to him leaving school. Monica enrolled just after he left, so they missed each other.



Benjamin Mording

A third-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course. When he heard about the duel through the grapevine, his heart danced at the idea of men duking it out over the affections of a woman. He channeled his energy into a song, to Elliott's great dismay.



Eliane Hyatt

A first-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and the daughter of Duke Rehnberg.

Secretly investigating Glenn's likes, but unable to ask him directly, because it wouldn't be ladylike. Instead, she is doing things the hard way, and hasn't had very good results.



Huberd Dee

Monica's senior from her time at Minerva's and the Artillery Mage's nephew. The worst combination of his father's masochism and hedonism and his mother's sadism and pragmatism. Held back two years at Minerva's.



Characters



Bernie Jones

The son of Count Ambard and Monica's former classmate. Currently studying to inherit his family's title.

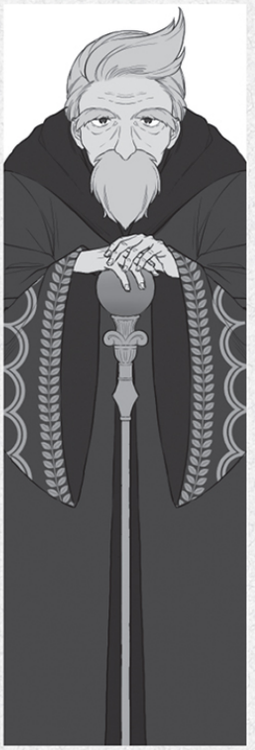
Has been challenged to multiple magic battles by Huberd and lost badly each time. Hopes he never has to see the other boy's face again.



Bartholomeus Baal

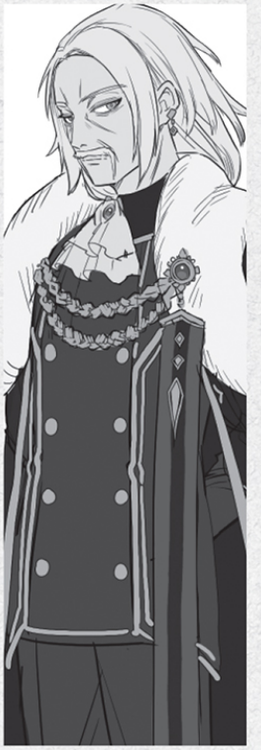
A craftsman originally from the Empire who worked at the Gem Mage's workshop directly after coming to Ridill.

Even knowing that Ryn is a spirit, he hasn't given up on her. A sucker for a pretty face.



William Macragan

The fundamental magecraft teacher at Serendia Academy, and nicknamed the Waterbite Mage. Realized the Silent Witch was at Serendia, but kept quiet about it.



Darius Nightray

Also known as Duke Clockford. Felix's maternal grandfather and the leader of the second prince's supporters. Plotting to bring about a war with the Empire.

Other Characters

Agatha

A maidservant assigned to Isabelle. A playful young woman who smiles as she accompanies her villainous charge, but incredibly strong when she has a stick-shaped weapon in her hand.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Wildianu

A high water spirit contracted to Felix. Not great when it comes to combat or detection, but excels in hiding himself from others.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Venedict Reyn

Monica's father. Executed for forbidden research seven years ago. A mild-mannered man, he was an excellent teacher.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Albert Frau Roberia Ridill

The third prince of the Kingdom of Ridill. Very competitive toward Felix, and currently trying to win Glenn and Monica over to his side.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Patrick Andrews

Albert's servant. A young boy who likes to eat and relax. About half the snacks meant for Albert end up in Patrick's stomach.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Robert Winkel

The fifth son of Baron Winkel of the Kingdom of Landor. After Monica beat him at the chess competition, he proposed to her just so they could keep playing chess. A chivalrous boy with excellent grades.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Byron Garrett

A third-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course and president of the magic-battle club. Specializes in flame magecraft and considers Cyril his rival.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Lindsey Pail

The ballroom dancing teacher and the faculty member in charge of Monica's class. Sincerely roots for her hardworking students.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing Volume 6 of *Secrets of the Silent Witch*.

This book features all seven Sages, a idea that has been in the works since Volume 1.

Despite writing in the afterword of Volume 5 that I wanted to show you the students having a good time in Volume 6, they wound up in trouble instead. I'm beginning to worry that I'm a little heartless… Please accept my apologies.

That said, I hope you're looking forward to what these poor kids will get up to in the next volume. Monica will do her best as well.

Regarding future printing plans, Volume 7 of the main story is scheduled for next winter.

…However, before that, there is something else in the works: the first in a two-book series featuring the Barrier Mage Louis Miller as the protagonist.

This side story will place Louis in the spotlight, and the first book will be about his time as a student at Minerva's Mage Training Institution.

It'll be a fresh new look at Louis when he was still a boy. And by fresh, I mean as fresh as a raging shark, snapping, landing on the shore and chomping, jumping, biting the nets restraining him, and batting harpoons away with his tail. In other words, *very energetic*.

Others from the main story will make cameo appearances as well.

This Louis side story serves as a prequel to *Secrets of the Silent Witch*, and I hope you'll check it out.

To Nanna Fujimi, as always, thank you for your gorgeous illustrations.

This volume featured many new characters, so I'm sure designing them was a lot of work. But I'm always moved by your wonderful designs. Each of them expands the world of the story even further.

When I explain character designs, I submit little drawings that look like dumplings to help, but of all the ones I've made, the Gem Mage was, if I may be so bold, a critical hit—a dumpling truly emanating the aura of a petty villain.

But my dumplings simply can't express his servility or fussiness. Depicting traits like that in a picture is incredibly difficult—and yet you managed it perfectly.

And so I must truly thank you for making every character so charming.

To Tobi Tana, thank you for your excellent work on the manga adaptation.

The story is rather extreme, split between scenes with a lot of action and scenes with no action at all, but you've depicted them all with such charm and life regardless. It makes me very happy.

The newest book of the manga adaptation is Volume 3. Monica and the prince share the cover.

In the manga adaptation, you can also see people who haven't shown up in the insert illustrations in the books yet.

Mr. Boyd, the chess teacher, was especially wonderful with his combination of sternness, nobility, and class.

Please give the third volume of the manga a read so you can see him. His muscles really *bulge*.

Last, but not least, I'd like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who purchased this book. The fan letters make me very happy as well.

Hearing you talk about your favorite scenes and characters with such passion, along with the special letter paper, the sealing wax, the wonderful stickers, stamps, cards, and illustrations you include—it's like you packaged all your love right in the envelope. It fills me with joy.

That serves as great encouragement to keep going. Thank you. Thank you so much.

I will do my best to continue writing, to answer your words of support in kind, so I hope we can meet again in the next volume.

Matsuri Isora

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Secrets of the Silent Witch VI
Matsuri Isora

Translation by Alice Prowse
Cover art by Nanna Fujimi

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SILENT • WITCH Vol.6 CHINMOKU NO MAJO NO KAKUSHIGOTO
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First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: May 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain
Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Isora, Matsuri, author. | Fujimi, Nanna, illustrator. | Prowse, Alice, translator.
Title: Secrets of the Silent Witch / Matsuri Isora ; illustration by Nanna Fujimi ; translation by Alice Prowse.
Other titles: Sairento uicchi. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022020923 | ISBN 9781975347802 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975347826 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975351694 (v. 3 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Witches—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Bashfulness—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Witch fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.I877 Se 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022020923

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9266-6 (paperback)
978-1-9753-9267-3 (ebook)

E3-20250315-JV-NF-ORI

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