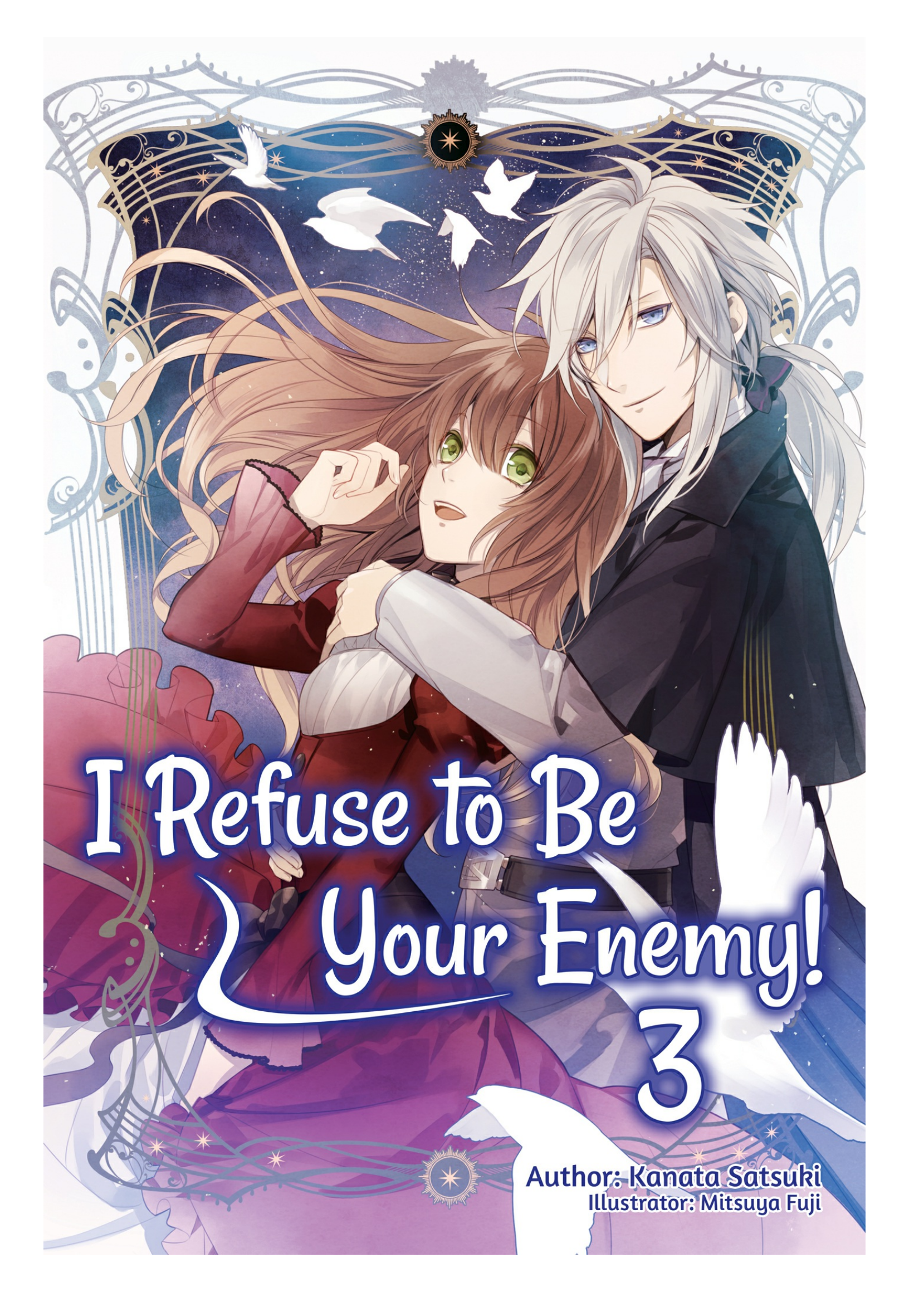


I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!

3

Author: Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: Mitsuya Fuji

The illustration features two anime-style characters. A young man with long, flowing silver hair and blue eyes is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark blue coat over a white shirt. He has a gentle smile and is holding a young woman. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and green eyes, looking up at him with a surprised expression. She is wearing a red dress with white sleeves and a large white ruffled collar. The background is a deep blue night sky with white stars and several white birds in flight. Ornate, golden musical notes and staves are scattered around the characters. Two circular sun-like symbols with eight-pointed stars are positioned at the top and bottom center. The title 'I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!' is written in a large, white, stylized font with a blue outline, and the number '3' is prominently displayed below it in a similar style.

I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!

3

Author: Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: Mitsuya Fuji





Character Introductions

Kiara Cordier

Our protagonist. An earth spellcaster with brown hair and gray-green eyes. When she was about to be forced into marriage, she realized that she had been reincarnated into the world of a game she'd played in her past life—and that she was on the path to dying a villain—and fled. Currently, she is a spellcaster in Reggie's Farzian army, fighting against the enemy nation Llewyrne.

Reginald Dias Farzia (Reggie)

A handsome young man with silver hair and blue eyes. As the resourceful prince of Farzia, he is leading the forces against Llewyrne. In Kiara's past-life memories, he was slain before the start of the game.

Alan Évrard

A lively young man with black hair and blue eyes. He is the son of the margrave of Évrard, who manages the border between Farzia and Llewyrne. In the game from Kiara's past life, *Farzia: Kingdom at War*, he was the protagonist.

Cain Wentworth

A calm and collected knight who has served Alan ever since he was a young boy. He also serves as Kiara's personal bodyguard. He lost his family in a war against Llewyrne.

Horace

Kiara's spellcasting mentor. He used to be a wind spellcaster, as well as a bug-eyed, withered old man. He lost his life, but thanks to forming a mentor-disciple contract with Kiara, his soul was able to live on inside a Jomon clay figurine.

Wayne Évrard

The black-haired, green-eyed margrave of Évrard. Alan's father.

Beatrice Lydia Évrard

The blonde and blue-eyed wife of the margrave. Alan's mother. Elder sister to the king of Farzia.

Groul

Reggie's knight-guard. Has dark-auburn hair and a sharp gaze.

Edam Reinstar

One of Farzia's generals. A grizzled gentleman.

Jerome Limerick

One of Farzia's generals. A well-built, middle-aged man.

Gina

A brown-haired Salekhardian mercenary traveling with Kiara's group. A beast-tamer who employs the help of three frostfoxes.

Girsch

A muscular mercenary with a mean sword arm. A woman at heart. The deputy leader and team mom of Gina's mercenary band.

Isaac

The second prince of Salekhard with reddish-brown hair and gray eyes who formed an alliance with Llewyrne. He seized power by imprisoning his half-brother, Yefrem.

Lila, Reynard & Sara

A group of three pale, fox-like monsters called frostfoxes kept by Gina. They can use ice magic.

Marianne

The queen of Farzia with chestnut-colored hair and amber eyes. Reggie's stepmother. Born of Llewyrne, she is aiding the Llewyrnian army's invasion of Farzia alongside the count of Patriciél.

Mikhail

A blond, blue-eyed lord-in-waiting from the Salekhardian royal palace.

Count Owen Patriciél

A Farzian nobleman, but one who has held close ties to Llewyrne for quite some time. Enamored by Marianne, he has aided the Llewyrnian invasion in accordance with her wishes. Formerly Kiara's adoptive father.

Viscount Credias

A Farzian nobleman who holds no territory of his own. His face is reminiscent of a bullfrog, and he is the man Kiara was originally supposed to marry. Spellcaster.

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Chapter 1: The Battle of Cassia Castle

Rays of summer sunshine beat down upon the gray stone of Cassia Castle's walls. The sky beyond the spire was clear and blue, completely detached from the turmoil unfolding below.

As I stared up at it, I was struck with the strange sensation that I was seeing a live-action rendition of an RPG cutscene I'd watched long before I was born.

But this was reality.

I was born into this world with the name Kiara. It took me until I was fourteen to realize it, but one day, I had the epiphany that I was living in a world nearly identical to an RPG I'd played in my past life. That game was called *Farzia: Kingdom at War*.

The protagonist was the heir to the Margraviate of Évrard, Alan. If his life had proceeded according to the RPG, he would have lost his father in the prologue along with his best friend and my guardian, Prince Reginald of Farzia—also known as Reggie.

In order to change their fates, I'd been fighting as a spellcaster.

That said, I certainly didn't have the power to lead an entire country. The best I could do was defend Alan's hometown, Évrard. In the meantime, we were invaded by the kingdom of Llewyn, whose forces were closing in on the royal capital.

Fortunately, forewarned is forearmed, so I'd gotten us off to a more advantageous start than in the game.

And yet... why had *he* cast me aside, deliberately keeping me away from the front lines?

My mouth drawn in a thin line, I listened alongside Alan and Cain as Lord Reinstar's uncle, General Edam, recounted everything that had happened thus far—and how Reggie had stormed the castle standing before us.



Cassia Castle was occupied by the Llewynian viscount Lord Weber. There were about 3,000 soldiers inside.

Edam postulated that the scant numbers were due to Fort Clonfert's unexpectedly swift fall. The soldiers who abandoned the fort were supposed to join up with the forces here, hence why there were so few men stationed around the castle town; the majority had been assigned to Clonfert.

Unfortunately for them, Farzian forces had arrived at the castle faster than they'd anticipated.

Panicked as he was, Lord Weber still had a chance of holding out through a siege... or he *would* have, if not for two things. First, the castle was part of the kingdom of Farzia. Second, his opponent wasn't the straightforward, orthodox Alan; it was Reggie.

By the time Reggie sent out his scouts, he had already set his plan into motion. He had about ten men dress up in Llewynian military uniforms and make a show of escaping back to the castle. Once they had infiltrated the grounds, they spread a message among the residents of the castle town: *The forces of Évrard will be here to liberate you shortly. When they arrive, open the gates and fight alongside them.*

The downtrodden victims of Llewyn's sudden invasion jumped at Reggie's proposal, and when they flung open the gates, Évrard soldiers came flooding through.

Lord Weber scrambled. Word didn't reach him until after the gates had been broken down. All he could do was fortify the castle's defenses and call for the heads of the prince and any other nobles of interest. But Reggie, the man of the hour, kept out of sight as he extended his reach into the castle.

The plan had been for Reggie and his knights to infiltrate the castle, take the viscount's head, and bring the battle to an end as quickly as possible.

Edam had initially objected to the prince himself leading a group into the castle. However, Reggie had already taken measures of his own to put the Llewynians out of commission: the soldiers he'd sent in earlier had poisoned the

food provided by the merchants of the castle town. When Edam learned of this, he surrendered his argument.

The attack was to be launched in the afternoon so there would be enough time for the poison to kick in.

The Cassian knight Aubrey directed Reggie to the baron's emergency escape route. He had learned of the hidden passageway when he was helping the baron's son, Charles, escape the castle.

Edam didn't know what had happened to Reggie after he snuck into the castle. He and his men had managed to bring the surrounding area under control, as they were ordered, so they were just about to head in after him.

I wanted to join them, but first, I had to talk Cain into letting me go.

"His Highness ordered us to wait outside. Stay here with Lord Alan," he insisted.

Alan tried to stop me, too. "Don't worry. Reggie won't be taken down so easily—even if there are defective spellcasters in there."

"But there's always a chance he could be caught off-guard! What is he supposed to do if he runs into someone who can shoot flames? If I were there, I could protect him!"

A protest died on the tip of my tongue: *You don't need to go so far to protect me! I became a spellcaster so I could fight. If you won't let me do anything, why am I even here?* Of course, I couldn't say any of that—not when they were just concerned for me.

"I'll bring you along." Surprisingly, Edam was the one to cut in. He placed a hand on my shoulder.

Both men (particularly Cain) were thrown for a loop. Edam explained himself in no uncertain terms. "This young lady is a spellcaster. And that aside, I can't say I approve of treating a young woman like a helpless child."

"Without her magic, she's nothing more than an ordinary girl. She can't cast her magic without proper warning, which means she can't adequately protect herself." Cain's assessment stung.

“This is something she’s chosen for herself,” Edam asserted. “If she’s hurt badly enough to crumple, she’ll accept the responsibility for it. It’s up to her what she takes away from the experience. Regardless, I’ll keep some of my men by her side, and they’ll be sure to make an opening for her to use her magic. Just wait here and have faith.”

Cain hung his head. As a mere knight of Évrard, he couldn’t disobey the general. Alan held a higher rank, but he seemed to have taken Edam’s speech to heart; he gave up on arguing.

Master Horace, who had been quiet for a while now, started to chuckle deviously. “Sometimes you have to let the kids run wild. Making mistakes and learning from disgrace is just another part of life. Besides, you won’t see a girl Kiara’s age changing her mind any time soon!”

“Precisely,” Edam agreed. Perhaps the two old men had more in common than it seemed. Something about Master Horace’s comment didn’t sit well with me, but with that, I was allowed to go after Reggie.

“Thank you, General Edam.”

“You chose to hold the power to sit at our war council, so I figured you ought to have the power to carry out your will; that’s all it was. But as your knight says, I saw for myself in our last fight how vulnerable you are. Keep in mind that people are going to worry about you.” His gentle lecture made him sound like a schoolteacher. I dipped my head in a bow.

Edam and I set off toward the castle. Cain watched me go with an unusually nervous expression. I’d always had someone to act as my personal bodyguard in the past, so perhaps he wanted another knight to accompany me, if nothing else.

Having picked up on that, Gina stepped forward. “My frostfoxes and I will go with you, Kiara. Animals have sharper instincts than humans, after all. Why don’t you take a break, Sir Cain? Let me go earn my pay.”

Gina clapped Cain’s shoulder with a smile, and he stumbled forward, taken by surprise.

“How about you and I have a nice, long chat?” Girsch sidled up to Cain, who

went pale and retreated to where Alan was standing. It looked like Cain was fully preoccupied with guarding himself from the mercenary now. Of course, it probably helped that he knew I had other people looking out for me, too.

A little relieved to see that, I pushed onward. Then, I turned to Gina beside me and asked, “By the way, is Girsch attracted to men?”

“Yeah. Unfortunately, it’ll never come to anything. Girsch only falls for men who are into women.” Gina heaved a sigh.

If the target of Girsch’s affections was someone with the same preferences, the two could walk hand in hand. Sadly, the mercenary’s tastes sounded like the equivalent of screaming alone into a barren wasteland. How tragic.

“I guess people can’t change what they like...”

“The first person Girsch ever loved was a married man. Those feelings faded eventually, but the type stuck. The poor thing’s always complaining about it.”

“No one can make themselves fall out of love, no matter how hard they may try. Nor can you force anyone else to change how they feel about *you* for the very same reason.” Edam cut in with a few words of wisdom.

We all set foot inside the castle together. I could hear the distant clashing of swords. Still, thanks to Reggie’s poisoning tactics, the fighting wasn’t as fierce as it could have been. The sounds of conflict weren’t all that frequent, and things were just about settling down.

A knight of Edam’s, who had joined up with us along the way, told us the current state of affairs.

A few of Lord Weber’s men had caught on to the poison. Consequently, the viscount and a small portion of his soldiers had managed to escape. There weren’t many survivors, however, and the group had fled to the main tower in the face of Reggie’s assault. Reggie had immediately given chase.

We followed him into the main tower.



The Llewynian soldiers in the main tower had been taken out.

After bounding up the stairs two or three steps at a time, we finally arrived

outside a door. From the inside, we heard a voice shout, “Drop your weapons or we’ll kill this girl!”

Edam’s men busted open the door and rushed inside, and I followed behind. Inside were the corpses of over a dozen knights and soldiers along with a pool of blood oozing over the floor. Right in the center of the tiny chamber were Reggie and his accompanying knights.

In the back of the room, there was a girl about my age—mostly likely the baron’s daughter, Flora— with the look of someone who had given up on everything, the life drained from her face and a man grabbing her from behind, holding the blade of his sword to her neck. I had to assume he was Lord Weber.

The pair was flanked by five Llewynian knights.

Flora was wearing a thin, simple dress torn at the chest. There were rope marks around her wrists, which hung limply beside her, as well as around her neck, which was currently held at swordpoint. Her long, brown hair, so similar to Charles’, was a tangled mess.

It had been days upon days since she was captured, and her clothes weren’t dirty; from that, I could guess what had happened to her. Being a girl of the same age, my heart broke for her all the more. I only wished there was something I could do to help her.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t. One wrong move and she would be killed.

Reggie, meanwhile, was callous. “Go right ahead. I don’t intend to throw away my life or the lives of my soldiers for that girl.”

His back was turned to me, so I couldn’t tell what sort of face he was making as he said that. However, his voice had a more cold-hearted edge to it than usual.

Lord Weber clearly hadn’t seen Reggie’s blunt refusal coming. After glancing around the room in dismay, he bit down on his lip as he steeled his resolve. He took something out of his jacket, and the next moment, blades of ice erupted from Flora’s body, putting an end to Lord Weber’s life.

“Lady Flora!” Aubrey sprang forward from behind Reggie, cutting down a Llewynian knight who came swinging his sword in desperation.

One of the remaining knights fell victim to Flora's icy blades while the other three lost their will to fight and fell to their knees. As the blades of ice snapped off and shattered, Lord Weber's body peeled away and fell to the ground behind her.

After that, the ice began to spread, encrusting the length of her arm. The slow process of freezing over had to be painful. Flora let out a scream. Aubrey rushed over to her, only for the girl to turn him away.

"No! NO!"

Flora fled to the window behind her. There, she seemed to regain a bit of composure. She turned to Aubrey, who was standing by helplessly, and said, "Aubrey. Look after Charles for me."

Trails of white ice formed along her cheeks as her tears frosted over. I saw Reggie move his arm, only to hold himself back, clenching his right hand into a fist.

When Flora opened the window with a look of anguish, her frozen arms fell from her body, shattering on the floor and turning to sand.

Finally, she threw herself out the window, almost like she had stumbled and fallen forward. I heard the dull, heavy thud of something hitting the ground.

I had watched the scene unfold from beginning to end, completely paralyzed. Suddenly, someone pulled me into an embrace, covering my eyes in the process. Judging by the sweet, flowery aroma, it was Gina.

"You're alright. Just calm down, Kiara," Gina repeated over and over. Why was she so desperate to console me? At first, I didn't understand. However, Gina's warmth made me realize just how cold I was, and I came to realize that I was trembling.

As she held me in her arms, Gina moved us elsewhere.

The small room she took me to looked like it might be for guests. There was a bed inside, along with a sofa and some other furnishings. I stared at my surroundings in a daze, and in time, the trembling subsided. The chill, however, stayed with me.

Reynard snuggled up against my leg, but it wasn't helping me feel any warmer.

Gina said to me, "I didn't think this would all come as such a shock to you. I wish we'd brought Girsch along. I'm nowhere near as good at comforting people."

"I mean, sure... I am shocked. But I'm just as upset with myself for failing Miss Flora."

I'd come along because I thought I could do something to help, but it hadn't amounted to anything.

What had Reggie been doing? He hadn't been utterly paralyzed like me. No... he'd been watching Flora closely, gripping his sword so he could bring her down at a moment's notice. I hadn't even thought to do that much.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Kiara! Even if you'd managed to save Miss Flora before things escalated, there's no telling if she would have survived or not. And after what happened, there was nothing left to do but kill her."

Gina insisted that Flora was a kind, noble person—that she chose to die to keep from hurting anyone else, so we had to praise her for what she had done. Still, I found it difficult to just agree with that.

"Sir Horace?" Disheartened, Gina turned to Master Horace for help.

"That's just how she is. She's soft AND stubborn, which makes her extra hard to handle. Heehee!"

"This is no time to be laughing!" Gina protested.

Just then, someone opened the door. Reynard got up from where he was laying at my feet, lowering himself into a defensive posture.

"There you are, Kiara."

It was Reggie, who was gazing at me with a hopeless smile. Surely he had known things would turn out this way. I hung my head, unable to look him in the eyes.

"Are you one of the mercenaries we hired in Maynard?"

Gina likely identified the prince by his silver hair. She peeled herself away from me and made a show of reverence, falling to one knee. “Yes, Your Grace. I am Gina, a mercenary under the employ of Lord Alan Évrard. These are the frostfoxes under my care.”

“I see. Well, I’ll take over from here. Could you step outside for a moment?”

Reggie swiftly dismissed her. As a hired professional, she had no choice but to do as he said. “Certainly, Your Grace.”

She shot me an uneasy look as she got to her feet.

Reggie approached me, untied Master Horace’s strap, and handed him over to Gina. “Take this, too. You can leave him with Wentworth.”

Gina looked unsure what to do with Master Horace thrust upon her, but he just gleefully chuckled and said, “Heehee! Must be good to be young,” so she assumed there wasn’t an issue. Holding the clay figurine in her arms, she took her frostfoxes and left.

Reggie switched places with Gina, taking a seat next to me. He let out a soft sigh, and I could tell he was tired. After all, he’d been on the move since the morning, working nonstop to infiltrate the baron’s castle.

Now that Reggie was here, I caught a whiff of blood in the room.

“I was hoping to finish things before you showed up.” Reggie tousled my hair, mussing it up a little more than usual, then quickly pulled his hand away. “I asked Wentworth and Alan to buy as much time as they could... but things took a little longer than expected on my end. It was my own fault that you caught up to us.” He peered into my face. “Are you mad that I didn’t tell you?”

“It doesn’t matter. It was your call to make as our leader. I have no choice but to listen. Besides, I already knew that you like to take care of things quietly, when no one else is looking.”

I *was* angry. I knew I had no right to be when I hadn’t managed to do anything, so I couldn’t blame Reggie. Still, I couldn’t help sulking as I answered his question.

The way Reggie treated my childish behavior completely seriously was as

comforting as it was insufferable. “That’s true. I’m bad at telling others what I’m thinking. And I don’t like to be held back, so there are times I don’t feel like entertaining your requests. The same goes for you, doesn’t it?”

I pursed my lips. I was the one who had started it—dismissing Reggie when he tried to stop me and volunteering myself to fight. All the same, I didn’t want to agree with him. If I accepted what he was saying, it meant I would never get what I wanted.

“Don’t sulk, Kiara.”

He took my face in both of his hands and forced me to look at him. His hands were warm, and a tickle spread through my cheeks, my chin, and just under my ears.

Welling up with frustration and another emotion I didn’t quite understand, I nearly broke down into tears.

“I brought you along because you were determined to fight. But I don’t want to send you into battle when I don’t have to. With how unaccustomed you are to war, I’m afraid too much could break you.” Reggie brought his face close to mine and murmured into my ear, asking for my understanding.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I could feel my resolve weakening. It was like he was giving me a push when I was standing right at the edge of a cliff.

“I can handle it. It’s something I decided to do.”

“But the more you endure, the more you’ll change. Nearly all of the things that make you who you are today come from before you were born, don’t they? Your kindness, your optimism, and even your rebellion against me. If all you’d ever known was a tormented childhood, you wouldn’t have turned out that way.”

Reggie was probably right. Even now, I thought of the mother and father from my past life as my only real family, and although I hadn’t believed it was real, I’d essentially built my sense of self around the person I was in my dreams. My moral code was a product of my past life, too.

That’s why I was afraid of killing people. Why I was afraid of fighting. I had to

tell myself that I was just seeing the events of an RPG reenacted in real life, or else I couldn't bear the sight of all the carnage.

"I don't want you to kill anyone, but I also don't want to stop you from doing what you've decided. I won't rob you of your freedom. But the least I can do is ensure you don't stray too far from what your heart is really telling you. If I can't keep you off the battlefield, I can at least divert your attention from it. I wanted to show you that I can do that for you."

Reggie slid a hand from my cheek to cover my eyes. I kept them open, but the palm of his hand was so close that I could barely make anything out.

"Reggie...?"

"I do wish I could keep you blindfolded all the time, but I suppose that isn't feasible. Whether you understand where I'm coming from or not, I'm not going to stop. Some of your stubbornness has rubbed off on me."

I interpreted that as a warning. Reggie would continue to jump into action without letting me know, like putting a metaphorical blindfold on me. No matter how angry I got, he wasn't going to change his ways.

"But I'm not going to chan—fwat are you doigg?"

All of a sudden, Reggie pinched my nose. I tried to bat his hand away, to which his blithe response was, "Fine. Then I'll do this."

"Mmph?!"

He pinched my mouth shut!

It didn't hurt, of course. If I made enough of a fuss, Reggie surely would take his hand away, but I was so surprised, all I could do was blink. I lifted my hand to brush his away, but for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"Heheh. You must be surprised, by the way your eyelashes are fluttering. It tickles." Reggie pulled his hands back with a laugh. With the blindfold gone, I could see his smiling face once again.

Weird. Somehow, I feel REALLY annoyed.

I knew the reason: it was because Reggie had changed the subject on me. Yet he was so good at consoling me, I was practically putty in his hands—which just

made me want to fight back.

“Reggie, you big jerk!”

“Why am I a jerk? Because I wouldn’t do as you asked?” Reggie questioned, seemingly unoffended. “I’m doing my best to listen to you. That’s why I let you go to Maynard. Plenty of civilians lost their lives there, too; there’s no hierarchy of suffering. But if you came to this castle, you were bound to witness Lady Flora’s final moments. That seemed too risky.”

Evidently, Reggie had predicted that Flora was going to die from the start.

“What’s more, we can’t always fight with you as our final defense; if something were to happen to you, our men might lose their nerve and scatter. It’s true that many lives have been saved thanks to your willingness to fight. But if we don’t learn to handle situations without you, that helplessness will come back to bite us, leading to the deaths of many soldiers. I don’t want our forces to become too dependent on you.” That part was probably his perspective as our prince and commander. His face was devoid of expression.

I held my tongue. Cain had said the same thing to me earlier, and I hadn’t been able to argue with him either.

“This was a necessary measure to ensure that doesn’t happen. It wasn’t *only* for your sake. Try to understand, Kiara.”

Reggie gave me one last hug, then left the room.

Once I was alone, I ground my teeth together hard.

So what AM I supposed to do for you, Reggie? When are you ever going to let me protect you? What do I have to do to keep from losing the people I love, the ones who are like family to me?

Those were all the things I’d wanted to say. But after I had stood around and trembled uselessly, Reggie had easily talked me down, so I’d missed my chance to say any of it.

By the time we were done dealing with the aftermath of the battle, night had fallen. We’d managed to sweep the entirety of the castle, so we decided to spend the night there. I stayed in the same room from earlier.

I fell asleep right after dinner, but I woke up in the middle of the night, short of breath. I felt like I'd run out of oxygen, frantically gulping for air like someone who had just run a full-out sprint.

Once I'd finally calmed down, it was still dark outside. I closed my eyes again, but this time, I couldn't get back to sleep. After tossing in bed for a while, I saw dawn finally beginning to break, so I gave up on sleeping altogether.

That said, I wasn't sure what else to do. Everyone assumed I would pass out if I overused my magic, so I hadn't been given any regular tasks to complete.

While I was sitting around, I felt the temperature gradually rising. By lunchtime, it would be pretty hot out. However, I figured that if I basked in the morning sunlight before the heat got too oppressive, all my gloomy feelings would evaporate, and the heat would return my mind to a blank slate.

If I was going to go outside, now was the time. And if I could, I wanted to walk around by myself.

I changed clothes and left the room. Master Horace must have noticed, since he never needed to sleep, but he didn't say anything as he watched me go.

"Lady Spellcaster?" muttered a pair of soldiers who had been standing guard during the night shift. They rubbed their eyes sleepily as I passed them in the vast castle corridor.

"Good morning!" I offered a nonchalant greeting as I cut past.

The two men watched me go in a daze, then exchanged a few remarks of surprise.

"I'm so tired I must be seeing things... Can't wait to get to sleep."

"No, that had to be her. There's only one girl her age staying in the castle."

"I've never seen her without an escort before. Will she be alright on her own?"

"She'll be fine, I'm sure. She *is* the spellcaster."

It must have been strange to see me walking around so early in the morning.

After that, I only ran into about ten other soldiers—most likely thanks to the

time of day. The ones who recognized me seemed to wonder why I was walking around by myself, but they naturally assumed I was on some sort of spellcaster mission, so they watched me go without comment.



Outside, the town was surprisingly crowded.

Near the castle, rations were already being doled out. Townspeople who had been robbed of their food by the occupying Llewynians, as well as some of the soldiers on the expedition, stood in line to be fed.

I was hungry, so I got in line behind the rest of the townspeople.

No one realized that I was the spellcaster. At first, I wondered why, but then I remembered that I had yet to fight in this town. The citizens had never seen my magic in action.

The townswoman giving out rations handed me a soup made of beans, potatoes, sun-dried tomatoes, and a little bit of pork. There weren't many ingredients in it, and it was a bit bland, but there was something nostalgic about the meager meal. It reminded me of how I'd always eaten as a child.

Then I recalled the rich, meaty soups I'd enjoyed at the House of Patriciél, and the soups full of carrots and other vegetables I'd often eaten at Évrard.

After living in this world for so long, I realized just how fortunate my past life had been. All I had to do was go to the supermarket to buy all the meat and vegetables I wanted. The stews I ate were always full of big chunks of chicken, pork, or some other meat. Dad really liked beef stew, so Mom would indulge him every now and then. But in this world, not even the nobility could have their favorite food whenever they craved it.

"This takes me back..."

I was struck with a longing to go back to my past-life home.

When I was finished eating, I still didn't feel like going back to the castle, so I wandered aimlessly around town.

Perhaps because they were so overjoyed to be free, or perhaps because they were too focused on getting back their regular lives, I didn't witness any scuffles

throughout the town. Everyone was walking around with bright smiles on their faces.

Plus, it probably helped that Farzian soldiers were patrolling the city to make sure there weren't any Llewynians in hiding.

Tired of walking along the cobblestone streets, I sat down on top of a wooden box I'd spotted next to an unfamiliar house. In the center of the small square, there was a single, large tree with a well beside it.

I'd stumbled upon the public well, apparently.

The moment I sat down, I lost the desire to get back up. No, I lost the desire to go back to the castle altogether.

As I sat there zoning out, more and more people began to come and go from the square.

A gray-haired gentleman passed by, pulling along a small, covered cart. Another man walking by called out in delight, "What's this I see? Are you reopening your stall?"

"Indeed I am! Just for the day, though. I've got some mead I kept hidden from the Llewynians."

Evidently, the merchant hadn't been able to do any business while the Llewynians had been around. Thrilled to see one of their favorite shops reopen, several people flocked over to the cart in no time, where they began to drink and make merry.

"Here's to Prince Reginald!"

"And here's to the margrave of Évrard! Didn't Limerick and Reinstar have a hand in it, too?"

"What's it matter? Here's to Farzia!"

Their cheers sent ripples through the increasingly humid air. I was a little happy to hear it but equally frustrated with myself for failing to contribute.

I was about to grit my teeth when I heard someone say, "Wait, is that the spellcaster?"

It was the first time anyone had called me that since I'd headed out on the town. I lifted my head, wondering who it was, and the person I saw was a tall young man with reddish hair, his eyes wide.

He'd probably blurted it out without thinking. He immediately put a hand over his mouth, glanced from side to side, then looked back at me.

He looked older than Cain. For whatever reason, there was a tinge of dismay in his gray eyes. He was in good shape—someone I could definitely imagine swinging around a sword.

That said, he wasn't wearing the blue cape of a Farzian soldier, so he couldn't have been a member of our army. And if he were just a Cassian citizen, he wouldn't have recognized me. That left only one possibility.

"Are you one of the merchants who followed us here?"

Whenever an army went on the march, it meant a large gathering of people. From a merchant's perspective, it was like a huge group of customers moving in a pack, so they would often follow along while dragging their carts, ready and waiting to sell their goods at the drop of a hat.

That brought them right up close to the battlefield. Thus, many merchants would learn a certain level of swordsmanship in case they got caught up in the fighting, while others hired bodyguards.

"Err, well... Something like that. But hold on, are you really... that spellcaster?" he asked in hushed tones, creeping closer. Yeah, he definitely looked distressed.

He must have seen my face somewhere before. However, since I was sitting in the middle of the town all by myself, maybe he thought his eyes were deceiving him.

I wasn't sure how I ought to respond, but I decided to go ahead and be honest with him. Even if he was the sort to do something unsavory with the knowledge, he was bound to be wary of me. There was no telling how I might strike back, after all.

"Yes, I am," I answered with a nod. The man was flabbergasted.

“Wow. There’s always someone better,” I heard him mutter to himself, but I had no idea whom he was comparing me to. Once he’d pulled himself together, he sat down next to me on the box and asked softly, “Are you sure it’s okay for a rare gem like you to be out here all alone?”

I scooted away from him automatically.

Apparently I’d hurt his feelings because his expression grew even more stunned as he stared at the gap between us. Maybe it was his first time getting snubbed by a girl. He looked at the open space, then back at me, and went, “Huh?”

I paid him no mind as I responded, “The Llewynians are gone, so it should be fine. There are plenty of people around, and if I scream, I’m sure one of the soldiers on patrol will come running. Besides, if anything *does* happen, I can take care of it myself. I’m pretty strong.”

“You have a point there. But I hope you’re not opposed to conversation, at least.”

“I don’t mind talking. I’m just not comfortable sitting so close to a man I’ve only just met.”

“Blunt, aren’t you? I like that.” Snapping himself out of his funk, the young man chuckled.

“And for the record, sir, no matter how much you cozy up to me, I can’t buy any supplies from you. I don’t have the authority.”

Everyone around me paid attention to what I needed and provided me with all the essentials. Thus, while I carried money around in case of an emergency, I’d never had to use it.

“In that case, will you satisfy the curiosity of this humble merchant? Also, I may be older than you, but I don’t need to hear any ‘sirs.’ Far too stiff for my liking. You can call me Isaac.”

His grinning face was as radiant as the sun. The more I talked to him, the more this bright, sociable merchant—Isaac—didn’t seem like such a bad person, and he had yet to try anything worse than sitting next to me. I concluded he wasn’t anyone dangerous, so I nodded.

“Why are you out here all by yourself? Do you have a bodyguard or two lurking around somewhere?” he asked, and I shook my head. “What... Really? I’m not one to talk, but should you really be doing that?”

“I had to. I felt like I was suffocating.”

Today, it had been especially hard to breathe. I just wanted to be alone, so even though I knew I should’ve brought along an escort to keep everyone from worrying, I had purposely avoided it.

“I know how you feel, but still...”

“You do?”

He looked like someone who could hold a sword and defend himself. Had he lived the sort of life where he needed to be guarded? I gave him a sideways glance as I started to wonder, but for whatever reason, Isaac panicked and rushed to explain himself. “It was a long time ago! I was the son of a wealthy family, so growing up, my parents would insist I took an escort wherever I went. Uh, anyway, try this! Here!”

Isaac took a small can of dried fruit out of his pocket. It was sprinkled with sugar to make it last longer.

“Are you sure I can have this?”

“Of course. Why else would I offer it? What, are you afraid I’m up to no good? It’s still perfectly safe to eat. See, watch this.”

He made a show of eating it himself, so it was hard to refuse. I picked up a piece and put it in my mouth.

It’s so sweet!

The sweet taste traveled through the inside of my cheeks, down my throat, and all the way up to my brain.

It had been ages since I’d eaten anything sugary. Was the last time when I’d had cake at Limerick Castle? But that was an unfamiliar place... Plus, we’d been in the middle of a meeting, so I didn’t remember the taste very well.

As I thought that, I felt my eyes start to water. The tears spilled out and began to slide down my cheeks.

“Wait, what’s this now?! Why are you crying?! Stop that!”

“It’s just so sweet...”

“What, too sweet for your tastes?! You don’t like it? Do you want some water?”

“No, it’s great.”

It was sweet and delicious... so much so that the dam of my heart broke, all my pent-up emotions leaking out.

“So great you started crying? You’re something else. Hm, I *thought* you looked ready to cry earlier.”

“Was I making that kind of face?”



When I lifted my head in surprise, I saw Isaac smiling back with the same conflicted expression as before. “I know how to keep a secret, so if there’s something on your mind, you can come out and say it. I don’t mind listening. Speaking of which, shouldn’t you have someone else you can go crying to? As the spellcaster, I’m sure you’re well taken care of.”

I gasped. Maybe that was it. The reason I’d felt so stifled was because I couldn’t talk to anyone about all the feelings bottled up inside of me. No matter how badly I wanted to complain, I knew we’d just end up going around in circles.

Not that Reggie was the one in the wrong, of course. I didn’t blame Cain either. I knew they were both just trying to look out for me.

When I lapsed into silence, Isaac let out a sigh. “There’s someone you can talk to, but there’s a reason you can’t talk to *them* about it—is that it?”

I hadn’t said anything, but Isaac had managed to read between the lines.

“Uh-huh. They’re too overprotective.”

Once again, the words came spilling out before I could stop them. Even I could tell why I was saying these things to a total stranger: I wanted to talk to *someone* about it. Everyone close to me in the castle seemed likely to take Reggie’s side, so I was afraid to ask their opinion.

“If someone’s getting protective of a spellcaster, I’m imagining... hmm. Any time you aren’t using your magic, they insist, ‘We’ll protect you!’ and won’t let you do as you like. Or they go, ‘You can’t go *there*, it’s too dangerous!’ and follow you around all day long.”

“Yeah, you’ve got the right idea.”

“You *are* a woman, you know. Why not be a good girl and let them protect you?” Isaac responded, like I was making a mountain out of a molehill.

“So WHAT? Just because I’m weak, I shouldn’t be allowed to do anything? You men sure seem to enjoy taking care of things all by yourselves!” I snapped back in spite of myself.

Isaac looked amused. “If that’s how you feel, don’t give them a chance to tell

you no. You just told me you were strong.”

“I *am* strong... but I can’t wield a sword, and if you take my magic away from me, I can’t do anything. I have to rely on the people around me for everything else, so I can’t just brush them off.”

“Don’t overcomplicate the issue, then. Just let them take care of it. Doesn’t that make things easier on you?”

“Other people are out there getting their hands dirty for me, and I’m supposed to just mindlessly welcome them back with a smile?!”

My anger was starting to boil over. Isaac seemed taken aback.

“Erm, well, if you’re going to get *angry* about it, you might as well force them to acknowledge your strength. Why do you think your companions refuse to rely on you?”

I knew the reason. “Because... I’m afraid of killing people.”

For a few moments, Isaac just stared at me blankly. He was probably dumbfounded.

A spellcaster who feared killing people fighting in a war was probably the silliest thing he’d ever heard. I bet he was getting a little worried about following an army with a spellcaster like *that* in it.

It struck me how odd my perspective was, and I hung my head.

Bemused, Isaac asked, “Ah, but you’re fighting in spite of that, right? You aren’t being pressured into it?” I nodded, and Isaac heaved a sigh of relief. “So in short, you want to protect what’s precious to you. But the people around you don’t want you doing anything too dangerous?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Mm, I see. They *are* overprotective.”

Isaac nodded, like everything made sense to him now. I felt deeply relieved to have someone agree with me. Then, he offered the blunt suggestion, “Well, you just need to go hand your enemy a sound defeat.”

“Huh?”

When I lifted my head and looked up, I saw a belligerent smile on Isaac's face. "If you show them you're strong enough to forgo their approval, they'll have to stop sheltering you. So long as you can keep yourself perfectly safe, they won't have anything to complain about. That's your solution. Rack your brains and figure something out."

Oh, so that's it, I thought.

I'd defeated plenty of enemies, but I'd always done it under Cain's protection. I'd assumed I couldn't manage it on my own and turned to him for help, and as a result, I'd given everyone the impression that it was too dangerous to leave me by myself.

Isaac looked relieved to get that off his chest, but a few seconds later, distress suddenly washed over him. "Auuughhh! Why am I telling YOU this?!"

He held his head in his hands, seeming to have some regrets. I tilted my head to one side, puzzled. Did he think it was inappropriate for a merchant to give his input on military matters?

At first, I had just taken him for a weirdo, but he'd helped me out a lot by listening, so I felt kind of bad for him.

"Sorry for troubling you with all this. You offered to listen, so I couldn't help babbling."

"Hmph. Who could ignore a woman on the verge of tears?"

"So you only did it because I'm a girl?"

"Obviously. If it were some scoundrel bawling his eyes out, I'd tell him to go cry to his mother and be done with it."

"I don't have any family, you know... There's no telling if this hypothetical man would have anyone to go home to either."

"Wait, you're an orphan?! Don't make me cry, you idiot!"

As he made a dramatic show of wiping away his "tears," Isaac tousled my hair in sympathy. He was a little rough, but it didn't hurt. Maybe he had practice patting the heads of younger children like that.

I let him do as he liked, and eventually, he pulled back his hand with another

troubled look. Perhaps he'd just done it on instinct; he looked at his own hand, then at me, and let out a sigh.

"I've been called soft myself, but I can understand why people would be worried about you. You were wary of me at first, but once we started talking, don't you think you let your guard down a little too quickly?"

"I know... I won't claim to have the best judgment."

"Hey, that's where you were supposed to say that I seemed like a good person! You wound me."

Apparently, he'd been fishing for compliments. This was my first time seeing an older man sulk because I hadn't flattered him. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Still, hearing you tell it like it is made me feel a lot better."

Reggie and the others were noblemen, so they always had a certain air of sophistication about them. Even Alan, who was the most candid with me, would back off whenever he started to feel like he was picking on me.

"Something about it feels really familiar. I feel like I could keep talking to you forever."

Somehow, talking to Isaac reminded me of being at school in my past life. Of course, given how much older he was, I ought to have likened him to a teacher or faculty member. But it felt more like talking to a boy in my class or maybe getting advice from someone a few grades above me.

When I looked back at Isaac, he'd clamped a hand over his mouth and averted his gaze.

"What's wrong? Did I say something weird?"

"You dummy. You can't just go around saying things like that. Even worse if you're saying it to a man. Ugh, you're so goddamn cute!"

"Cute?!" The sudden compliment sent me into a tizzy.

"I could keep talking to you forever'? Now that's a come-on if I ever heard one. And you can't say it with tears in your eyes! That's just unfair!"

"Wh-What?! I wasn't trying to flirt with you! I really meant it, though!"

“You’re seriously going to follow that up with ‘I really meant it’?! What’s wrong with you?!” Isaac berated me in hushed tones—perhaps because he didn’t want anyone else around to hear.

His face was a little red; he was definitely embarrassed. Maybe he wasn’t used to being complimented.

“It’s just, well, since I was the one saying it, I figured you’d see it like a child getting attached to you. If a little kid said they wanted to talk to you more, there’s no adult out there who would think that was a come-on, right?” After panicking a little, I told him exactly what I thought.

Isaac suddenly brought his face close to mine. “Listen here, Lady Spellcaster. I don’t know how old you are, but you must be over sixteen. For someone well past her childhood years, you’re far too defenseless. Then again, you do have a bit of a baby face.”

“You’re not wrong... but I’m not all that pretty, in any case.”

“You’re plenty cute.” Isaac said it with a completely straight face, so I just stared back at him, forgetting to breathe for a moment. “Why does that surprise you? Are you surrounded by oblivious curs who never think to pay you a compliment?”

“That’s not—”

Just as I was about to say “true,” someone called out to me. “Kiara!”

Startled, I looked around. From the other side of the square, Gina came running over with her frostfoxes in tow, putting an end to what must have been a long search for me. Isaac looked over in the same direction as me, then gulped loudly.

“Why is *she*—whoa there!”

Did he know Gina from somewhere? Isaac probably wasn’t in her line of sight; when he bolted upright in surprise and took a few steps back, Gina rushed up in his place and hugged me.

“Eep!”

“Goodness, you can’t go off on your own like that! I was so worried about

you!” The way Gina was rubbing her head against my shoulder reminded me of a large dog. That must have lit a competitive spark in her frostfoxes, because they started snuggling up to me too.

I didn’t mind the roughhousing. It was fun... but I was also getting a little hot. Right when I thought the combination of fur and body heat was going to kill me, I saw Isaac wave at me from a distance and wander off.

“See you around!”

Perhaps he didn’t want to be accosted by the spellcaster’s bodyguards; he sure had made a swift exit.

“Huh? Was someone just here?”

Gina noticed me looking elsewhere, so she peeled herself away from me and followed my gaze.

“Gina?”

She went completely stiff as she watched Isaac go.



“Just what do you think you’re doing?! I didn’t realize you were THAT much of a fool!”

The moment Isaac stepped into the alleyway, he was showered with abuse by the boy who had been waiting to ambush him.

“Wow. Aren’t you a little too outspoken toward your king?”

“You deserve every word of it! Why would you make contact with the enemy’s spellcaster?!” Isaac’s lord-in-waiting, Mikhail, berated him with his hands on his hips, dressed like a regular townsman.

Isaac scratched at the back of his head and responded, “I don’t know. She was all alone, so I thought I could bring her over to our side and abscond with her.”

That had been his original plan.

She had been sitting all by herself, ready to cry. It had been easy to guess that her relationships weren’t going well or that she’d run away after some sort of blunder. Thus, he’d planned on saying just the right thing and tricking her into

coming with him. It was a crowded area, so he couldn't just throw her over his shoulder and run, but he'd figured he could lure her away with some sweet-talk.

"And how did that turn into you lighting a fire under her? There were too many people around, so I couldn't catch the entire conversation, but it seemed like the perfect chance to eliminate her without a fight."

"That's the thing. I'm not really sure."

"WHAT?!" Mikhail's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Nonetheless, Isaac didn't have a better explanation to give him.

If she had just been crying, it wouldn't have been anything new. There was no way he could fight a war without seeing his fair share of women in tears. Was the problem that he'd given her the sugar candy? She'd cried because it was sweet... But no, that probably wasn't it.

Either way, *something* had thrown him off his game.

However, he was tired of Mikhail's nagging, so he declared, "Relax, it's not an issue. I like my enemies strong! Come, today should be a good chance for us to make our escape. Let's go!"

And with that, Isaac successfully swept his failed kidnapping attempt under the rug.



Hello, Kiara here. You know, the girl who had run away from home twice over the course of her two lifetimes.

I'd bolted out of my room on impulse and planned to stay away for a while, so that probably counted as running away.

The issue here was the specs of this particular runaway girl (me). As a spellcaster, I was essentially walking around carrying a rocket launcher at all times. Anyone who knew that wouldn't try anything funny, but given how delicate I was, I could instantly collapse under its weight. If a malevolent person stumbled upon me when that happened, they might abscond with me, weapon and all.

That was what Cain's lecture boiled down to.

Obviously, Cain had never heard of the weapons from my past life. I may have taken a few liberties in paraphrasing.

Alan stayed quiet through the whole tirade, but he didn't hold Cain back. He was wearing a stern look on his face, like a mother who might say, *Go get a good scolding from your father!*

Still, I was determined not to back down. "I know it was wrong to go out without telling anyone, but I was just fine on my own. Why would I need to use magic strong enough to incapacitate me out in the middle of the town?"

"What if someone knocked you out before you could use your magic?"

"No one's going to come kill me out of nowhere. Every faction out there would love to get their hands on a spellcaster."

"And if you couldn't get away?"

"I'd manage. Most castles are made of stone. If they threw me in a prison cell, I'd be out of there in no time."

I could make my own escape route. Cain must have imagined the same thing, given his grimace.

"Um, excuse me, Sir Cain." Gina was the one to cut in. "I'm not sure *anyone* can protect Kiara from everything."

"We can at least reduce the risk of danger," Cain shot back immediately.

"But," Gina went on, standing her ground, "reducing it is the best you can manage, right? If someone sets out to kidnap Kiara because she's a spellcaster, there's only so much you can do. Even if she *does* have a guard with her, they just have to send in enough men to take him out. Or they might bide their time and watch for an opening. Nothing is certain."

"So we should just leave it to chance?"

"I'm not saying we shouldn't take precautions. I just don't think it's right to keep her tied down. Girsch and I can accompany her whenever needed, so you should let Kiara have a little more freedom. She never gets to go out and enjoy herself while she's traveling with an army of men; wouldn't it be nice to let her

cut loose every now and then?”

Cain closed his eyes, giving Gina’s argument some thought. When he opened them again, he stared back at me.

“Did you enjoy going out on the town?”

The first thing to pop into my mind was Isaac. The sugar candy he’d given me. The way he’d panicked when I’d started crying over how sweet it was. He was a strange man, but I’d enjoyed talking to him.

So, I nodded. “Yes. It was really fun.”

Cain chewed that over, sliding his gaze over my face. Even though he wasn’t doing anything, it was a little nerve-racking, like he was somehow prodding my cheeks and temples from a distance.

After letting out a soft sigh, he said, “Alright. So long as you bring a guard when you go out on the town, you can do as you like. I have no desire to keep you locked up. Just be careful.”

With that, Cain turned on his heel and left the room.

It was almost anticlimactic. I had been so sure that Cain would reject everything out of hand. The knight had rarely left my side since departing Évrard. At first, I had just felt guilty for troubling him. But after a while, the way Cain held me back from anything he didn’t approve of had started to feel like a shackle.

Speaking of shackles, what about Reggie?

“Where *is* Reggie? I thought he’d be first in line to yell at me,” I mumbled to myself, deflated.

Alan overheard me and answered with a sigh, “Reggie isn’t interested in holding you back from the sidelines. In fact, when I suggested we determine the scope of your involvement, he said there was no need.”

I thought back to what Reggie had said yesterday: *I don’t want to stop you from doing what you’ve decided. I won’t rob you of your freedom.*

True enough, he had never staunchly opposed any of my decisions—not when I’d chosen to become a spellcaster, and not when I’d chosen to fight. He may

have objected, and he certainly hadn't been happy about it, but he had never once stopped me from doing something after I'd made up my mind.

Instead, at Cassia, he had predicted what I would do ahead of time and steered me in a different direction. Because he was kind, perhaps. Or maybe he was just that afraid of taking my freedom away.

I didn't fully understand what he was trying to do.

Suddenly, I was reminded that Reggie had told me he wouldn't go back on *his* decisions either, and I felt a pang of loneliness.

Why was that? When it was Cain objecting, I'd only felt defiant.

"I'm against it, personally. You may be an exceptional asset, stronger than a thousand soldiers combined, but you're always off doing something stupid. Still, if your head guardian says it's alright, Wentworth and I can't object any further. You don't have to tell us where you're headed, but be sure to bring an escort with you," Alan asserted, then took his leave. He had to attend a meeting about what to do with the province of Cassia.

That resolved my runaway caper, but somehow, I couldn't relax.

I heaved a sigh, and Gina gave me a reassuring pat on the head. "Sure, you got scolded a little, but now you can go out whenever you want. Isn't that great?"

"Thanks for backing me up, Gina," I said.

"Don't mention it. I got involved because I wanted to. You helped us put out the fires in Maynard, remember? I took a liking to you after that. And besides, the situation felt pretty familiar."

"Did you have someone tie you down, too?"

"Hehehe. A lot happens when you've lived twenty-three years. Men can be so gauche sometimes."

"That sounds rough," I sympathized. Then I suddenly remembered Gina's harsh glare as she'd watched Isaac go.

Gina had claimed she didn't know him. She had said she'd just been suspicious of him for hanging around me. Nevertheless, her gaze had seemed a

little too sharp for that... Perhaps she'd had a falling out with a man around Isaac's age before.

My mind wandering aimlessly, I headed out into the corridor.

"Oh, Lila!"

I spotted a frostfox down the hall. She was wearing a green ribbon around her neck, so I knew it was Lila at a glance. Alan had instructed Gina to put some kind of marker on the foxes to make sure nobody mistook them for an enemy or a wild monster. I'd offered her three ribbons, which she had tied around their necks.

After I'd met up with Gina in town, Lila had wandered off somewhere. She had gone in the same direction as Isaac, so I assumed Gina had been looking into his identity.

Lila joined Sara and Reynard at Gina's side.

"Oh, looks like our little runaway is back. How was your adventure? Eeeheehee!" Master Horace welcomed me back to my room from where he sat atop the mantelpiece. Since the foxes couldn't get to him up there, he was the picture of complacency. When Gina had left to go looking for me, Master Horace had asked her to set him down somewhere high up.

"Feh. Any day I get to look down on you is a good day, you wretched dogs."

"They're not dogs, Master Horace."

"Ahaha! There's something funny about seeing a doll so rattled." Gina was greatly amused to see Master Horace getting up on a high horse from his safe zone.

Without warning, the red-ribboned Reynard sprang at Master Horace. His slender forefeet made contact, and Master Horace let out a startled scream.

"Y-You foxes really are despicable, picking on a helpless old man!"

After he dropped back down to the floor, Reynard sat down on the spot without sparing Master Horace another glance. He even began scratching his head with his hindleg.

It was like he was saying, *What was that? Must have been the wind.* Master

Horace had likely interpreted it the same way, considering how he screeched with indignation.

I was starting to get a picture of why Master Horace's past encounters with frostfoxes had left him with such a bad impression. They were probably drawn to his mana. Friendly as they may have been, Master Horace didn't want them around because of the chill they brought—so, in his mind, it was just targeted harassment, plain and simple.

Chapter 2: The Siege of Sorwen

Under Prince Reginald's command, we had successfully taken back Cassia.

After we had spent a while in Cassia Castle, we held a meeting to discuss whether we should head straight to Delphion and vanquish the main body of Llewynian troops or take a detour to liberate Sorwen first.

Why were we weighing those two options? Because of Sorwen's unique circumstances, and because initially, we'd had the option to pass the province by.

The province of Sorwen had a mountain range to the north. There was a wealth of mines there, and the marquis' manor was built in a town along the foot of a mountain.

Once the marquis of Sorwen had received word that Llewynian troops were drawing near, he had evacuated all his citizens to the mining town. With 30,000 soldiers about to descend upon them, he'd judged that his territory's forces alone wouldn't be enough to push them back, according to Edam.

"Frankly speaking, if we had somewhere to escape to, I would have done the same. Sorwen is a naturally fortified area, so it must have been an easy decision to make."

In order to protect the mines from bandits, a fence had been built alongside the road to the town a long time ago. Using those built-in features to their advantage, the Sorwenians had managed to thwart the Llewynian's attack on the manor. The Llewynians had chosen to turn their attention to the royal capital instead, and thus the marquis' forces hadn't suffered many losses.

"I'm almost envious. Limerick has mountains of its own, but we don't have nearly as many mines as Sorwen. The high road through our province was built with traffic flow in mind, so most of our roads are easy to march through," Jerome, Lord Limerick's brother, reflected with a nod.

Taking that into consideration, some proposed that we leave Sorwen to hold

out for now and instead devise a way to defeat the main group of Llewynians first; the reason was that we had recently received news that things were going poorly for the royal capital and its army.

The king was nowhere to be seen, and our forces kept getting pushed back by the Llewynians—all we ever heard was bad news. If the royal army was defeated before we could get to them, there was a good chance our fight would drag on even longer.

Reggie set his elbows on the long table, placed his chin on top of his hands, and smiled. “Unfortunately, this is bad timing for Sorwen. A lot of farmers escaped to that impregnable mountain town. If they can’t tend to their fields all summer long, it will affect their autumn harvest.”

Évrard was no exception there. In the RPG, there was no need to worry about provisions, but this was the real world. People needed food to live. This wasn’t like my past life, where you could import food from other parts of the world with different production periods or preserve it with the power of science and technology. Herbicides didn’t exist, and the only forms of insecticide were all-natural. If a farmer left their crops alone for several days, it would have a huge impact on their harvest.

Jerome’s expression turned grim. “Even if we allow things to turn that way for a time, we’ll still need to drive the Llewynians out of Sorwen eventually.”

“True. We don’t want to be caught from behind while we’re attacking Delphion. And it’s unclear if the marquis of Sorwen would aid us while he’s holed up in the town,” Alan added, in agreement with Jerome. “My father has approached the kingdom of Erendor to the south. If they grant us their cooperation, the plan is for them to block the invasion route north of Évrard. That way we won’t have to worry about any new Llewynian reinforcements.”

The northern part of Évrard had been overrun by Llewynian forces, so the people living up there had fled the area. Under normal circumstances, Évrard would have gathered troops to go and recover that lost ground, but we weren’t the only ones who had taken damage here. We had to go strike down the Llewynian army before they could launch an attack on the royal castle.

Given the current situation, we would have a hard time enlisting help from

other noble houses for the sake of defending our own territory. Therefore, all we could do was call for troops in the name of stopping the Llewynians' march, then assign the soldiers that couldn't join us on our expedition to Évrard under the pretext of defending the border.

At the moment, Lady Évrard was attempting to bring the other lords and the kingdom of Erendor to our side using her title as a former princess of Farzia. If she succeeded, we could cut off the Llewynian soldiers trying to pass through Sorwen.

"I'd prefer to drive the Llewynians out of Sorwen so we can be better poised to attack Delphion. Sorwen should have the forces to spare, so I want them to curb the flow of reinforcements until we make our move," Reggie suggested.

Edam nodded. "I see. Sorwen keeps an army of its own, after all. So long as we do a little culling on their behalf, they can drive the insects out on their own. The majority of Llewyn's troops are... currently moving toward Sestina, I believe."

He was referring to the place where troops summoned by the king had gathered. Most of the soldiers had come from noble houses to the west. The Llewynians were concentrating their forces there in order to crush the Farzian army.

The discussion proceeded in the direction of liberating Sorwen.

Reggie was to serve as our commander, with Alan and Jerome joining him. Edam would stay behind in Cassia.

In the RPG, Alan had fought at Sorwen. After Sorwen succeeded in stopping the Llewynian invasion, they decided to aid Alan's forces.

Thus, I assumed that it was the right decision to go... but I was nervous. I had a feeling the battle wouldn't go the same way it had in the game.

We had just barely prevented Maynard from turning into a sea of flames. When I had heard the full report of what had gone on in Cassia, I'd realized what a tough fight it would have been if we'd fought fair.

As much as I hated to admit it, my magic was hard to use inside a city. Reggie's methods of inspiring the townspeople and poisoning the food supply

had been the best way to retake Cassia quickly and with minimal casualties.

Still, there was no telling what could happen, so I wanted to come along regardless.

“I’m going, too,” I asserted.

I didn’t say I *wanted* to go. I wasn’t asking permission; I was just going to do it.

Up until now, I’d come along reluctantly, only because I wanted to protect my friends. If I wanted to produce results that no one could argue with, I had to be more assertive. That was the conclusion I’d come to after my talk with Isaac.

I glanced at Reggie, determination in my eyes. He nodded back at me.

“Very well. We’ll have Lady Kiara join us.”

Reggie didn’t argue. He was probably trying to stick to his word—that is, in exchange for letting me do as I liked, he would ignore my requests concerning his safety.

That was fine by me. Before I could start worrying about anything else, I just had to be by his side.



The day we set out, I rode my own horse.

Fortunately, there were foot soldiers among our forces. We had to traverse the long distance without leaving them behind, so there was no need to gallop ahead on the march. In that case, I had no trouble riding a horse by myself. Besides, if I didn’t get in some practice soon, I was bound to forget how it was done.

When I told Cain I would be riding alone, he begrudgingly got a horse ready for me. After my rebellious breakout the other day, he may have figured it was useless to argue.

In exchange, I had Cain and the mercenary duo serving as my three escorts.

“So you see, that’s when I decided I’d rather be a mother than a bride.”

Along the way, I became absorbed in one of Girsch’s anecdotes.

Girsch had been born into a matrilineal family. After helping with the

household chores from a young age, the mercenary had developed a secret affinity for sewing and child care.

One day, Girsch's family was dragged into a war. They had no choice but to flee, abandoning their home and their fields. Girsch took up the sword in place of a needle and thread, jumping into battle as a volunteer soldier.

Girsch turned out to be surprisingly well suited to fighting. After striking down enemy soldiers one after the other, the mercenary's strength had become apparent to all... but that came as a bit of a disappointment.

"I hate to admit it, but I'm better at wielding a sword than sewing."

After cutting through enemies even more skillfully than cloth and saving up a decent amount of money in the process, Girsch eventually longed to raise children.

Then, one day, Girsch came face-to-face with true love. The man was a member of Gina's and Girsch's current mercenary group.

"He was a handsome one, alright. When I told him I had no interest in remaining a soldier, he invited me to join the group. He told me it was somewhere I could make a living through my swordsmanship *and* make my dream come true."

The mercenary group was made up of villagers whose homes had burned away in the fires of war. When they got married, their wives would go live in the village and give birth to more children. When those children grew up, they made a living fighting in wars as a member of the mercenary band, and the cycle continued.

Girsch thought that sounded perfect and jumped on the offer without hesitation. After all, there would be plenty of opportunities to take care of the kids whenever the adults were away.

"But see, the man who recruited me had met me while he was on his way back to his hometown to get married. At first, I was just thrilled to have my skill recognized. But whenever I saw him talking to his wife, I started to feel lonely." Girsch placed a hand to one cheek with a sigh.

A while after that, the mercenary finally realized those feelings for the older

man hadn't been simple admiration—it had been romantic love.

Unfortunately, said married man was as straight as an arrow. Girsch had fun taking care of the man's children together with his wife. Their love was never meant to be; however, the mercenary started to think of taking care of a loved one's children as another form of happiness.

In the end, Girsch switched tracks to “I'm going to become everyone's mama!”

Cain listened off to the side with a bewildered look on his face. Meanwhile, I thought the story was pretty amusing. I mean, here we had this huge hunk of muscle acting like a nanny! As far as I could tell from listening, Girsch liked men but held stronger maternal instincts than any romantic feelings.

Girsch had also looked after Gina since she was little, serving as her sword instructor.

As we talked and enjoyed one another's company, a day and a half went by following our departure from Cassia Castle. We eventually arrived near a Sorwenian fort north of Cassia.

In Cassia, the Llewynians had left a nobleman to serve as a temporary lord in order to get a foot in the door. However, since the Sorwenians had withdrawn and they had yet to capture the region, they were using the fort as a base, leaving to attack the nearby towns every now and then.

For that reason, we had assumed that if the Llewynians in the fort knew we were coming, they would hole up inside to fight us off. But...

“Nobody was there?” When he heard Jerome's report, Reggie furrowed his brow—and immediately gave an order. “Strengthen our defenses in the rear and keep marching! The enemy plans to surround us!”

“If they're going to go around us, we're better off pushing ahead than turning back,” Jerome said.

“Should we seclude ourselves in the fort?” Alan suggested.

“No, Alan,” Reggie countered. “We'll be in trouble if they left a parting gift behind for us, and we don't have time to investigate before going inside.”

“If they’re planning to encircle our forces, they must be hiding somewhere nearby. The best place to engage them would be...”

“Just outside the town where the marquis is staying.”

At that, the knights broke into a gallop. A portion of the cavalry took some archers with them and ran past the fort.

The infantry kept on moving. We spurred on the carriages carrying supplies as fast as they could go.

In the very rear, I marched with the troops led by Alan so we could strike back at any enemies who tried to attack us from behind.

“This isn’t what you expected, is it?” Alan asked, following after the foot soldiers as he kept an eye out behind us.

“Yeah. Two different battles have been combined into one.”

In the RPG, Alan’s forces first defeated the Llewynians stationed at the fort, then headed to the mining town where Lord Sorwen was staying. Along the way, a different Llewynian general caught them in a pincer attack.

“We prepared for this possibility. Don’t worry about it.”

Apparently, Alan was worried I’d be upset that my information hadn’t been of any use. He had a pretty considerate side to him.

In moments like these, he really acted the part of a protagonist who had brought so many people together to fight by his side. As for me? All I ever worried about was myself, and I could be downright insensitive at times. Even now, I was so hung up on getting Cain’s and Reggie’s approval that I was completely ignoring their feelings.

“Thanks.”

If our enemy planned to besiege us, I wanted to break through their ranks as quickly as possible. I wasn’t a very skilled rider, but I spurred my horse as fast as I could.

Around us, soldiers were forming battle lines and dashing ahead.

Today was comfortable thanks to the overcast sky and the breeze blowing

through, but it was still a hot time of year. Most of the soldiers had rolled up their sleeves underneath their cloaks. Even Reggie and the knights were more lightly dressed than usual.

Evidently, waging war during the summer was almost unheard of. Enemy and ally alike would be bogged down by the unbearable heat. For that very reason, the Llewynian army had paused their march and was currently engaged in a standoff with the royal army.

Once autumn rolled around, the situation was bound to change in a big way. We had to produce some results before then. Otherwise, the nobles who had been sitting on the fence might end up pledging their allegiance to Llewyrne.

However, everyone said that this attack on Sorwen was our absolute limit. After this, we were going to enter the peak of summer. The reason we had chosen to carry out this plan regardless was because we had one clear advantage here.

“Go on, you guys!” At Gina’s call, her frostfoxes ran circles around the soldiers, kicking up a blizzard as they did.

It was like marching with a portable air conditioner. As a result, even though we had to do a bit of running, our soldiers stayed in tip-top shape. Something like this wouldn’t have been possible even in my past life, probably. It was the equivalent of traveling in a car with an air conditioner and a generator.

Meanwhile, the Llewynian soldiers in Sorwen were bound to be completely drained from marching in the summer heat. That assumption of ours eventually bore fruit.

Past the lines of cavalymen and archers who had marched beyond the fort, Llewynian soldiers sprang out from a nearby grove. They put a stop to the attack of the archers already stationed there and then attempted to drive them back even further, but there wasn’t much energy to their charge.

Given the heavy armor they were wearing, they had probably been more concerned about sustaining injuries than the heat, but they must have been struggling to push forward. Their speed kept slowing, and judging by their less-than-impressive numbers, quite a few men had dropped out.

Just in case, I formed a small hill in the middle of their path. Climbing it forced them to expend a great deal of effort, and their speed dropped even further.

As we sped ahead, we eventually lost sight of the Llewynians who had been pursuing us from behind. Reggie had us slow our march, but we continued to press onward. If we came to a stop, the Llewynians would catch up to us, and we didn't want to get caught in a pincer attack.

Sure enough, as we resumed our journey after a short break, arrows came flying at us from both sides. None of us were wearing armor due to the heat, but we managed to block the attack with the shields Reggie had ordered us to bring along.

Nonetheless, Reggie decided to press onward instead of stopping to fight. After the onslaught of arrows died down, he had our fastest knights move out to deal with the enemy archers.

Reggie's knights would lead the attack on the left. Jerome would assume responsibility for the right.

I couldn't help both of them. After some indecision, I decided to go to the left. In the RPG, the enemies were more thickly clustered on that side.

I was about to turn my horse in that direction when Cain stopped me. "I'll take you there, Miss Kiara. Please ride with me."

I hesitated for a moment. If something happened, there was a chance Cain might force me to turn back. But then again, he had never once disregarded my wishes in the middle of a battle.

"Alright."

At that, Cain brought his horse right up to mine, lifted me up off of it, and hauled me over.

"Eep!"

By the time I'd gotten over my surprise, the transfer was complete. I was shocked by the abruptness of it; he was tossing me around like a bag of rice!

I didn't *think* I was all that light. I was a little bit taller than I'd been in my past life, so that meant I had to be heavier... presumably.

Cain entrusted my horse to a nearby knight, called out to Gina and Girsch, and dashed off to the left.

The rain of arrows came to a stop, and the Llewynian soldiers charged out of the grove and onto a plain centered around the high road.

“Now, Girsch!” I yelled out.

“Ehe! Long throws are my specialty!” Girsch lobbed the hunk of copper ore I’d handed over when we set out.

“Specialty” was no exaggeration; it flew a considerable distance. My eyesight wasn’t sharp enough to catch where it landed, but that didn’t matter. I had Cain bring our horse to a sudden halt, dismounted, and put my hands on the ground.

“A pitfall!”

I put my all into creating a giant hole in the ground. The group of Llewynian soldiers at the front fell down the surprise pitfall. The ones in the back failed to stop themselves in time and tumbled down after them, cutting off the flow of soldiers from the left.

Girsch’s eyesight was good enough to get a glimpse of the scene from afar. “My, my, it looks pretty deep.”

“Really? How deep?”

“About two men tall?”

My pitfall was a resounding success, but the Llewynians began steering themselves around it before too long. I didn’t want them getting over here so easily, so I went to work mass-producing pitfalls while we were on the move. I made two of them right in the middle of their forces, but they didn’t appear deterred.

“Heheheh... Looks like you’ve got the hang of it, kid.” Master Horace cackled as he looked on. “But go too far, and you’ll regret it later.”

“I’ll be fine, Master Horace.”

I couldn’t let as few as ten or fifteen pitfalls get me down—not if I wanted to show everyone what I was made of.

Gina called for our attention. “The cavalry is coming our way. Let’s pull back for now.”

The Llewynian knights were trying to come back around from the front. Even worse, they paid no heed to the Farzian soldiers attempting to hold them back and were coming straight for us!

Cain turned his horse around by the reins.

“Protecting the spellcaster comes first!” someone shouted. Cain, Gina, and Girsch all took off at once.

The rest of our men had noticed what was happening; Reggie’s knights, who were leading the left-hand forces, did their best to mow down the Llewynian knights for us.

However, the Llewynians were dead set on going after me. A few shielders intercepted our knights, and the rest of the Llewynian cavalry galloped past them.

“They must think killing you will put them at an advantage... or no, maybe keep them from being at a *dis*advantage,” Master Horace reflected.

Cain nodded. “A spellcaster is a much more challenging opponent than any ordinary soldier. That’s whom I would go after first, too. The Llewynians must have evacuated the fort we saw earlier in order to prevent a repeat of what happened at Clonfert.”

They had heard that I’d destroyed an entire building in one hit, and that was why they had abandoned the fort. Everything finally made sense.

I wanted to head them off with my magic, but with the way Cain was holding me firmly against him—not to mention that with all the rocking back and forth, I’d bite my tongue if I wasn’t careful—that wasn’t going to happen.

In the meantime, we made it back to Alan.

“I brought you along without asking, but you’ll be safer here, Miss Kiara,” Cain explained. Evidently, he had judged that Alan and his knights, who were guarding the rear and keeping an eye on the situation before deciding their next move, were better poised to protect me. “Take care of Miss Kiara, milord.”

Alan ordered his knights and cavalymen to keep me surrounded.

“Wait just a second!” Gina got down from her horse, untied her hair, and tied a red shawl around her waist, wearing it like a skirt. Then she left her horse with Girsch. “This should do it. Sir Cain, let me ride on your horse. Girsch, you come with us. Lord Alan, you take Kiara. Kiara, you should tie back your hair.”

“Planning to act as bait, hm?” Alan asked.

Gina nodded. “If the enemy is going after our spellcaster, it’s a good strategy. We can take care of the cavalry, but the arrows are what we really need to be worried about. This way, we can fool their eyes from a distance.”

“Let’s do it. Get on, Kiara.” Alan came to a quick decision and urged me up.

“But...” I hesitated. If Gina acted as a decoy, she would be chased down by an overwhelming number of knights. I felt awful subjecting someone else to a scenario that would have my own hair standing on end.

Alan was the one to scold me for my hemming and hawing. “If we split the enemy’s attention in two directions, it will reduce Wentworth’s and Gina’s chances of being targeted too. Once they find out Gina is a decoy, they won’t spare them another glance. While the enemy is distracted, keep your distance and attack. We have to create a situation where it’s easy for you to wield your magic. Hurry!”

With that command, Alan reached out with both arms, and Cain silently lifted me up off his horse. He handed me over to Alan, who had me sit at the front of his saddle.

I had no say in the matter. I felt almost like a ball, getting passed around from horse to horse.

At that point, all I could do was thank Gina for her consideration and tie back my hair in order to play my role. She had even handed me a cord to do it with.

“I’ll take the spellcaster and go on ahead. The Llewynians at our rear won’t catch up to us just yet. You lot should go back up our forces on both sides. You five, come with me. Hurry up and put your hair back already, Kiara! Let’s go!”

“Hey, wait!”

While my hands were still behind me working to tie up my hair, Alan spurred his horse onward.

“See you later, Kiara!” Perhaps to clear my conscience, or perhaps because she was totally used to this, Gina just waved me off with a smile. Both she and the poker-faced Cain faded into the distance.

I couldn’t even spare a hand to wave back. I had almost managed to force my hair into a ponytail, but then...

“Whoa!”

Because I couldn’t grab hold of anything, I nearly slipped off the horse.

Alan firmly gripped me around the stomach, so we managed to avoid a disaster. He then said, “Just give up and grab hold of something,” pressed me against his shoulder, and adjusted his grip on the reins. After that, we picked up speed.

I was so afraid of getting thrown off that I listened to Alan and clung to his left arm. The moment I did, I finally understood how he was able to toss me around so easily. I couldn’t usually tell from over his clothes, but his arms were *way* beefier than mine.

While I reflected on the newly apparent reason behind our difference in strength, I looked back at the enemies behind us, then started searching for a place for us to go.

“How about that clifftop over there?”

“We’ll be sitting ducks on the way up,” Alan said curtly.

Unfortunately, I didn’t see any other areas that stood out. From here all the way to the base of Sorwen’s mine-filled mountain, there didn’t appear to be any places that gave a bird’s-eye view of the battlefield. That meant there was only one thing I could do.

“When is Reggie planning to stop our march?”

“Soon, most likely. He’ll want to finish things before the weather-beaten troops have a chance to join up with the Llewynians on this side.”

The reason he kept pushing his soldiers forward was to prevent a pincer

attack and to evade the enemies closing in from behind. Even if the number of soldiers was the same, the amount of effort it would take to defend against a pincer attack versus taking the enemy head-on was incomparable.

“Furthermore, Sorwen’s marquis should be able to see us from where he is. If he knows our forces are clashing, he’s likely to send us more soldiers.”

If the Llewynians saw we were getting reinforcements from Sorwen, they would have no choice but to retreat. This was yet another part of Reggie’s calculations to end the hot summer battle as quickly as possible.

“These are the prince’s troops we’re talking about, after all. Thinking ahead, Sorwen can’t choose NOT to send any help. Mmheehee!” Master Horace seemed to agree with Alan’s assessment.

Still, if the enemy cut down our numbers before that could happen, it defeated the whole purpose. In that case, I’d already found my battlefield here.

“Alan! Run your horse around this whole area once, then drop me off a little ways ahead,” I requested, then grabbed some copper ore from my pocket and started sprinkling it around.

“Our forces haven’t stopped yet.”

“That’s fine! I’m better off somewhere past our army, a short distance from the high road. Please?”

Alan wasn’t about to deny my request. Reggie stubbornly refused to include my magic in our tactics, so we hadn’t discussed what my role was supposed to be.

I knew that was Reggie’s kindness at work. He figured I didn’t want to kill anyone, so he was allowing me the option to not do anything at all.

As we started running ahead of the troops, my eyes met with Reggie’s for a moment. His gaze was stern. Ever since I had begun to fight, Reggie gave me that look every now and then. And each time, I felt like he was seeing right through me to the fear in my heart.

It was like he was saying, *Will you be able to keep on fighting?*

But I had no intention of stopping.

Eventually, Alan took us to the spot I had pointed out. After passing through the high road, lined by a small wood, we came out into a wide, open area.

In the distance, I could see a fence built to restrict the people coming in and out of the path that continued toward the mountains, along with a town built on a slope. The area from here to the fence was all vast plains.

There were a few fields here and there, but presumably, there had already been a clash with the Llewynians here. Everything had been trampled, and all the crops were brown and withered.

This was the perfect spot. I had Alan stop at a place a little to the left of the high road, and then I slipped down from his horse.

“Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I should do?”

“No, it’s fine. Thanks for not trying to stop me.”

Alan didn’t ask me what I was planning to do. He just frowned and said, “If you’re saying *that*, I’m sure you’re up to no good. Part of me wants to just hit you upside the head and toss you over to Reggie.” He heaved a sigh. “But lately, I’ve started to see things differently. If we can put a quick end to this ridiculous war, at least things between you and him won’t grow any more strained. So I’m willing to prioritize winning above all else... and to that end, I suppose I can turn a blind eye to your idiotic behavior.”

As he turned away to start giving orders to the knights, he added, “So long as you promise not to die, you can do as you like. At the end of the day, I know you’re a stubborn cuss who won’t take anything but the path you’ve chosen for yourself.”

Alan knew me too well—particularly the part about me being stubborn.

Thus, I leaned into it. “Thanks.”

After that, I knelt down on the ground.

I knew what I had to do. I needed to fortify our defenses, losing as few of our and Sorwen’s men as possible. I had already laid out the groundwork to do just that.

I took out my copper ore and brought my golem onto the scene. Once I got up onto its shoulder and sat down, I could get a better view of what was going on down below.

The vanguard had finally made it here. Reggie seemed intent on confronting the Llewynians in a narrower area toward the front; he had placed the foot soldiers in the front and stationed the archers in the rear.

And that's when I heard Master Horace yell, "Augh?! When did YOU get here, you little rascal?!"

"Huh?"

When I looked over, I saw Lila boldly riding on the golem's right shoulder, opposite of where I was sitting. Lila stood steadfast, watching me closely. Somehow, I could feel the pressure easing off me.

"Don't worry, Master Horace. Lila is just here because she's worried. Besides, you can't get a strained back if you're made of clay, so you don't have to worry about your joints aching in the cold anymore."

"True enough... but the antipathy's been carved into my soul."

Even now that he couldn't feel the heat or cold, he was still tormented by old memories. I felt bad for him, but the frostfoxes' powers held too much appeal. He really needed to overcome his trauma somehow.

"I'm doing my best here, so you try a little harder too, okay?"

I focused on my magic arts. My power surged toward the copper ore I had scattered a short distance away.

Because it was so far from me, it was a little difficult to concentrate my mana in the ore. Nonetheless, I managed to pinpoint the location of the majority of it. As the Llewynians rushed ahead and drew closer to the Évrard soldiers, I waited for them to pass over the ground where I had scattered the ore.

I gritted my teeth. Wherever the ore had been spread, the well-traveled ground of the high road slowly melted away into mud. Before long, it had turned into fine sand.

Now that they were ankle-deep in sand, it became harder for both the

Llewynian foot soldiers and cavalrymen to move forward. I shifted the sand around so their feet would be even more firmly buried.

This is hard to do with such a wide range.

I placed a hand to my chest and held my breath.

“It’s only a foothold!” When voices rang out to rally their men, the Llewynians pushed on. The soil had merely turned to sand; they figured there was no need to go around it, unlike the pitfalls, and they could just force their way through.

I took deep breaths and waited for more and more Llewynian soldiers to set foot in the sandpit—one thousand, two thousand, three thousand of them. As I counted, I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears like a drum.

Once the time was right... I hardened the sand all at once.

With one or both legs cemented in place, the Llewynians began to panic. Now that they couldn’t move, even if they could still swing their swords, they had nowhere to run. They couldn’t dodge, either.

Reggie and the other commanders didn’t pass up the opportunity. Their blades went to work reaping the enemy’s lives like wheat.

In the RPG, paralysis was classified as a low-level magic spell. But in reality, there was nothing quite as scary as having your legs frozen in place.

Countless screams and death throes reached my ears.



“You’re well prepared.”

As Gina was pulled up onto Cain’s horse, disguised as Kiara, she cocked her head to one side. “I’m supposed to be guarding Kiara, aren’t I? If you’re going to hire a female mercenary, this is the most obvious use for one.”

“I see.”

Cain determined that he would just have to defend Gina in place of Kiara—not only for the mercenary’s sake but to lure in the pursuing cavalry as well. Seeing as Gina knew how to wield a sword, he was bound to have an easier time of it than protecting Kiara.

After thinking it over, he said, “There’s no need to be worried. I’ll keep you safe, just as I’ve always done for Miss Kiara.”

“Hm? Don’t need it.” Gina gave Cain a wide-eyed stare, and the knight looked equally puzzled by her response.

“But if you get hurt, Miss Kiara will be devastated.”

Gina glanced around, ascertaining the positions of the enemy cavalry, then beckoned Reynard and Sara back to her side. Frowning, she told Cain, “Listen... You’re really going to get yourself in trouble like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’d heard that Farzian men were a more respectable sort than Salekhard’s, so I can’t say I’m surprised. It’s fine to protect women and all, but you need to learn to take a good look at people and make a judgment call. I was hired to *fight* for you. You’re not paying me to be protected.”

Frankly, Cain was taken aback. He had been raised to protect women, regardless of whether one had been hired to fight as a mercenary. But evidently, Gina wasn’t particularly impressed with his convictions.

“Got it? I’m out here fighting because I can hold my own. I don’t need your concern. If something *does* happen to me, I have my cute little buddies here to take care of it, so don’t waste your time worrying over nothing. Reynard!” As she called out her partner’s name, Gina drew her dagger from its sheath.

The Llewynian knights had drawn closer. To cover their comrades’ backs, the Évrard cavalry rushed forward to cut them down. Unfortunately, the enemy was so focused on slaying the “spellcaster” that they paid no heed as their fellow men were defeated behind them, and the vanguard drew closer and closer to Cain and Gina.

“Reynard, sword!”

The frostfox who had been running alongside their horse let out a wild roar. Simultaneously, the blade of Gina’s dagger extended until it equaled her in height. It became a sword of ice, enshrouded in a cloud of white, billowing vapor.

As Cain turned his horse, Gina swung her blade down. The arms and shoulders of the nearby knights it hit—and perhaps most fatally of all, the heads of the horses they were riding—froze over, and those enemies collapsed on the spot.

Cain backed Gina up, the pair striking down all the enemies who came slashing their way undeterred... and as he did, he came to a realization.

So long as she wasn't fighting at point-blank range, Kiara was considerably strong. If he allowed her to fight as freely as Gina and defended her as an equal... maybe, just *maybe*, they could more handily demolish the Llewynian army.

Almost like the devil had whispered into his ear, the thought crossed his mind and refused to leave.

In the meantime, the majority of the Llewynian knights fell to Gina's icy blade, and the remainder were slain by Girsch and Alan's knights. The few men left standing saw that they stood no chance and turned back. With that, they were unlikely to go chasing after Kiara. It was right then—when Cain had determined as much and started heading to the vanguard to find Kiara—that it happened.

The Llewynian foot soldiers closing in from behind had slowed to a stop.

More accurately, the ground underneath their feet had suddenly turned to sand, tripping them up and impeding their movements.

Soon enough, the sand around their feet hardened into stone. As soon as the Farzian soldiers realized the Llewynians had been rendered immobile, they surged forth like an avalanche.

Cain couldn't describe the sight before him as anything but the demolition of a powerless enemy. It was nothing more than the slaughter of an opponent who couldn't fight back.

But there was no telling how long the miracle would last. If the Farzians didn't mow them down now, the surviving Llewynians would go on to claim the lives of their fellow men. To keep that from happening, the Farzian soldiers swung their swords down like men possessed.

Cain and Gina, who were right up close to the spectacle, joined in the battle as well.

By the time the heat and the stench of blood in the air had reached stifling levels, the earth had returned to its original form. But in spite of their newly found freedom of movement, very few Llewynian soldiers managed to make an escape.

All the Llewynians who had been slain with their legs cemented in place fell backward, their knees bent at an odd angle. It was a bizarre sight to behold.

“So this is the true terror of a spellcaster. ‘Strong as ten thousand men’ doesn’t even begin to cover it. When used to her full potential, she could destroy an entire army all by herself,” Gina muttered. She had dismounted Cain’s horse to fight, so her arms and chest were now soaked in the blood of her enemies. There was a slight tremble in her voice—perhaps she was left shaken by the one-sided massacre.

Among the nearby soldiers, many had turned pale, and others were visibly frightened.

Previously, whenever Kiara had struck down the enemy with her magic, she had simply overpowered them with abilities disconnected from reality. This time, her magic had facilitated a slaughter by human hands, making the horror seem all the more real.

Yet Cain couldn’t understand why everyone seemed so afraid.

This was all so they could defeat an even greater number of Llewynian soldiers. They were fighting to ensure that Llewyn would never invade Évrard again, so what was the issue?

And... it was the perfect vengeance, too.

A desire sleeping deep within Cain’s heart had been awakened: he wanted to see the Llewynians utterly crushed.

When he saw a Llewynian soldier hanging skewered from behind on a spear, Cain recalled the corpse of his mother, whom he had managed to identify despite the days’ worth of rot and decay. When he saw a Llewynian soldier breathe his last, staring up wide-eyed at the sky as he shed tears and blood, Cain was tormented by the knowledge that his brother had met a similar end.

Up until now, Cain had bottled up all that hatred under the guise of self-

control. As a knight serving the margraviate of Évrard, he couldn't allow himself to be driven by a grudge alone. He had been warned that if he went rogue and raised chaos, it would only make it that much harder to defeat the enemy.

So long as it would allow them to beat Llewyne, Cain had felt he could live with that. He had followed his orders, and before long, that sense of self-restraint had been ingrained in him.

It was no surprise that he had slipped back into that impulse as soon as the war had begun. All that had been holding him back was the pity he felt for Kiara.

When he saw a woman crying, he didn't want to sadden her further. But no matter how hard he had tried to stop her, Kiara herself had insisted on fighting.

After hearing what Gina had to say, a thought had crossed Cain's mind: the entire reason he had taken a liking to Kiara in the first place was because he had witnessed her pushing forward to defeat the enemy. She was a courageous girl, capable of accomplishing what he couldn't. That had been his initial impression of Kiara.

His good sense was what had stopped him from throwing her into battle. Thus, he had done everything he could to hold her back, to the point of attempting to incite Prince Reginald into action—though neither of the pair had gone along with that in the end.

He finally understood why, whenever he had allowed her to go overboard, he had made her frame it as a command for him to obey—because otherwise, he couldn't keep his own hatred in check.

But now, Cain believed there was no longer any need to hold himself back. Kiara had made her choice. No matter how much she cried and wailed in the process, she would protect the prince and as many Évrard soldiers as possible and kill however many Llewynian soldiers as was necessary to do it. Their goals were in alignment.

The battle unfolding before his eyes had begun to wrap up. As he shouted orders at his men, Prince Reginald caught Cain's eye.

For a few short seconds, the prince's gaze wandered to the golem standing a

safe distance away. There was no change in his expression, but Cain sensed pity in his eyes.

Having noticed that, Cain knew he had to go to Kiara's side.

When he looked closely, he saw that the magic holding the Llewynians in place had been dispelled, and the golem had begun to move.

"I'm going after Kiara." He bid Gina a terse goodbye, then headed in the same direction as the spellcaster.

The golem, which she had been utilizing as her high ground, gradually returned to a lump of earth. Cain figured she would be nearby and had his horse bring him close.

Most likely, Kiara had chosen a spot far from the troops because she didn't want to see either him or the prince right after the battle. She wanted to stand by their side to better protect them, so it must have been hard on her to be constantly denied.

Cain tied up his horse nearby, then walked in search of her at a leisurely pace so as not to frighten her.

He stumbled upon her quickly enough. She was lying on the ground, hugging a frostfox close. It was Lila, who must have left Gina's side at some point during the battle.

Kiara's breathing was rough, like that of someone suffering from an illness. Clearly she had used too much of her magic.

But after this, she would never have to worry about that again. From now on, Cain would fight alongside her, taking care not to push her too far.

The soil crunched under his feet as he took a step forward. When Kiara heard the sound, her eyes snapped open, and she turned her head, startled.

"Oh, Sir Cain..."

Her greenish-gray eyes were damp as she stared up at him. She looked anxious.

Most likely, she was concerned that Cain had seen her in a bad spot. And she was right to be; normally, he would have been furious with her. *Why would you*

make yourself sick like this? he would ask. *Take better care of yourself,* he would say.

But today, he wasn't thinking any of that. He knew now that what he truly wanted was for her to grant him his wish. She was the one who could do what he had never managed to.

Cain wanted to be her support.

Meanwhile, he slowly began to understand just what it was he felt for her.



Leaning against my golem's head, I gasped for breath as I watched blood dye the ground below.

I'd had a rougher time than expected. I had assumed that this would be easier than moving two golems at once, but perhaps there had just been too much distance. All the same, I didn't want to stick around somewhere I would be easy pickings.

"Mmheehee, this is brutal! It's a simple tactic, but I've never seen anything more chilling. I'm betting both enemy and ally alike got a good taste of your power today," Master Horace remarked.

A dry laugh escaped my lips—though who could say if I'd actually managed a smile.

My goal here was to inspire a fear of me, so that *should* have been exactly what I wanted to hear.

If everyone kept me away from the fighting in the name of keeping me safe, I had to prove to them just how strong I was. Isaac was the one who had given me the idea.

Go hand your enemy a sound defeat.

I didn't want anyone to grow dependent on the convenience of my magic. I just wanted them to count me among their numbers. So long as I did that, I hoped they wouldn't flat-out leave me behind again like they had in Cassia.

The Llewynians were in chaos over the current predicament. Those who fought back even knowing there was no escape found themselves the targets of

arrows or fell victim to Farzian swords. Those who gave up relinquished their weapons and surrendered.

Nonetheless, the Llewynians in the rear didn't give up their struggle. *Can't they just hurry up and retreat?*

For lack of options, I moved my golem forward.

"You sure you can manage?" Master Horace was a spellcaster himself, so he could imagine just how much of a toll casting magic at such a wide range would have on someone at my proficiency level.

"I'll be fine," I insisted as I advanced my golem to chase away the Llewynian soldiers. Unsurprisingly, the Llewynians ran off for fear of a finishing blow.

Reggie rushed toward a soldier with his back turned, ordering his men to hunt down anyone within range. This marked the end of it, most likely. Our efforts had paid off.

Relieved, I returned the hardened earth to soft dirt. Next, I hurried my golem away, heading for a nearby windbreak. It was a good distance from the battlefield, so I figured it would be safe. Just outside of it, I slowly dismantled my golem—*carefully*, otherwise I was liable to tumble over on the spot.

With great effort, I managed to sit myself down in the shade of a tree. But even that proved too painful, so I lay down on my back.

I found myself short of breath for the first time in a while, so much so that I nearly broke into a coughing fit. The last time I had been in such bad shape was after the battle at Fort Clonfert.

"Even Clonfert wasn't... this bad..."

Everything hurt. I was suffocating, as if I wasn't taking in enough oxygen with each breath.

Master Horace scoffed, "That's what you get, kid. Obviously the burden was going to be heavy if you transformed such a wide range of land. If you'd at least thrown some of your own blood in there, maybe it wouldn't have left you so drained."

Of course. Surely there would have been a world of difference if I'd given

myself an easier time of it rather than struggling through the process.

For my part, I'd just wanted to show off a big spell—and to do it *without* using a technique that would rub Reggie the wrong way.

“Hey, Master Horace. Don't tell anyone... okay?”

I was in so much pain, but I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't want anyone to know.

Master Horace fell silent for a bit, reluctant to answer, but he eventually muttered, “Do as you like. Magic draws on your very life; you're better off using it for a reason you can make peace with. Besides, if anyone wanted to stop somebody who used the kind of magic you just did... they'd have to think of one damn clever way to pull it off. Eeeheehee! But hey, it's not like I want to watch you sink into a quagmire.”

“Quagmire? I don't know what you mean... but thanks, Master...”

I figured he would say that. The only ones who perceived magic as a way to handle your very life force were the ones who had experienced it themselves. Here we had Master Horace, who had wished to survive no matter the cost and had used the final embers of his life to turn me into a spellcaster. Of course he wouldn't try to stop me after I'd decided what I was going to use my own life for.

Still curled up on the ground, I endured the pain, desperately praying for the mana writhing within me to settle down.

Unfortunately, I had no idea if that was going to work out in my favor. My body's revolt showed no signs of dying down, and fear washed over me as I remembered all the times I'd watched defective spellcasters turn to sand.

Was I going to die? Here, without anyone knowing? The thought of disappearing without so much as uttering my final words was too lonely to bear.

Tears pricked at my eyes, and when I reached out a hand in desperation, I heard a soft footstep, followed by something fluffy touching my arm.

I saw a pale coat of fur and a green ribbon. It was Lila. She sniffed at my

cheek, then lay down next to me, pressing her cold body against mine. I took comfort in the chill, and in the next moment, I felt the heat suddenly begin to drain from my body.

I wasn't *physically* cooling down. The fever generated by the magic swirling within me was being sucked out along with the mana itself.

Oh, that's right. Frostfoxes hang around spellcasters because they like their mana. By snuggling up to me, Lila was absorbing all my excess mana. As a result, the magic inside me came under control, and gradually, it subsided.

I hugged Lila tight, grateful for her help during one of my most hopeless moments. She stayed put, making no attempt to wriggle out of my grasp.

When I closed my eyes, relieved, the tears that had welled up in my eyes began to spill. But that was fine; I just had to wipe them away before anyone showed up—or so I thought. Thanks to the sudden loss of tension, my consciousness faded for a bit.

My eyes snapped back open at the loud crunch of footsteps. When I turned my head, I saw it was Cain.

"Oh, Sir Cain..."

Oh no, I thought. Now that he'd witnessed me completely wiped out, it was no use trying to act tough.

As I was searching for an excuse, I noticed that something was off. The look on Cain's face seemed more pained than usual, yet somehow like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Or perhaps it was just my imagination.

"Please don't tell Reggie. I'm just a little tired."

I tried getting up to show him I was alright, but I wobbled like I was anemic. Still, I powered through it enough to sit up straight.

"You're so stubborn. It's more upsetting to be told that you don't need any help from me, you realize."

Cain knelt down and extended a hand. His fingertips slid over my cheeks, wiping away the tearstains on my face. He used the same hand to stroke the back of my neck, and I jolted at the touch.

“I don’t like being outmaneuvered the moment I take my eyes off you either. If that’s how you plan to go about it, I’d much prefer you keep me by your side as a partner-in-crime—or at least, I do now.”

His hand was warm, steeped in the smell of blood and iron from gripping his sword, but the darkness in his eyes only grew. As he lifted me up with a faint smile on his face, he had an air of intensity about him—one that said he’d long since thrown out any pretense of a reason for touching me and simply desired to wrap me up in his arms.



“What?”

I was flummoxed, but Cain spoke in a gentle voice, like he wanted to reassure me. “From now on, all I want to do is help you if you’re going to fight. No matter how hard I may try, I will never understand your desire to spare our enemies. My own hatred for Llewynne is too strong. When I watched those Llewynian men die without putting up a fight, I was fully reminded of that.”

He had always silently watched as I performed funerals for the enemy, but I’d known it didn’t sit well with him. For him, the battle against Llewynne also held implications of revenge. If this war had been against Salekhard and *only* Salekhard, Cain likely wouldn’t have felt the same way. He simply would have fought as part of his role as a knight.

And yet, I had insisted on having things my way—and reawakened his grudge in the process.

Unfortunately, there was no turning back time. Cain couldn’t go back to the person he’d been before his revelation.

“For the longest time, I pitied you. I wanted to keep you away from the war... but if you refuse to change your course of action, I’ve realized now that I’d do best to support you in it. After all, you can kill far more Llewynians than any ordinary soldier. And what’s more, you changed a predetermined future.”

Cain lifted my hand and placed a kiss to my fingers.

His attitude toward me had changed somehow. Before, he had always given the impression that he was looking after a child, and at times, I’d found that embarrassing. But now, he was almost... reverent? There was something oddly polite about his demeanor. It felt like there was an almost frenzied quality to his eyes when he looked at me... or was that just my imagination?

“I believe this should be more convenient for you too. We have only one problem. Although His Highness doesn’t seem interested in restraining your actions, he is against proactively throwing you into battle. But with my help, things should become easier for you... Don’t you agree?”

All I could do was nod. Cain was exactly right. If they knew I had him on my side, Reggie and Alan would see that it was no longer possible to craftily

remove me from their plans. There would never be a repeat of Maynard, where they had purposely left me behind.

There was just one problem.

“Won’t you get in trouble if you do that? You were ordered to protect me, so if you allow me to jump into danger—”

“His Highness asked me not to stop you from doing whatever you’d set your mind to, so it should be fine. But in that case, why don’t you make it an order?”

“Huh?”

“If the one I’m protecting commands it, I have no choice but to obey. If we leave things as they stand now, I would have to prioritize His Highness’ and Lord Alan’s orders over your desires. If I *were* to put your orders first, so long as you have no plans to make an enemy of His Highness, there should be no conflict of interest.”

It would be a piece of cake to avoid becoming enemies with Reggie. I would never, ever join up with Llewyn. Besides, if this would serve to protect Cain as well...

“Please work with me... to defeat our enemy.”

Cain immediately called for a do-over. “That didn’t sound much like a command. You ought to have the word ‘order’ in there, if nothing else.”

Didn’t we have a conversation like this before? I wondered. Then I tried again, “Erm, in that case... please obey my orders on the battlefield.”

“Tell me to prioritize your orders above all else. Otherwise, I might just give precedence to His Highness and lock you away somewhere you can’t use your magic.”

“Hrk... When we’re on the battlefield, please give my orders top priority. Even if that means disobeying Reggie. I’ll take full responsibility for whatever happens.”

The corners of Cain’s mouth finally lifted, satisfied. “Then I am at your command, Miss Kiara.”

“Great... Here’s a different kind of quagmire.”

I thought I heard Master Horace mumble something with a sigh, but I couldn't quite catch what he said.



Cain and I made our way back to the rest of the troops just before the battle ended. At almost the exact same time, a group of Sorwenians came along from the nearby town. About twenty armed horsemen showed up to receive Reggie.

Of course, one of those men was Lord Sorwen. If I remembered correctly, he was stated to be thirty years old in the game. He had lost his father in a mining cave-in and succeeded him at a young age. Perhaps a product of his family's extensive efforts in commercially developing their territory, he had the air of a merchant about him.

He was riding a horse and wearing a military uniform, a sword hanging from his waist, but the look didn't really suit him. It was almost like the clothes were wearing *him*. His long, golden-brown hair reached his shoulders.

"I do so humbly apologize for our tardiness. I'd heard rumors of Your Highness' march, but to my deepest regret, not even our merchants could so much as budge after the Llewynians' attack. Why, even merchants from neighboring territories found themselves trapped in our town, unable to return home. You have my deepest gratitude for striking down the invaders!"

Yeah, the ingratiating attitude really screamed "merchant."

"I was hoping we could make it here sooner ourselves," Reggie replied. His tone was so mild, you'd never guess he had initially planned to skip past Sorwen altogether.

I watched the exchange from a distance.

If I were to believe what Reggie had said in Cassia, so long as he didn't find out how exhausted I'd been, he wouldn't have anything to scold me over. All the same, I was so afraid he was going to see right through me that I wanted to hide, like a dog guiltily glancing at their master after a bout of mischief.

"It'll be fine," Cain reassured me, placing a hand on my shoulder as I fidgeted. He had been by Reggie's side far longer than me, so I assumed he knew what he was talking about.

Then again, Reggie was a certified expert at reading my mind. I wanted to go get a word in with Jerome or Edam ASAP. Using this battle as an example of what I could do, I would request that they incorporate my magic into their strategies from now on.

Unfortunately, I couldn't interrupt the prince's and the marquis' conversation to start up a chat with the two men standing nearby. While I was waiting impatiently, Reggie looked my way.

Cain held my hand in solidarity. I instinctively looked down, and by the time I lifted my head again, Reggie was already looking elsewhere.

That was all there was to it, but somehow, it had left me terribly anxious. It was a feeling akin to plunging a hand underwater, stirring it all around, and leaving everything a mess.

As I stood there perplexed by my own emotions, we were given the order to move out.



At Lord Sorwen's guidance, we entered the nearby town. Surrounded in fences and walls built to keep bandits out, the place was the picture of calm.

Alerted to the arrival of the prince's army, some of the townspeople came out of their houses to line the cobblestone streets. Others stuck their heads out of their windows to watch us. The women seemed particularly giddy as they gazed out at Reggie and his companions.

"Hey, look at the silver-haired man!"

"Isn't that the prince? He's so handsome!"

"Awfully young, isn't he? He must be close to my daughter's age. That knight by his side has such a refined look about him!"

"Is the one with the black hair another nobleman?"

"I *did* hear that the margrave's son is here to represent Évrard."

These poor girls had been down in the dumps for a long time now. Forget going out to fight to protect their town; they hadn't been able to go out *at all* in ages. This must have made for a fun diversion.

Reggie probably realized that himself. Occasionally, he would wave his hand with a smile. He'd probably gotten used to this sort of thing over the course of his life as a prince.

Making a show of cheerfulness was bound to have a positive impact on townspeople, young and old, male and female. If we looked relaxed enough, we'd give them hope that we could drive out the Llewynians.

Just as I imagined, part of the crowd watching Reggie began to cheer.

"Long live His Highness!"

"Victory to Farzia!"

If you traced it back to its origins, Farzia was once a kingdom ruled by the divine right of kings. But ever since war had grown more rampant, kings who were formidable in battle had become more popular with the citizens.

Appearances held equal sway over people's hearts. Reggie's good looks held the power to inspire the confidence needed to lend us a hand.

Not far behind him, I was riding together with Cain. It was embarrassing to do this in front of such a large audience, but I hadn't recovered enough to ride on my own, so I'd had no other choice.

I wished I could have flaunted my stuff... like, *Your spellcaster here will give it her all!* But that was asking too much from me. The thought was absolutely terrifying. If the people started muttering, "Who does that little girl think she is?" or whatever, I'd never recover.

Unfortunately for me, sharing a horse was bound to stand out. It probably didn't help that seeing a girl among the forces was so rare.

"Look, there's a girl! Who is that?"

"Some nobleman's daughter, perhaps?"

Each time one of those whispers reached my ears, my shoulders trembled a little.

"Act a little more confident. You mustn't look down. It's a waste of your pretty face," Cain whispered into my ear. That embarrassing line of his was almost enough to make me scream and run away, but if I did that, I'd just look

like a crazy person.

If nothing else, I didn't want to be perceived as a weirdo, so I looked straight ahead with a stiff face. Behind me, I heard Cain let out a burst of laughter.

Ugh... This is humiliating. Nonetheless, Cain kept his arm firmly wrapped around my stomach to hold me up, so I couldn't deny that this was easier on the nerves than going it alone.

Before long, we arrived at Lord Sorwen's manor. It was an elegant brick building, much less ostentatious than the outer wall of the town. After being shown to my room and assigned a servant to act as my attendant, I had her draw a bath for me. Given the hot time of year, the lukewarm water felt perfectly pleasant, and it was a relief to rinse all the dust, sweat, and smells of blood from my body.

I brought Master Horace along with me. The servants were taken aback by his... everything, but they kindly wiped him down with a cloth at my request. Master Horace seemed awfully pleased to have the young ladies' hands all over him.

After that, I took a short nap. I had just about reached my limit, so I fell asleep in no time at all.

When I woke up about three hours later, I was feeling a lot better. In my earlier condition, I probably couldn't have gotten food down my throat; I was lucky there had been some time before dinner.

Perhaps because of the large number of people crammed inside the manor, dinner took place inside a small hall. Reggie and the other nobles weren't the only attendees; their accompanying knights enjoyed their meal in the same place.

With the exception of the ones tasked with guarding the manor, the soldiers would have to spend the night in tents set up in the outskirts of the town, but the marquis had at least provided them all with a meal.

Gina and Girsch were staying in the manor too. The two often served as my escorts, and Gina was a woman with monsters to take care of, so they couldn't very well have spent the night with the rest of the soldiers.

Off in a corner of the hall, an animal-loving knight was talking to Lila and Reynard. “Err... shake, boy!” I heard him say. *They’re not dogs, you know.*

Alan looked like he really wanted to join in. Every now and then, his eyes would drift over to Reynard. Unfortunately, neither Alan nor I could head over there. There was a good chance that Lord Sorwen would start up a conversation with us. Here we were enjoying his hospitality, so we couldn’t very well abandon the man who had provided us food and shelter to go play with some foxes.

Once the spotlight fell on me, I was lucky to have Cain, who handled himself flawlessly, sitting by my side. Thanks to his assistance, I managed to answer all sorts of questions about magic without incident.

Afterward, the lord even flattered me with, “My, the lady spellcaster is so young and precious.”

He also asked, “Which house is Cordier?” to which I responded that they were relatives of the Évrards. He mentioned that he had a male relative close to me in age. When I remarked that he might get along with Alan and his friends, for some strange reason, Reggie burst into a fit of amused giggles.

Next, he said, “One of the daughters of a branch family is living nearby, and the air there is much cooler than in our manor. Would you like to go visit it tomorrow?” Cain called for Master Horace’s help in a whisper, and he laughed his usual creepy cackle.

As such, I was able to gently let him down with, “If I had Master Horace with me, the poor girl would probably get scared.”

Following my rejection, Cain cut in to suggest that the spellcaster might need some rest after the long battle. Even Alan said, “Come to think of it, I haven’t seen you bedridden as of late... but don’t push yourself.” So, with that, Lord Sorwen finally gave up on his invitation.

After that series of conversations, for whatever reason, Reggie’s knight Groul massaged his temple with a sigh. *Is he tired?*

Despite various mishaps, I successfully made it through dinner. I could still feel the fatigue weighing down my body, so I went right to sleep afterward...

but I woke up in the middle of the night.

Ever since we'd left Évrard, I hadn't been sleeping very well. However, considering how listless I was still feeling, I hadn't imagined it would be bad enough to wake me up.

I tried to go back to sleep, but it wasn't happening. I had already slept too much during the afternoon, most likely.

There was nothing more I could do, so I decided to move my body a little. Once I'd had a nice change of pace, maybe I would be able to get back to bed.

The room I was staying in was one of the guest rooms, so it was fairly large. Inside the spacious area were a bed, a writing desk, and a sofa. There was a wardrobe as well, but I never carried much luggage on the march, so I had no need for it. Even the pale-blue nightgown I was wearing was just a hand-me-down from the marquis' sister, who had already left to be married.

The world outside my window was completely still; the only sound I could hear was the rustle of leaves swaying in the gentle breeze. The sky was pitch black, and from what I could tell, there was still a long way to go until dawn. It was pretty cool at night, but I'd probably feel even more refreshed with the wind against my skin.

Thus, I decided to leave my room.

Seeing as it was bound to get hot, I almost didn't want to wear anything extra, but then I would be in trouble on the off chance I ran into someone. I threw on a thin gown over my sleepwear. Master Horace would just make for extra luggage, so I left him behind.

When I stepped out of my room, there was no one else in the corridor. That was no surprise, really; it was the middle of the night. Everyone must have been worn out from the battle earlier in the day.

However, my servant had apparently been waiting around in an adjacent room. When she heard me open the door, the middle-aged lady rushed out to meet me.

"How can I be of service to you, milady?"

“Oh, um! I just woke up, so I was going to go for a short walk,” I answered honestly, and she offered to lead me to the manor’s courtyard.

I was grateful for her help. After all, nobles’ manors were huge; I could’ve ended up wandering for ages before I found my way outside. Plus, having someone walk with me was comforting.

Under her guidance, I headed outside through a sliding door.

The breeze caressing my skin felt pleasant. All the heat that had been bottled up inside me since the afternoon dissipated into thin air. After drawing a deep breath, I looked behind me, but the servant was gone. Had she gone back inside to give me space?

The courtyard was pitch black, but I could just barely make out the silhouettes of everything in the moonlight. And most notably of all, the stars were shining brightly in the sky.

This world had its own myths and folklore associated with the constellations. I had picked up some very basic trivia at my boarding school, but seeing as I’d always just pretended to know what everyone was talking about, no one had ever formally taught me about any of them. I was worried people would think it was strange that a nobleman’s daughter, who ought to have heard all these fairy tales from her wet nurse, had never heard about any of that stuff.

Still, even if I knew nothing about their true meanings, what I *did* know was that the stars were beautiful. Magic existed in this world, sure, but maybe it still followed the Copernican model. Was it safe to assume that those shining lights were celestial bodies?

I noticed a few stars moving through the night sky. *Huh? But how? Can stars really move that fast? If this were my past life, I’d assume those were planes, but we don’t have those here.*

As I followed one of the traveling stars with my eyes, I saw the shadow of a bird pass over the moon, bigger than the one I remembered from my past life. Its tail feathers shone as brightly as a star.

“Oh, so it was the bird that was glittering...”

Just what you’d expect from a magical world. Witnessing a bird’s tail feathers

shining like a star was a perfectly normal phenomenon.

While I was thinking to myself about how strange and beautiful it was, a voice unexpectedly rang out to answer the questions in the back of my mind. “It’s called a starbird. Have you never heard of the creature?”

I looked behind me, startled by the unfamiliar voice, and saw a man walking up to me. It was too dark to tell for sure, but it looked like he had a lighter shade of hair. He had left his lantern near the door, and its soft glow glinted off his locks. He had a meek quality to his features, and I got the feeling I’d seen him somewhere before. Unfortunately, I was bad at remembering people’s faces at first glance, so I couldn’t recall who he was for the life of me.

“Were you having trouble sleeping, Lady Spellcaster?”

He clearly knew I was the spellcaster, and now that he was only a few steps away, I could tell how slender his arms were. He was probably some kind of white-collar worker... which meant he wasn’t a soldier or anyone else with the army. But seeing as he had so casually struck up a conversation with me, he had to be a relative of the marquis’ or something.

“It’s an honor to meet you. Would you mind talking with me for a bit?”

“I’m sorry, have we met?” I asked.

He gave a quick bow. “I am a member of the House of Sorwen. I heard you were due to stay here, so I was hoping for the chance to meet you. Won’t you take this opportunity to chat with me?”

He nonchalantly caught me by the arm, and I gave a start. This guy definitely seemed like the type to go around trying to pick up girls. *Wait... Is that what he’s doing here?!*

The possibility finally occurred to me, and I was thrown for a loop. What was I supposed to say to turn him down?!

“Milady,” he whispered urgently, taking advantage of my hesitation to pull me into an embrace.

A chill ran down my spine. This was nothing like when Reggie or Cain would hold me close. I felt no peace of mind at the gesture. On the contrary, a feeling

of disgust crept over me.

If he were an enemy, I would clobber him without hesitation. But given his relationship with the marquis, I wasn't sure if I should do anything too drastic. Besides, killing was easy, but I wasn't confident I could hold back enough to merely knock someone out. If I summoned a golem to punch him, his bones would be crushed into dust. *Oh, I got it! I can just cement his feet to the ground!*

Right as I had my eureka moment, I heard a voice call out, "Could you please keep your hands off our spellcaster?"

The owner of the voice stepped out from deep within the left-hand side of the courtyard. Perhaps he'd been out for a nighttime stroll; he was dressed in breezy attire instead of his usual military uniform, though his sword still hung from his waist as a precaution. The biggest clue to his identity was his silver hair, glittering in the moonlight and hanging loose for once.

There weren't many men who looked good with long, unbound hair. Yet in his case, he simply looked beautiful, like the resident of a fantasy world. I almost began to wonder if I was dreaming.

"Y-Your Grace..." The man from the House of Sorwen knew it was Reggie at once. He sounded frightened.

"To think you'd pull this just when everyone is worn out from the battle. I see the marquis keeps poor company."

Reggie was smiling, but his eyes were narrowed, giving him a sinister air. As the prince approached with the look of a hunter who had locked onto his target, the man who had struck up a conversation let go of me and automatically took a step backward.

"And here I *just* issued the marquis a warning. Was he planning to talk his way out of this by claiming you acted of your own accord?"

"Erm! No, well, you see... we were only talking! Please excuse me!" the man babbled, then made a run for it.

After I watched him go in a daze, I figured Reggie at least deserved a thank you. "Um, thanks for saving me. And... good night."

I was afraid that if we talked any longer, he would tell me off for everything I'd done earlier that day. Plagued by a guilty conscience, I decided to make my own hasty escape. I didn't get very far, however, before he pulled me into a gentle hug from behind. He held me loosely, like all he wanted was to wrap me up in his arms.

"Don't run, Kiara." His pleading tone brought me to a halt. "Don't be afraid. I won't get angry with you. Not today."

The tension finally drained from my body. I wasn't scared. On the contrary, I felt relieved, and any desire to disentangle myself from the arms wrapped around my shoulders and waist vanished—because now I knew that Reggie wasn't going to turn his back on me.

I had rebelled against him, yet he still hadn't written me off. Just knowing that much made me happier than I ever could have imagined. I didn't want to be brought back down to earth, so I hoped he wouldn't say anything more about today. At the same time, there were words I desperately wanted him to say, enough to squeeze them out of him.

A plea nearly escaped me: *Please, tell me you need my help. Tell me that you need me badly enough to bring me along.*

But Reggie didn't say anything.

He knew what had happened, and that was exactly why he wasn't going to question me about it. On the other hand, perhaps his silence was a sign that he was holding back something *he* wanted to say.

It was a truly vexing moment. And yet, for some reason, just standing quietly like this gave me the peaceful feeling that we had been together this way for a long, long time now.

Had I grown too used to him hugging me ever since we had first met? Back in the beginning, it had definitely taken me by surprise. *Well, I'm pretty sure he saw me as more of a fellow kid back then. We even slept in a pile together.*

A thought finally occurred to me, and I asked, "Were you having trouble sleeping again?"

"That's right."

Reggie had always been a light sleeper. I knew that whenever he stayed at Évrard, he would often wake up in the middle of the night. I'd even stayed up late chatting with him once before. We had been busted by Mabel and given us a good scolding afterward, though.

"Now I'm glad I came out into the courtyard to pass the time. It meant I was here to rescue you."

He didn't interrogate me about why I was out here. After all, he'd already promised he wouldn't get mad at me.

"Here I thought you'd be tired. Even from afar, I could tell you weren't looking well. Were you trying to hide it to avoid my disapproval? Wentworth, on the other hand... I suppose he's chosen to accept whatever it is you want to do."

"Yeah. He said he'd help me do whatever I've set my heart on."

I didn't tell him everything Cain had said. He had only revealed so much of his heart to me in order to entrust me with his wishes. And besides... *I* was the one who had pushed Cain into saying those things.

I remembered the feeling of playing an RPG with my levels maxed out from the beginning—how exhilarating it had been to so painlessly beat the enemies. If that enemy were someone who had killed my loved ones, you can bet I would have craved even more of that thrill. The more I cut loose, the more vengeance I would be able to take.

"I see."

How had Cain come to that decision? Surely Reggie wanted to know. Regardless, he didn't ask me to explain any further. He had probably sensed that I didn't want to talk about it.

There was a lapse of silence, and I looked up at the sky once more. Another star-laden bird was flying past. The lights twinkling in the darkness informed us of its presence.

"Oh, a starbird." Reggie noticed what I was staring at. "It's a nocturnal bird that sleeps during the daytime. People claim it's a species of monster. Since it possesses the ability to see in the dark, it can fly through the night sky without any issue."

“Its tail is so pretty! The feathers shine just like stars.”

“Would you like one of those feathers for yourself?”

“Not really. I’d feel just awful plucking it out. Wait, do they ever shed?”

If they shed and regrew their feathers, I could marvel at its beauty with a clear conscience. Then again, if I picked one up in the middle of our journey, it would just make for extra luggage.

“Oh no. Those birds are quite ferocious, you see. They only look small when you see them flying from a distance; they’re actually fairly large animals. They’ll often attack and devour pigs, so we have to call for exterminations from time to time.”

“Wait, what? Pigs?!”

My image of the bird suddenly transformed into something much more terrifying. And it looked so beautiful when it was up in the sky, too!

Reggie giggled at my surprise, then said, “Right... About that man just now. I’m going to issue the marquis a stern warning. I’ll ensure that he never tries to make a profit off you again.”

“What do you mean, a profit?”

“With all the mines around here, I’m sure there’s no shortage of tasks an earth spellcaster could help with.”

“Oh, I see...”

Digging tunnels with my magic was a piece of cake, so to anyone in the business of operating those mines, my skills must have been highly desirable. I totally understood why they wanted to bring me into their ranks.

“If I’m being honest, I would’ve preferred to simply slice off the arms he touched you with.”

“Hold on now, there’s no need to go that far!”

Upon turning my head in surprise, I came face-to-face with Reggie’s affectionate gaze. I tensed when I saw that beautiful face so close to mine, but Reggie just cheerfully remarked, “You finally looked me in the eye.”

Watching him light up over something so trivial made me strangely antsy. It felt a little hard to breathe, like the air around me had suddenly thinned.

“I have one thing I’d like to ask of you, Kiara.”

“What is it?”

Peering into my face, he answered, “Don’t do anything too reckless. If you think you’re in trouble, just run away. I *do* worry about you, you know.”

I didn’t respond immediately. I knew there were bound to be situations that called for a little recklessness, so I couldn’t promise him that.

Reggie whispered, “Just say yes.”

“Erm, I—!”

Reggie drew his face even closer to mine, pressing his cheek to my temple. *Wait, this isn’t just “close”! We’re actually touching!*

I had grown accustomed to hugs back when I was being passed around like a ball, but face-on-face action was still too much for my delicate sensibilities.

“Come, give me your answer,” Reggie urged me, extracting an arm from around my shoulders to instead press his hand to my cheek. “All you have to say is ‘yes.’”

In an attempt to drive me even further into a corner, he brushed his lips against my ear. *Hey, that tickles!*

“Would you stop that?! Yes! There, I said it! Happy?”

Grr! Why does he always have to go and do stuff like that?!

Once I had panicked and caved in to his demands, he finally drew back.

I glared at him. “Since I only agreed under pressure, how can you be so sure I’m going to keep my promise?”

I was already planning to go back on my word from the moment I said it. Did that upset him? Apparently not, since Reggie seemed perfectly satisfied with the outcome.

“This was good enough for me. Now that you’ve promised, I bet you’re going to regret it as soon as you break faith with me. You’ll think of me and feel bad

about it.”

“Hrk...”

How diabolical. He had made me promise just so I would regret it later.

“Was that too cruel? Then to make amends, let me take you back to your room.”

“Sure, I don’t mind... Hey, wait!”

The moment he had my permission, Reggie swept me up into his arms. Then, he started walking ahead at a brisk pace. *What’s wrong with all the people in this world? Don’t they have any sense of weight?! Why are they all so strong?! How can everyone lift me up so easily?!*

Even my past-life dad had a hard time picking me up after I’d entered middle school. But then again, I could tell how broad Reggie’s shoulders were as I rested my head against them, and in his arms, I suddenly felt a whole lot smaller. It really drove home how stark the difference in our physiques had grown since we first met.

“Put me down, Reggie! Aren’t I heavy? I can walk on my own.”

And yet, Reggie only embarrassed me further with, “Your warmth reminds me of a little kitten’s, so I’d rather not let you go.”

A kitten? Now that was just embarrassing. I definitely wasn’t that cute.

For some reason, a sense of loneliness washed over me. Something about this was nostalgic... and sad. Still, I wanted to stay like this forever.

There was no armor or thick clothes to separate us for once, so I took the chance to soak up Reggie’s body heat. I found myself nuzzling my cheek against his shoulder before I realized what I was doing.

“Are you cold, Kiara?”

“Huh?”

I was so humiliated, I could have just screamed. What was WRONG with me?!

“Err, uhh... A little? Maybe?”

I had no idea what I’d been thinking. Desperate to play it off, I went along

with the excuse Reggie had provided for me. Sadly, that turned out to be a huge mistake.

“Oh, sorry. I hadn’t noticed.”

He tightened his hold on me. When we arrived back at my room, he put me back in my bed and pulled the covers all the way up to my neck. *Nooo, it’s so hot!* I tried to pull them back down, but he readjusted them with a gentle scolding.

“I don’t want you catching a cold. We have to keep you warm.”

“It’s so hot, though...”

“Didn’t you just say you were cold?”

Sure I had, but that was just a lie I’d blurted out. *Ugh, it’s sweltering...*

I could have sworn I heard a faint giggle, so there was a good chance Reggie knew exactly what he was doing.

I managed to sleep soundly despite the roller coaster of events. The next day, I awoke to news that a post-horse had arrived from Cassia.

According to the intelligence we received, delivered via a southern province currently fending off a Llewynian attack, the royal army had confronted the Llewynians... and been sent running.

Interlude: Destiny's Turning Point

The men were engulfed in fire. Hot, pale flames burned away all their screams, tears, and anguish in an instant, leaving nothing in their wake but black charcoal.

With each step Ada took, she claimed another victim. Her enemies swung their blades, but the weapons fell from their hands before the tips of their swords could reach her, the men losing their forms and crumbling to ash.

“She’s a monster!” Ada heard someone cry out, but the words didn’t cut particularly deep. Her strength certainly *was* on par with a monster’s, and either way, more and more of them had to die for her—or else she was going to pay for it.

The catch was that, most likely, they were all relatives of the Farzian royal family. As she gazed upon their pale shades of hair, for a brief moment, the woman stopped to wonder just what she was doing.

In the beginning, Ada never could have committed this sort of atrocity. She never would have desired to kill her fellow Farzian citizens or the nobles she may have passed in the street once upon a time. Nor had she wanted to leave the royal capital to come all the way to the plains of Sestina. She had simply been ordered to attack the Farzian forces from behind as they faced off against Llewyne.



Where did I go wrong? Ada reflected as she spewed flame. Would she have been alright if her fiancé hadn't run off with another woman? Should she have found herself a different man the moment she sensed he didn't hold any affection for her?

Or was the problem that she had fled from the church where her wedding ceremony was to be held?



A little over a year ago, Ada had run away for the first time in her life.

She hurtled blindly ahead until she tripped and fell. After catching on a branch in the thicket she had wandered into, the train of her dress was in tatters. Nonetheless, Ada just kept on running for as long as she could.

The man she had been set to marry had left her at the altar. Who could have blamed her for fleeing alone into the wilderness?

She had always been lauded as a beautiful woman, with countless suitors lined up to request her hand in marriage. For her to have her husband-to-be run off on her was beyond humiliating. With the kind of despair she was feeling, she had assumed any reaction of hers would be justified.

And yet, her mother and father had spoken as if *Ada* was the one in the wrong. She had shouted at them and bolted, hoping they would at least care enough to comfort their distressed daughter, but it was questionable whether they'd even gone looking for her. If they had headed out on horseback, they could have tracked her down in no time, but there was no sign of them anywhere.

"Hah! I'm just their disgrace of a daughter, spurned by her betrothed. I'm sure they'd prefer I just disappear," Ada muttered as she crouched down on some unfamiliar roadside, exhausted.

That was when the devil came along.

"Oh! The color of your hair is the spitting image of Annamarie!"

While she lay collapsed, a stranger wrapped his finger around a lock of Ada's light-brown hair, ever so slightly tinged with red—a man whose face made him

look like he had been cursed to turn into a bullfrog. His wide mouth and square jaw bore a very strong resemblance to the creature. Although they weren't especially large, his bulging eyes only enhanced the impression.

"Take her away."

At the demon's command, his subordinates brought Ada to a noble estate. But instead of the manor itself, they threw her into a shoddily built shed on the premises.

There, Ada drank a beverage a servant had offered her without the slightest hint of suspicion... and passed out.

After that, she suffered for three days and three nights. When she stirred, conscious but hazy, her throat felt like it was burning. Then her stomach began to hurt, and before long, a heat coursed through her whole body, leaving her writhing in agony.

Once her condition had finally settled, she came face-to-face with the devilish bullfrog once again, a huge smile plastered on his face. Only then did she learn that the man was the viscount of Credias... and that she was his prisoner now.

"You are to become my bride. I found you collapsed on the road as my carriage drove past; surely this must be fate! I suffered quite the inconvenience when the girl I had chosen as my wife absconded, but now that I've gotten my hands on such a fine replacement, why, I couldn't be happier," the bullfrog announced.

Ada was stunned.

She had heard rumors before—rumors of a poor, poor girl named Kiara Patriciél.

Ada and her friends had gossiped about it during their tea parties and social gatherings. They had theorized that her father, the count of Patriciél, had been unable to reject Lord Bullfrog's marriage proposal due to their good standing with each other.

How pitiful the girl had seemed. At the tender age of fourteen, she had been forcibly engaged to a repulsive man over forty years old.

There was no way it would have been a *mariage blanc* for appearances only, either. This was a man with a whole harem of mistresses. “The poor thing! If only Lord Credias were a looker, at least there would be a silver lining,” Ada had commented.

Those conversations, which had bordered on vulgar, had been nothing more than a fine sweet to enjoy with their tea. Oh, how she longed to go back to the days where she could revel in that sort of gossip.

But now, Ada could no longer deride the runaway Kiara as someone who “didn’t have what it took.” She had escaped from the devil himself. Just the thought turned Ada green with envy.

What’s more, if the viscount had been searching for a replacement as a result of her escape, that meant it was Kiara’s fault that he had gotten his hands on Ada. She hated the girl with every fiber of her being.

Why did you have to run, Kiara Patriciél? If only you’d stayed, this man never would have set his eyes on me! Ada lamented.

Nevertheless, Ada objected, too stubborn to lie down and surrender to her fate. She insisted that she had never agreed to this marriage.

At that, the viscount called for Ada’s father. When he arrived, he said, “It would be one thing if the only disgrace you’d brought upon us was losing your husband-to-be. We could keep you off in a corner of our estate, and perhaps one day, some fanciful man would desire to take you as his wife. But you spent the night in the viscount’s home without permission, completely unattended. If word spreads and it turns into a scandal, what choice do you have but to marry the man?!”

Ada was shocked. She never would have imagined that her escape route had been sealed while she was laid up in bed. If word got out that a lone woman had spent three whole nights in an unmarried man’s mansion, there would be no coming back from it. Ada had no choice but to consent to the marriage.

Furthermore, Ada had been brought up with the same traditional values as any daughter of nobility. Her previous fiancé was a man her father had chosen for her. She hadn’t held any particularly strong feelings for him; she had simply lost her head over the humiliating damage he’d done to her reputation by

leaving her at the altar.

Ada didn't have the courage to rebel against her parents and run off a second time.

Two weeks later, there was a wedding ceremony attended only by her closest relatives. That short span of time hadn't allowed Ada a proper chance to prepare herself for what lay ahead. Left with no other choice, Ada had shamelessly groveled and pleaded with the viscount on the night of their ceremony.

"P-Please, have mercy! I'll do anything else you ask of me, but please, at least wait until I've had time to grow accustomed to my new home!"

Ada had no idea what he might do to her if she refused to join him in bed. But no matter the consequence, she simply wasn't ready to go through with it.

Fortunately for her, that seemed to strike a chord with Lord Credias.

"Heheh. It's like Annamarie is here pleading for my mercy! How delightfully shameful. When you're on your knees, I can only see your hair and your back, so you look even more like her. Your face doesn't much resemble Annamarie's. Kiara's was a closer fit. That pure, helpless air about her really sold it... What a shame I missed out on her."

Evidently, the viscount couldn't bring himself to forget his late first wife. He always took a liking to girls with the same brownish hair as her. Ada had never laid eyes on either of the two, but according to the viscount, Kiara's eyes and general aura resembled those of the departed woman.

Ada had more mature features. She was still only sixteen years old, yet she had already outgrown her more girlish dresses.

Ultimately, Lord Credias let her off the hook until he grew bored of his mistresses. Nevertheless, Ada had no time to hole up inside her room and lament her misfortune.

She was put to work sweeping the floors, dressed in the shabby rags of a servant, her hair worn down to keep her face hidden. If she refused, her grace period would be revoked; she had no choice in the matter.

Allegedly, the viscount wanted to inflict misery upon Ada in order to bask in the sense that he was tormenting his former wife. The man was twisted to his core.

Eventually, he got in the habit of bringing her along as a servant when he went to visit other noble houses. Word spread that not even Lord Bullfrog himself had taken a fancy to his new wife, instead choosing to treat her as a slave—and thus, Ada Forsén became the laughingstock of high society. As humiliating as it was, it was still preferable to being defiled, so all she could do was endure.

That said, Ada had the upbringing of a nobleman's daughter; the grueling labor and painful cold of her new life left her bedridden with a fever more than once. Her only option was to push through, muttering "Better than being that viscount's plaything" over and over like a mantra.

Half a year went by.

One day, Lord Credias suddenly summoned a tailor for Ada. When he ordered a handful of dresses for her, Ada had the sinking feeling that he had finally tired of his mistresses—but that turned out to be wrong.

"Starting next month, you are to go work for the queen."

In other words, she was to become a lady-in-waiting.

Ada was ecstatic. Finally, the opportunity had arrived to escape her miserable days as a servant.

But in exchange, the viscount ordered her to swallow a mysterious stone. So long as she accepted that condition, he would keep his hands off of her for as long as she stayed with the queen. Ada happily gulped down the stone—and was consequently assailed with an all-too-familiar agony. After she spent another three days confined to her bed, Lord Credias told her, "You're a spellcaster now."

It was precisely because he knew she was someone special—someone with the aptitude for magic—that he had decided to let her serve the queen.

As much as she loathed the viscount, his words resonated with her. She was someone *special*. It felt as if all her days of suffering had all been leading up to

this wonderful moment.

She had assumed a spellcaster could subdue just about anyone, but unfortunately, she soon discovered that Lord Credias was the one person she could never vanquish. Due to the process through which she had become a spellcaster, she couldn't rebel against the viscount. She was informed that if she went against his orders, she would once again find herself reduced to a moaning, writhing mess.

"I am your master; this fact has been imprinted upon your very soul. If you turn against me, you'll be forced to endure a hellish amount of suffering, only to turn into sand and perish at the end of it."

To Ada's great dismay, no sooner than he said it, Lord Credias killed one of his mistresses right before her eyes. And for absolutely no reason but to threaten her.

The mistress was handed a sliver of red stone, no bigger than a grain of wheat. After swallowing it, she thrashed about in agony until she eventually crumbled into sand. According to the viscount, that was a test of whether or not she had the aptitude for sorcery.

Ada was terrified. However, her fear was quelled by the exhilarating thought of going to the royal palace and leaving Lord Credias behind.

The queen she eventually met was a kind woman. Despite being hired as a spellcaster, Ada's only real duty within the palace was to serve as her conversation partner. So long as she didn't leave the palace grounds, she was free to wander the gardens and premises as she liked. Now that she had finally returned to her tranquil life as a daughter of nobility, Ada felt nothing but bliss.

What's more, staying in the palace allowed her to catch glimpses of the prince she had always adored. He was the same age as her, a man with beautiful silver hair—Prince Reginald.

Ada had attended the New Year's feasts in the past, but seeing as her father had no strong connections to the royal family, she had always been told to keep her distance. There was no benefit to getting involved with a prince unfavored by the king, in any case. A shame though it was, she had nonetheless admired his good looks from afar.

Plus, when Ada had just started her work at the royal palace, the prince had struck up a conversation with her. It happened when some of her former peers were ridiculing her over rumors of her mistreatment at the viscount's hands. While he happened to be passing by, the prince sent the girls away and showed concern for Ada.

"So, you work in the palace, do you? For Her Majesty?" he asked. Ada nodded before she could stop herself. Word had it that Prince Reginald and the king did not see eye to eye with the queen due to her Llewynian origins; she didn't want to admit to the truth only to be rebuffed for it.

The prince asked if she had a hard time serving as the queen's attendant, and Ada replied that she had a comfortable life in the palace.

"Good. So you don't hate living here," the prince responded with a smile.

It was enough to make Ada delude herself into believing that the prince had taken a liking to her. Growing up, she had always been told how beautiful she was. Her husband *never* should have been such a horrible, older man. A beautiful man like the prince was the partner she deserved. After her first encounter with the prince, Ada became convinced of it.

Ada indulged herself with those thoughts, and the queen spoke to her after witnessing her and the prince together. "Reginald is yet another unfortunate soul. He spent his childhood years ostracized by the king, and now that his father has gone into hiding, there are few willing to stand behind him. I come from a former enemy country, so the boy is deeply suspicious of me. And yet, I do so wish I could find a way to help him one day."

The good-natured queen was worried for the poor prince. Ada was in complete agreement, and she believed there just *had* to be something she could do for the prince as she was now. Surely she could use her power to support him. If a spellcaster were to swear fealty to him, perhaps the rest of the nobility would fall into line behind him.

Once Farzia was annexed by Llewyrne, he would never again be tormented at the hands of the king. Moreover, she was told that if they succeeded, Lord Credias would be willing to divorce her.

"After that, you'll be free to marry the prince. I suppose he won't be the

prince of Farzia anymore, but so long as he's going to be with you, I wouldn't mind giving him the rank of a duke and some land to the west of Farzia. As a wedding gift, of course."

Ada lost herself in the sweet dreams the queen tempted her with.

From that day forward, Ada kept on dreaming of one day standing by the prince's side.

"I must fight for that future."

As she burned her own countrymen to ash with her magic, Ada told herself over and over: *Don't hesitate.*

Chapter 3: A Midsummer Cake and the Beginnings of Autumn

The royal army had been sent running. After I was summoned to a beautiful conference room filled with white plaster and wooden pillars, that was the first thing I heard.

Everyone gathered there took the news surprisingly well. In Reggie's and Alan's case, it probably helped that they had read my past-life notebook. For everyone else, the present state of civilization meant there was no use panicking about it.

There were no planes or trains here. No matter how hard we rushed, it would take us days to reach the province of Sestina. Considering we had to fight all the Llewynians in our path, it was likely to take us more than a month.

The most anxious one in the room seemed to be Lord Sorwen, who was deathly pale... but I assumed the actual cause of his distress was the happenings of the previous night.

Some time before breakfast, Reggie had taken him to task for his failure to keep his own subjects under control. Right before we went inside the meeting room, Reggie had informed me that "the matter was settled."

Lord Sorwen flicked his gaze toward him as he listened to the report.

What he was *really* worried about, evidently, was the impact all this would have from a business perspective. He was worried that if we were annexed by Llewyne, and all the nobles who had opposed them were killed, he would never be able to collect their outstanding debts.

He kept muttering "my money" over and over. Jerome, who was sitting next to him, looked pretty put off by it.

Paying him no mind, Alan said, "Supposing the royal army has been laid to waste, it becomes that much harder for us to defeat Llewyne."

The royal army had lost their clash against the invading Llewyrne forces. All the nobility who had sent out their soldiers had either surrendered or fled. The nobles living near the royal capital, including the marquis of Sestina, had their hands full either defending their territory or making preparations to flee in the night. Meanwhile, the Llewyrnians were taking their time, leaving those lords alone for the time being.

“They’re a safe distance from Sorwen, after all. We have no choice but to stay put until the autumn breeze blows through. That leaves the uncertainty of when Llewyrne will launch their attack on the royal capital, but there’s nothing more we can do for now. Our side of things is proceeding according to plan,” Jerome declared, taking the various circumstances into account.

Everyone nodded in agreement. From the start, we had known we wouldn’t make it in time to stop Llewyrne’s attack on the royal capital.

His expression unchanging, Reggie added, “According to some intelligence I received, it is highly likely that His Majesty the King has already been assassinated. As such, it was fully expected that the man he appointed as general would fail to unify the troops and therefore succumb to the Llewyrnians. I don’t believe this calls for a change in our plans.”

“Let’s spend the rest of the summer building up our defenses from Évrard to Cassia,” Jerome agreed.

“Are there any Llewyrnian survivors left in Sorwen or Cassia?” Alan asked.

“Generally speaking, we either call for their surrender or hunt them down and ship them off to Évrard. I’ve received word that there’s been talk of exchanging prisoners of war via Erendor. A Llewyrnian will come with payment, and we’ll return their men for a ransom. In the meantime, we’ll have them tend the fields to the north, much like we’re already doing in Évrard,” Reggie responded.

Upon hearing that, Lord Sorwen paused his money mantra and lifted his head. “In other words... it may cost us more time and effort, but if we ship off Llewyrnians without killing them, we can whittle down Llewyrne’s funds?”

“Yes, but it costs *us* extra money of our own to pay for the guards and provide meals for our prisoners,” Reggie immediately interjected.

Lord Sorwen swiftly abandoned his scheme to make money off the prisoners of war. He must have realized that even if he diligently shipped off the prisoners, he'd have to use up his whole cut of the profits to do it. After all, at least half of the ransom would go to Évrard, the territory shouldering the heaviest burden. Reggie would collect most of the remaining money as military funds.

"If we aren't heading out on the march, our next concern should be the harvest," Évrard's cavalry general chimed in. Lord Sorwen bobbed his head in agreement several times, stressing that this was of the utmost importance.

"We should leave patrols in the neighborhoods for the benefit of those who have returned to their fields. I've already left Cassia in Edam's hands. As far as Sorwen goes, I'll have to ask you to make use of your prized soldiers, Marquis," Reggie submitted with a smile.

The marquis sagged in his seat. Unlike Cassia, which had lost nearly all its soldiers and seen its baron murdered, Sorwen had withdrawn and thus had forces left to spare. Of course Sorwen would be expected to manage their own affairs.

Reggie looked around at everyone in the room. "Now then. Given the presence of His Majesty's troops, we have thus conducted ourselves as a volunteer army with the mission of defending our country. However, now that His Majesty's well-being has been called into question, and he is no longer in a position to lead those forces, as his successor, I hereby designate the troops under my command as the Farzian royal army."

Up until now, Reggie had commanded the troops under his authority as the prince. As royalty, he was eligible to hold the rank of commander, so there was no issue with that in and of itself. However, there was still the king to account for, and he had called together a separate army. Because Reggie and his men were outside that chain of command, he had refrained from referring to his own forces as the Farzian royal army.

"As in the past, I will serve as the commander, and Alan Évrard will be my deputy. Edam Reinstar and Jerome Limerick shall be my generals. Our spellcaster, Kiara Cordier, will assist the deputy commander. Her rank is

equivalent to that of a general.”

When I heard the last part, I gawked at Reggie.

My actual rank hadn’t changed much from what it had been. Just one thing had changed: after spending so long treated like a wild card, my position had finally been established in clear terms. I was to be incorporated into Alan’s troops.

For a brief moment, I wondered if Reggie had finally acknowledged my strength. Of course, it was just as likely that he was only trying to avoid confusion when soldiers from other territories joined up with us.

Edam and Jerome were named as generals because, within our country’s army, soldiers were typically led by nobles of their own province. So long as their lord hadn’t been killed, all those conscripted—knights, soldiers, and commoners alike—were to be managed by their respective territories.

Right then, a knight waiting outside the meeting room announced that another messenger had arrived. Looking a little haggard, the middle-aged man entered and presented a rolled-up letter.

Groul took the letter and unfurled it, then handed the correspondence to Reggie.

“Hm. It seems we’ve reached an agreement with Erendor. A few thousand of their soldiers have arrived at Évrard.”

“A few thousand is plenty! If they don’t want to stir up trouble with Erendor, Llewyne can’t keep using the same route. Their only option left is to send their soldiers through Salekhard,” Jerome remarked, smiling.

I was relieved. The kingdom located just south of Farzia, Erendor, was willing to cooperate with us. With this, we could curb Llewyne’s invasion from the Évrard border.

Partly thanks to the report, although we were still on the brink of losing the royal capital to Llewyne, the meeting ended on a high note.

“Erm, Lady Spellcaster?” When I stepped out of the room, the same messenger from before addressed me.

This almost never happened to me. I stopped and pointed at myself, asking, “Wait, you mean *me*?”

The messenger nodded his head vigorously. “I was entrusted with a letter addressed to you.”

The envelope he presented me with was indeed addressed to Miss Kiara Cordier. It was from Lady Évrard. I dove into reading it right away, wondering what it could possibly be about. As I perused its contents, I cried out, “Oh, that’s right!”

“What is it, Miss Kiara?” asked Cain, who was escorting me.

“It’s his birthday!”

“Pardon?”

“Alan’s birthday is coming up! If we don’t arrange something quick, we’ll miss it!”

In two more days, it would be August’s Saint Thistle’s Day—which meant Alan’s seventeenth birthday was quickly approaching. Meanwhile, both of his parents were under the distant sky. Well, technically, we were the ones under the distant sky.

Thinking ahead, Lady Évrard had written a letter with a request for Alan’s birthday. She didn’t mind if it ended up a little late, but whenever we next stopped somewhere, she wanted us to treat Alan to some sort of dessert. She’d included the money to cover it in the envelope.

It turned out that Alan was a big fan of cakes and sweets. Each year, Lady Évrard would have our cook bake him a cake, but that obviously wasn’t going to happen this year. Besides, many of the ingredients for a cake were scarce during wartime, so she had made the call that any sweet treat would do.

Her Ladyship’s motherly concern for her son warmed my heart—especially given the knowledge that if Reggie and Lord Évrard had died, finding the right dessert would have been the least of her worries.

Of course, she couldn’t saddle her messenger with perishable goods. Instead, she had delegated the task to me, the one with the most time to spare.

I had a lot more free time on my hands than everyone else. Battles were a contest of strength, so Reggie and the soldiers had to train every day to keep from losing muscle. I, on the other hand, didn't have to worry about that. I barely played a role in running the military either. For me, getting a dessert ready would be no big deal.

The distribution of goods had become somewhat erratic in Sorwen, but the town hadn't been pillaged, so we could still get our hands on a reasonable amount of supplies. The villages up in the mountains had escaped the invasion unscathed, so even luxury items remained on the market.

Heck, there had been fruit in our breakfast and last night's dinner. It certainly wasn't the scant wartime meal I had imagined. That was a good sign that I would be able to find all the ingredients I needed.

The real issue was how to get it baked. The manor had just been inundated with a huge flood of guests, so the chefs of the kitchen were likely too busy to help me out.

"I've got nothing but time on my hands. I could always bake it myself."

"What's your plan?"

"I'm thinking of baking a cake in Lady Évrard's stead. Just something simple."

I could make a pound cake, at least.

Cain looked like he hadn't expected me to say that. "That's unusual. I've never seen you do a commoner's work before."

"Oh... Yes, I suppose you're right."

The idea of it had taken him by surprise, seeing as I had been a count's daughter (though only for a short time). Daughters of nobility never made sweets with their own two hands. Never partaking in any manual labor was considered a noble's status symbol. Knowing how to delegate their work to others was what earned them respect. The only productive tasks a noblewoman would ever do were embroidery and knitting. Cooking was completely out of the question.

"There's no need for *you* to make it, is there? Why don't you ask one of the

marquis' cooks?"

"Normally, I would. But they already have a huge group to serve, and having the prince here keeps them on their toes, so I'm afraid it would just create more work for them. The only problem is... they might not want an outsider poking around in the kitchen, so I need to go get permission first."

When I brought up my concerns, Cain said, "Well, in that case..." and led me back to the meeting room we had occupied earlier. Luckily for us, the marquis had just stepped out into the hallway.

Cain approached him. "I have a matter I'd like to discuss, Your Lordship."

Lord Sorwen shot us a petrified stare, but once we explained that we wanted to use the kitchen, he gave us permission. He basically said that we were free to either ask one of the chefs or make it ourselves. He did, however, give me an odd look when I insisted I wanted to do the baking.

With that out of the way, I started off by purchasing the ingredients. It was a bit pricey, but with Cain's help, I managed to pick up flour, sugar, butter, and eggs. I spotted some dried fruit for sale, so I bought that too.

That gave me flashbacks to the time Isaac had offered me candied fruit, and I impulsively purchased a candied citrus peel to keep on my person.

As he split the groceries up into small bags for me, Cain asked, "Are you planning to eat while we walk?"

"Erm... Yes, exactly! It's nice to do on occasion."

There was a chance I would never see him again, but Isaac had taken the time to hear me out, even if he'd been a little rude about it; I was really grateful to him. I hoped that if I imitated him, I might start to take after him a bit. The thought alone embarrassed me, so I wasn't about to go and tell anyone that. It was my little secret.

Cain helped me carry some of the bags, and together we returned to the manor. The marquis had already spoken to his staff, so when we let ourselves into the kitchen, they kindly provided us with a space to do our work. Even better, they had readied the spare kitchen for us so that we could use it to our hearts' content.

Now we didn't have to worry about getting in the cooks' way as they took breaks or laid out the ingredients before getting ready for dinner. Once the preparations were in full swing, they would need this room too, but that just meant we had to finish up before then.

I dove straight into making my cake. After peeking into the furnace, which already had a fire going, I left a pot full of water inside to boil. The only measuring instrument I had available to me was a scale, so I used a counterweight to measure out enough ingredients for five cakes.

After I had melted the butter in hot water, I went out the back door and into the garden. I placed a hand on a decently large rock and transformed it into a stone golem. I tried to mold it into a humanoid shape, but it ended up looking more like a paper doll. Oh well. As long as I could use it, that was good enough. I managed to make fingers on both of its hands too.

I created two of those. Once each of them was holding an egg-filled bowl and a whisk, I had them get to work stirring like a mixer.

"Hehehe! Now I can beat the eggs without any of the hard labor!"

"Are you sure this is a proper use of magic?" Cain quipped.

"Absolutely! Better this than dealing with the muscle pain after the fact," I shot back.

I didn't need to flex my muscles to cast spells. Sure, I would still wear myself out, but at least I wouldn't be sore later on!

Cain gave me a dubious look, but I just told him to go check on how the butter was coming along.

I checked on the bowls I'd left with the stone golems, then handed them new ones to keep stirring; meanwhile, I added flour, butter, and dried fruit into the egg mixtures. After repeating that process for all five portions, I poured the batter into molds and had a stone golem stick them in the furnace for me so I wouldn't get burned.

Eventually, the sweet fragrance of butter wafted through the kitchen. As I sniffed the air and impatiently waited for it to finish baking, Cain muttered, "This takes me back... I just remembered that my mother baked a cake for me

once, a long time ago.”

Making sweets together seemed to have triggered a sense of nostalgia in Cain.

“Was your mother a good cook?”

“She was average. I come from a family of knights that has served the House of Évrard for generations, so we made a stable living. Even so, Mother preferred to do all the cooking herself. Perhaps I’m so nostalgic for the taste because it’s something I grew accustomed to in my childhood years.”

Cain’s mother had passed away; no matter how much he wanted to taste her cooking again, he never could. He had to be missing her deeply.

“It must be lonely,” I accidentally mumbled aloud.

Cain nodded. “I’m working through those feelings by fighting Llewyr. It’s the one thing I can still do for my mother now that she’s gone. So... please don’t hesitate to fight, Miss Kiara. In return, I’ll be there to support you.”

“Well, I don’t plan to *stop*.” It was hard to outright agree to what he was asking.

Today wasn’t terribly hot, but the air near the furnace was scorching. A breeze blew from the kitchen door to the window, but the atmosphere was no less oppressive for it.

“All the same, I still wish I didn’t *have* to fight.”

I was still as afraid of violence as ever. I didn’t want to watch Reggie or anyone else I loved die; I wanted to go back to the days when we could all live in peace. All I was doing was shoving down my aversion to murder in order to make that happen.

“Besides, at least half of the Llewyrn soldiers were drafted. Knowing that some of them have been forced to fight so they can keep on living their lives... it’s hard. What I’d really like to do is demonstrate an overwhelming enough difference in strength that they’ll just go running.”

If they ran away, it meant I didn’t have to kill them.

Cain narrowed his eyes. “And what if the soldiers you spared were just lying

to you so they could get away, and once they escaped, they simply ran off to go kill more Farzian soldiers?”

“Well...”

That was definitely one possible scenario. I hung my head, unable to counter his logic, but Cain didn’t back off with just that.

“Not everyone can be as noble as you. If they were to run out of food, there are some who would kill and steal what they need. If we keep heading west, eventually we will have to fight the Farzian soldiers who threw in their lot with Llewyne. The nobles who sided with the queen chose to survive no matter whom they had to kill to do it; it’s no different from handing over their own comrades on a silver platter. I cannot fathom why we should choose to spare them or show them any mercy.”

I pursed my lips and said nothing. The breeze swept through once again, blowing away the sweet, warm scent hanging in the air.

After the silence dragged on for a few long moments, Cain asked more gently, “You’ve killed so many people by now, yet you’re still afraid?”

I stared straight back into his eyes. I never would have imagined that Cain, who was always so kind, would say something like that to me.

Sensing my discomposure, he reached a hand toward me like the gesture was second nature to him. He trailed his fingers down my cheek until his large hand finally settled around my neck.

While I was preoccupied with the hand at my throat, Cain drew his face close to mine. “Don’t worry; there’s nothing to be afraid of. All you’re doing is saving the people of Farzia. For every enemy you fight and kill, you’re releasing our people—the weak ones who can do nothing but run about in the face of an invasion—from their suffering.”

His stare was so intense that I almost had to avert my gaze. There was something frightening about the way his words and his gaze permeated me to my core, like he was placing some kind of curse on me. But why? I had always been so sure Cain would never hurt me.

“Everyone will be very grateful. They’ll extol you for saving them... for

delivering them. Just tell yourself that you're fighting to hear those words at the end of it all. In the meantime, I'll support you—faint of heart as you are.”

“You think... I'm faint-hearted?”

Cain wanted me to go straight for my enemies' throats, just like Game-Alan would have. If I was going to head into battle and kill people, maybe that *was* the most honorable way to go about it.

“Am I... weak, you think?”

“Isn't that why you always felt you needed an accomplice?” Cain responded in a soothing tone.

Maybe he's right, I thought. At the same time, I found myself wondering, *How would Isaac have answered my question?*

Perhaps he would brusquely tell me that there was no use hesitating to eliminate my enemies. But I had the feeling that, in the end, he would tell me it was alright to be weak.

Before I knew it, I had gotten so lost in thought that I had averted my gaze from Cain. When I turned my head back toward him, I was surprised to find his face had drawn even closer. I jerked my head back out of reflex. No sooner had he grabbed my jaw to hold me in place than he left a soft, lingering sensation on my cheek and pulled away.

“Uh, wha...?!”

What?! Don't tell me he just kissed me on the cheek AGAIN!

The man in question appeared neither contrite nor embarrassed. “You overreact, Miss Kiara. That was the second time now. Or is the issue that it bothers you?”

“Um! I-I wouldn't say... it *bothers* me...”

I wasn't turned off or anything. I *was* shocked to my core, though. Thinking back on it, it had been a surprise attack the last time he'd done it, too. Yet I never felt the same revulsion I'd felt toward the marquis' relative the previous night. Why was that?

“I'm glad to hear it,” Cain said, giving me a small smile. “Last time, it was a

token of my gratitude. This time, it was evidence of my oath.”

If he was making an oath, I couldn’t very well ask him to stop.

While all sorts of thoughts rolled around in my head, I unconsciously took a step back from Cain and dropped my gaze to the floor. Right then, I noticed that the sand in the hourglass I’d turned had finished trickling to the bottom.

I had my stone golems take the molds out of the furnace.

“Okay, let’s see how they’re coming along! Oh, looking good. They may have baked a bit unevenly, but it looks like they’re cooked the whole way through. I don’t think anyone will get a stomachache from eating them, at least.”

Fortunately, the cakes had baked nicely, so I focused my energy there instead.

After my stone golems had taken the cakes out of their molds, I pinched off an edge of a cake to make sure it was done. *Yep, seems fine.*

As thanks for helping me, I cut off a corner piece of the same cake and offered it to Cain. I thought it was a good idea to have him taste it before anyone else, plus it seemed like a good way to sweep everything that had just happened under the rug.

“Will you taste test it for me?”

Cain blinked at the offer, but he graciously accepted and took a bite. Then he muttered, “Women always love doing things like this, don’t they?”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“I was just a bit surprised. My mother always asked me to sample her cooking, too,” he said, apparently willing to drop the previous conversation.

Whew. That’s a relief.

After all... maybe it hadn’t *bothered* me, but something about it didn’t feel quite right.



I asked Cain to make sure that Alan left some time in his schedule after dinner and saved enough room for dessert. Meanwhile, I tapped Reggie and his knights. I figured that a tea time surrounded by the people closest to him would

be the greatest gift I could give Alan.

I managed to gather Cain, Reggie, and Groul, and myself, plus Alan's knights and the cavalry general and garrison commander who had marched from Évrard with us. Finally, there was Gina, Girsch, and what was bound to make Alan happiest of all: the frostfoxes.

"Happy birthday! Lady Évrard sent you this," I said as I served the cake.

Since he was the birthday boy, I piled cake slices onto a platter just for Alan. Altogether, I think he had an entire loaf's worth stacked on there. Knowing Alan, he could devour every last crumb without so much as breaking a sweat.

Normally, he only enjoyed cake in moderation—perhaps out of a belief that men weren't supposed to eat that many sweets. But if the slices were already stacked for him, it only made sense for him to clean his plate.

Of course, it would have been a bit too plain to serve it as-is. Inspired by memories of my past life, I had iced the cake with a bit of whipped cream and turned it into a proper party cake.

When he took the platter, Alan looked deeply touched.

"Her Ladyship did this for me...? Wait, she didn't have this sent all the way from Évrard, did she?"

"Of course not. She just sent me the money for it. She told me to go buy something sweet for you, and seeing as it's your birthday and all, I figured I might as well bake you a cake."

"*You* made this?! Is it really safe to eat?"

Alan suddenly looked suspicious. I got why he was worried, but considering this was someone else's gift we were talking about, I wouldn't have tried my hand at it if I wasn't sure I could do it. I would feel like a complete fool if I messed it up.

"I had Sir Cain try it for me! It's fine. If it was undercooked enough to make someone sick, he would be in his room writhing in agony right about now."

Cain gave a grim smile. When Alan glanced over at the knight and saw that he was in perfect health, he finally seemed to relax. He brought a forkful of cake to

his mouth. Then, with a faint flush on his features, he said, “Hm, it’s not terrible... Thank you, I suppose.”

He didn’t come out and say it, exactly, but it seemed the cake was to his tastes.

“Seventeen, hm? Congratulations on finally catching up to me,” Reggie said. Following that, everyone else at the table offered their own birthday wishes. Alan happily accepted their congratulations and continued to feast on his cake, still a little red in the face.

The rest of us pecked away at the cake slices that had been served onto our own plates. All five loaves were gone in no time.

After we were done eating, I had one more present for Alan: I had asked Gina ahead of time to get her frostfoxes to snuggle up to him. Being the dog-lover he was, Alan might have enjoyed that even more than the cake.

And with that, my Alan Birthday Mission turned out to be a big success. Later, I sent off a “report of completion” to Lady Évrard.



We returned to Cassia later that summer, and eventually, September rolled around. Around the same time, Lord Azure’s and Lord Enister’s reinforcements arrived. Each had brought about 4,000 men with him.

We decided not to meet up with them inside the castle, however; we received them just outside the town gates. I stood next to Reggie. It was our first time meeting, so we had to make sure they would remember who I was. Cain, Gina, and Girsch stood behind us.

Gina was there for a similar reason. She had shown up to broadcast that she was a member of our army—you know, so that they wouldn’t mistakenly put down her frostfoxes.

The other people there were Alan, Edam, Jerome, and their respective knight-guards. All told, our numbers came out close to fifty.

Down the high road, plenty wide enough for carriages to pass side by side, countless figures were making their way toward us. As I squinted in the glare of

the sunlight reflected off their spears and shields, we waited for them to reach us.

Eventually, their vanguard came to a stop within a few hundred paces of us. Over a dozen men on horseback trotted ahead of the pack to greet us.

“Cover your ears, Kiara.”

“What?”

I gave a puzzled tilt of my head, but I did as Reggie had instructed. I noticed Alan doing the same thing. Even Groul and Edam were following suit, wearing all-knowing looks on their faces.

What’s going on? I wondered, before one of the approaching riders bellowed in an insanely loud voice, “IT’S GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, YOUR HIGHNESS!”

“Agh!”

Did we have loudspeakers in this world, after all? That was the only rational explanation for the volume of his voice, which came through loud and clear even with my hands over my ears.

The owner of the voice was a plump, middle-aged man mounted on horseback, wearing a cape and chain mail. If you put him in a tailcoat, he would have been the spitting image of a stereotypical opera singer.

The man drew closer, innocently humming and waving a hand. Once he was right near us, he dismounted his horse.

Reggie finally took his hands off his ears and greeted him. “You seem well, Marquis.”

Lord Azure bowed, bending down on one knee. “Niven Azure, at your service. I am truly delighted to see you well, Your Highness. When I heard you were in Évrard during the initial invasion, I was beside myself with worry.”

Evidently, he *conversed* at a perfectly normal volume. Relieved, I followed suit and lowered my hands.

That aside, this man had never made an appearance in the original RPG. Now, the *name* Azure, I did recognize. It was a territory south of Llewyrne, bordering Erendor. If I remembered correctly, the region was full of people who loved

music, and from there, a band of characters known for their humming had come along to join up with Alan... or something.

While I was jogging my memory, Reggie and Lord Azure finished up their conversation. Then, the marquis turned his gaze toward me with a broad smile. “My, what a sweet young lady. I suppose my incredible set of pipes took you by surprise, hm?”

“Oh, erm... A little bit, yes!” I answered honestly before I could stop myself.

Fortunately for me, Lord Azure didn’t seem particularly offended. “Azure is a mountainous region. There are many in the business of grazing livestock, and one of our customs is to hum pastoral songs to inform each other of our whereabouts. Somewhere down the line, that ‘humming’ turned into ‘belting.’ We trained our voices, and at some point, the neighboring provinces began to refer to us as the ‘Singing Azures.’ This voice of mine is the pride of my territory!” The further he went into his story, the louder his voice reverberated.

From what I learned later on, we had received noise complaints from Erendor, specifying that they did *not* want to work alongside Azure. The last time they’d fought together, Erendor’s forces had been put through the wringer. Thus, Lord Azure’s men had been dispatched to us, even though it would have been quicker for them to rush to Évrard as backup.

Lord Azure had been absolutely beaming when Lord Évrard had told him, “I ask that you defend His Highness for us.” The poor guy had no clue that he’d just been pawned off on Reggie.

After finally wrapping up his history lesson, the marquis asked Reggie about me. “Who is she, Your Highness?”

“This is our spellcaster, Lady Kiara.”

“Oho! So this is the spellcaster I’ve heard so much about. Hm... Are you quite sure you can hold your own in terms of physical strength? And volume?”

He’d asked me that with a completely straight face, but I was pretty sure projecting my voice wasn’t a skill I actually needed. Of course, I couldn’t come out and *say* that. While I struggled for a response, the quivering voice of an old man cut in with, “You’re loud enough for everyone here.”

I looked down to make sure it wasn't Master Horace, hanging at my waist. After glancing around the area, I mumbled to myself, "Is that... a goat?"

What I saw appeared to be a hermit straddling a huge goat the size of a horse. Okay, it was definitely smaller than a *horse*, but still. It had been hidden behind the rest of the horses, so I hadn't noticed the goat in the group until now.

And the moment I saw the goat, memories came flooding back to me.

"Oh!" I clamped a hand over my mouth before I could scream, trembling with excitement.

Ohmigod, it's Grandpa Cane in the flesh! He's really riding a goat! He's sporting his long, white beard! Unlike Master Horace, he hasn't gone bald yet!

This wasn't how he had joined the party in the RPG. After Cassia, Alan had gone on a quest to gather more allies, during which he had paid a visit to this count here—Lord Faden Enister—and sought his cooperation.

At sixty-five years old, Lord Enister was the oldest of the party members, and his weapon of choice was a cane. And wouldn't you know it—he still packed a surprisingly high attack stat. Talk about one heck of an old man. Thus, I had nicknamed him "Grandpa Cane."

"You could afford to quiet down a little. Why make such a racket when everyone can hear you just fine? Sheesh, I've been waiting so long for my earache to subside that I missed my chance to greet His Highness."

Lord Enister dismounted his goat, complaining and griping all the while. He was clad in nothing more than a pale-gray, long-sleeved military uniform befitting a hermit. When he stood next to Lord Azure, who was decked out in full chain mail, his paper-thin defenses were a little troubling to see.

"You mustn't push yourself," Lord Azure advised, concerned.

"I can manage *this* much without help," Lord Enister snapped back, full of bravado. "Faden Enister, at your service. I am honored to be of aid to His Highness, all to defend our kingdom of Farzia." He dropped down to one knee.

Reggie smiled and nodded. "I'm glad you could make it. You have my thanks."

In addition to the soldiers serving under them, the two noblemen were

accompanied by a familiar face. The last time I had seen the brown-haired boy, he had been disguised as a merchant's son, but there was no longer any need for him to dress that way. He was wearing an outfit arranged for him in Limerick, the province to which he had been evacuated—a black jacket embroidered with green (a sign of nobility), a white shirt, and a cravat tied around his neck.

It was Charles, the surviving son of Lord Cassia. I pursed my lips, his gentle features tugging at my heartstrings.

He was returning home to his castle now that it had been recovered by the Farzian army. I had been informed that Edam, who was to stay behind in Cassia, was responsible for looking after him until the end of the war.

Young Charles offered Reggie a greeting. After returning to the castle with everyone else, he went to go visit his parents' and sister's graves.

The cemetery was on the western side of Cassia Castle. A grave for the baron's family had been erected in a small garden.

The corpses of the baron and his wife had been unceremoniously tossed into the same hole as the rest of their murdered retainers, so apparently, it had been quite a struggle to find their bodies. Flora's remains were right under the window she had fallen from, so although she had dissolved into sand, they had managed to recover what was left of her.

Surely poor Charles had seen his fair share of gruesome sights during his flight from the castle. He didn't fall to pieces even as he stood before his family's graves. Tears just quietly slid down his face, as though it was finally sinking in that they were really gone. Aubrey held Charles close, bawling his eyes out.

Moving forward, I was bound to see plenty of similar scenes. If any of those future victims were Farzian nobles who had double-crossed us, it was doubtful anyone would even build a grave for them.

As I watched Charles cry from a distance, reflecting on the weight of events to come, all I could do was clench my hands into fists.

Interlude: The Fall of the Royal Capital

Llewynian forces surrounded the Farzian royal capital soon after the summer heat had died down. However, it turned out there was no need for them to take the city by the force. The majority of the people living there had already scattered in various directions, leaving no one behind to protect it.

Rumors of the king's passing had run rampant through the city. Afraid to fall victim to the forces of the neighboring country, the citizens had grabbed as many of their belongings as they could carry and fled to the nearest provinces.

Members of the nobility were among those who had fled. Some had stayed in the queen's good graces and maintained a neutral position, but these people had still failed to forge friendly ties with her. Others were those who had sworn loyalty to the royal family.

The merchants who had yet to strike deals with Llewynne had migrated to the neighboring territories, too.

The servants, attendants, and guards tasked with protecting the castle had tried to make their escape, but the queen had held them back. She had even swapped the guards at the entrances with her own subordinates. It was then that everyone flooded to escape like a dam had broken, spurred by fear that she was planning to kill the guards. The flight seemed preplanned, so the queen suspected that there must have been an instigator.

Due to those circumstances, the only people left in the royal capital were nobles and soldiers serving the queen, the merchants who had been taken under their patronage, and the impoverished people of the town who had nowhere to run. Not a single one of them would close the gates on the Llewynian army.

Llewynne's generals and soldiers solemnly set foot in the capital without so much as a fight. Soon after they entered the royal palace, it was time for Ada to go to work.



“Burn, burn! Burn to ash!” Ada chanted, spreading her arms wide and spinning in circles.

The paintings on the wall, the curtains she touched, the carpets she stepped over, and the corpses she nudged or trampled all went up in flames. Making her way out of the flame-ridden waiting room, Ada danced along to the great hall. There, the floor was made of stone, so no matter how hard she tapped her shoes against it, it wouldn't burn.

Suddenly bored of her dance, Ada stilled and glanced around the hall. Agonized shrieks rang out.

“Wait! Please, wait! Aren't we on the same side?!” a knight cried out as he backed away, only to be mercilessly skewered by a spear. By his side lay another Llewynian knight who had already departed for the underworld.

The general of the Llewynian forces and his men had been enjoying the queen's hospitality, partaking in a banquet lined up on the table. After entering the royal capital unimpeded and arriving at the palace under control of their king's sister, they had dropped their guard. And that was when they were ambushed by the queen's soldiers.

“Come, Ada, burn them all down. To a crisp, so that no one will be able to tell they were stabbed.”

At her beloved queen's command, Ada spewed her fire. The wooden table and corpses underfoot all burst into flame and burned away.

“It's so much brighter now. We have plenty of chandeliers, but I've always found this hall a bit gloomy,” rang the bright voice of the reddish-haired, amber-eyed queen guarded by several soldiers. As always, she wore a Llewynian-style gown on her body and a smile on her face.

“A-Are you sure about this?” the man who had ordered the deaths of the Llewynian knights asked timidly. He was one of the noblemen who had thrown in his lot with the queen. After all the help he had provided with the Llewynian invasion, he was thrown for a loop by this new development.

Her smile unfaltering, the queen responded, “Of course. My plan is to

eliminate the current royal family and build a kingdom of our own. As if we would settle for a ruler from Llewynne! I have no need for the general my dear brother sent me. All we wanted was more firepower.”

Her soldiers seemed to relax. They had been afraid of eventually coming under Llewynian rule, despite siding with the queen.

“I am the queen. I have no need for anyone who tries to pull my strings. And if he doesn’t want another country interfering, my brother has no choice but to do as I say. So don’t worry, everyone. Once we successfully eliminate the prince’s forces marching from Évrard, we’ll split up the land just as we agreed.”

Standing alongside the soldiers, the Farzian noblemen nodded. They left the room to subdue the remaining Llewynian soldiers.

“What will you do next, Your Majesty?” Lord Patriciél asked as he came to the queen’s side. With him was the one person Ada had hoped to never see again: Lord Credias.

He hadn’t fought in the battle, of course. His portly figure meant he was far from nimble, nor was he particularly strong with a sword. He was only there to watch over Ada.

Oh, how I wish I could kill him! Ada thought. *Only then could I finally be free.*

The queen had told her, “I have my own reasons I must listen to him. If *you* were to kill him, however, I wouldn’t stop you.”

The queen had been in desperate need of a spellcaster, and so Lord Patriciél had brought Lord Credias into her ranks. But, as compensation, the queen had been forced to offer up a good deal of her own servants to him.

“But now I have you—my dear, cute Ada. So long as I have you, I have no need for that man.”

Fortunately enough, the room they were in was already completely aflame. The mana flowing from within Ada was more than enough to turn the corpses to charcoal; she was giving birth to flames that reached all the way to the ceiling. All the windows had been left open, yet it was still swelteringly hot.

The queen and the two noblemen were standing a good distance away from

the burning corpses, but they weren't out of her reach. All she had to do was to nudge that fire just enough to rain down on the viscount's head.

The queen glanced over at her. When her beautiful smile broadened and she took a step back, Ada was overjoyed. Now she could burn the viscount alive without hurting the queen in the crossfire. With great glee, Ada extended her flames toward the viscount. The fire nearly swallowed his body up, like a snake swallowing its prey, but...

"Fool."

All the strength left Ada's body, as if the blood had drained from her veins, and she fell to the floor. The next moment, she was assailed with a heat akin to all the water in her body boiling.

The girl screamed, "Help me! Help me!"

No one lifted a finger to help her. The queen averted her gaze, as if it hurt to watch. Lord Patriciél merely stared down at her with the look one would give a stubborn, disobedient horse.

Lord Credias laughed with glee, delighted at the convenient excuse to toy with Ada. "Have you forgotten? I've just been indulging your selfishness—at this very moment, even! The moment you rebel, I'm always happy to remind you of that."

Then, he drew his narrow blade, always hanging unused at his waist. He approached Ada, grabbed the back of her dress, and tore the cloth with his sword. The viscount guffawed as she shrieked and rolled away. All the girl could do was cry at the shame of being utterly exposed to an audience.

Before her eyes, she saw corpses that had charred and long since lost their human forms. *Oh, if only this frog would burn up the same way*, she thought.

No matter how much she despised him, she had no choice but to grovel at his feet. She couldn't cast a single spell anymore. By the time the heat ravaging her body finally subsided, she had used up every speck of her magic power.

Now that she couldn't so much as light a candle, the best she could do was curse the man in her mind. He was nothing more than a fat, ugly brute. She hated him with every fiber of her being. Why was he the one person she

couldn't kill?

"Let's head to our next battleground. I need you to destroy the prince's army."

"What?! No!"

She didn't want to see the prince with this disgusting bullfrog at her side. There was no telling what the viscount might do to her, and whatever it was, she didn't want *him* to witness it. Ada struggled as she was hauled up by the arms, fixing Lord Credias with a baleful glare. But then...

"Wait just a moment, viscount." The queen walked up to them, quiet as a breeze, and knelt by Ada's side. Then she whispered into her ear, "Don't worry. As wretched as you are now, I'm sure the prince will take pity on you. You know how kind he is. Your pitiful circumstances are the surest way to draw his attention."

Ada was taken aback. *Look at how miserable I am! Yes, surely the prince will take pity on me.*

A smile broke out on her face.



Ada was dragged off, giggling as though she had just thought of something delightful. As she watched her go, the queen chuckled.

"You seem to have taken quite a liking to that girl," Lord Patriciél commented.

"Of course!" the queen responded, grinning from ear to ear. "Oh, what a poor girl, that Ada! And there's no happy ending for her either. No matter how much she endures, no matter how long she waits, her prince will never come for her! She's just like me!"

"Don't you think she's a little too rebellious? She would be much more pliable if she were brought under the viscount's heel, her spirit broken." Lord Patriciél had grown concerned when he'd witnessed her disobey the viscount's orders, fighting against him until she could no longer move.

"Goodness, no. I much prefer her like this." The queen smiled. "It's precisely because she's such a pure maiden that she continues to dream of a future that

will never come to pass. Her attachment grows all the stronger because she has just enough freedom to gaze at what's out of her reach and delude herself into believing she can one day have it. It's much more fun to help her cultivate her own hatred, rather than turn her into a mindless slave. Besides," Marianne added, "Reginald... that boy isn't such a coward that he would indulge a young girl's pipe dream for fear of his own life. I'm sure he'll cast Ada aside. How would that feel, I wonder? To be rejected by the one you've been pursuing so fervently. Perhaps Ada will be the one to kill Reginald, who differs so greatly from the prince she built up in her head. After that, she might even take her own life in despair. You see? She's on the path to self-destruction, so there's nothing for *us* to fear."

"You truly are a frightening woman."

"Oh? Have you come to hate me?"

"Never. I will adore you for as long as I live."

The queen laughed delightedly. "Oh, Owen. Do forgive me; I know nothing but how to use people. I simply can't understand the sort of love you desire, in which you offer up your heart to another."

Embracing the queen, who spoke so innocently of her inability to love, Lord Patriciél nodded. "I know, Your Majesty. So long as I can keep you by my side, as you promised... that's enough."

"Of course I'll stay. You're making all my wishes come true. But you know, that seat you've taken could collapse under you at any moment. You have to hurry up, find the naughty child gnawing away at its legs, and burn him at the stake."

"We'll manage. Lord Credias will learn to control that girl eventually. Perhaps she'll come to desire her own death at the stake, along with that naughty child you speak of."

"What a destructive love. I could never do it."

"That's quite alright. No matter how broken you may be... you just have to be yourself."

Chapter 4: Battle on the Delphion Border

It was the afternoon of the day we determined that, soon, we would be departing Cassia and heading out on the march. I stopped by a church in the castle town. Girsch, who had been paying the place frequent visits, had invited me to come along that day.

I had only asked Cain to accompany me, but upon arriving at the church, we ran into Alan and Reggie, who had been taking a stroll around the town. They both came inside with us.

We headed for the church's backyard. There, we found a bunch of kids who had lost their parents in the war playing together.

Ever since we'd returned to Cassia, Girsch had been helping out at various establishments sheltering these unfortunate children. That was the world's aspiring mama for you.

At first, the children had been in as much of a stupor as you would expect after losing their parents, siblings, and homes. Only the toughest of the bunch had helped the nuns of the church look after the rest. Whenever they weren't working, they either sat in pensive silence or, occasionally, burst into tears as all the horrors came flooding back to them.

Girsch had picked up war orphans off the street and brought them home to the mercenary village countless times in the past and thus was used to dealing with traumatized children. According to the grateful nuns, Girsch's presence had brought smiles to the children's faces in no time.

When Girsch had asked me to come along, I was hoping I could do a little good by playing with the children.

And *here* was the idea I had come up with.

"Hey, kids! My name's Horace!" I ventriloquized, affecting a squeaky voice. At the same time, according to our plan, Master Horace lifted his right hand. His arm was quivering just a fraction, accompanied by little clacking sounds, but I

pretended not to notice. “Let’s be friends!” Master Horace waved. After that, he stopped moving.

I *had* asked him to do a little spin for the finishing touch, but perhaps his pride just wouldn’t allow it.

The kids were mystified by the otherworldly doll. They edged toward Master Horace, brimming with curiosity.

“Is this dolly made out of pottery?”

“Whoaaa! Does it really move by itself?!” A boy at the front of the pack poked at Master Horace.

The clay figurine rattled and shook with fury. However, he had already given me his word that he would play along, so he couldn’t fight back. *He* was the one who had claimed, “Playing with kids sounds like a walk in the park!” Of course, that had just been him giving me tit for tat, but no need to sweat the small stuff.

“You’re a monster,” Alan remarked.

“I am not! Don’t you think this was a great idea?”

Alan could pity the doll all he wanted, but Master Horace was the one who had agreed to it.

Next to him, Reggie appeared to be having his first giggle fit in a long time. He had turned away, his shoulders shaking wordlessly.

Master Horace had taken off, walking with a symphony of clickety-clacks, and the children were following after him like baby ducklings, badgering him ruthlessly.

“Hey, mister dolly! Say something!”

“Is walking all it can do? Boooring.”

“If you’re real, prove it! Do a cartwheel!”

Even for an animate doll, that was a tall order—given his shape and all.

Master Horace came to a stop with a particularly loud rattle. It seemed he had reached his boiling point. “Grrr, I’m DONE! Who could stand looking after

these little brats?! I'm telling you, I HATE kids!"

"Eeeek! The doll yelled at us!"

"We're gonna be cursed!"

"I'm scared of ghosts!"

Master Horace swung his arms and hopped around in a rage, sending all the children running.

"Hey! You take that back! I am NOT a ghost!"

"Ahhhh! The evil doll is chasing us!"

"Wahhh!"

In an instant, the procession of ducklings had turned into a game of tag between a group of children and an oversized clay figurine.

"Oh, how cute! It's just like kids to be so scared of a doll," Girsch commented, warmly observing the scene.

"You don't have to be a child to find that scary. If that *thing* started chasing me—even in broad daylight—I'd be running too," Alan interjected, and I was in complete agreement. It would be especially terrifying at night. But seeing as I was the one who had made it in the first place, I kept my mouth shut.

"It's such a shame that today is our last day visiting here. I should go say my farewells to the priests," Girsch said with a sigh, then headed over to the nuns and priests of the church, who were standing a short distance away.

As he watched the mercenary go, Reggie mumbled, "The church may intend to keep custody of them, but things aren't looking good for these children."

This world was filled with natural phenomena that defied explanation, and as a result, every country worshipped the gods to at least some extent. The church was bound to offer refuge to Llewynians, too. That was why, no matter the country, it was common for VIPs to be sheltered inside of churches. Consequently, church entrances were always strictly monitored, and much of the time, not even the most kind-hearted friar would be allowed to keep anyone inside, child or no.

“I’d like to act as quickly as possible, but if I push our soldiers too hard, it will be difficult to keep them going... Kiara. According to your memories, we clash with Lord Delphion’s forces next, correct?”

“Right.”

Delphion was the territory bordering Cassia to the northwest.

“Lord Delphion’s troops will come marching toward us—on Llewyrne’s orders, supposedly. The only difference is that originally, that was supposed to happen a whole year after Llewyrne occupied the royal capital. I’m not sure how the new situation will change things.”

Up until now, it hadn’t made much of a difference whether events took place before or after the fall of the royal capital. Everything had been put into motion by Alan and his Évrard forces, the ones on the offensive. This time, however, things were different.

“It all depends on what *they* do—Llewyrne, Salekhard, and the Farzian nobility siding with Llewyrne,” Alan chimed in.

“Personally, the one I’m most worried about at the moment is Salekhard. If they would be willing to stay secluded in Trisphede, we could always form some sort of pact with them, relinquish the land temporarily, and avoid engaging them in battle,” Reggie suggested.

Alan frowned in response. “Don’t you think it would be a bit difficult to negotiate with them?”

“Perhaps. There’s also the question of how Delphion’s baron and the other nobles will act, considering Llewyrne still has a ways to go until they seize full control of Farzia. Once the royal capital falls, the queen may dispatch more troops toward us too. Is it safe to assume the baron will cut his ties with Llewyrne as soon as his daughter is freed?”

“I think so, according to everything I know.”

Lord Delphion had chosen to cooperate with Llewyrne because his daughter had been taken hostage. On Llewyrne’s side of things, the battles against the neighboring provinces of Sorwen and Cassia had been particularly fierce, so they wanted to strike a deal that would let them avoid fighting Delphion. Thus,

they had accepted the baron's offer.

In the RPG, however, the baron's daughter had already been killed, so there was no means of rescuing her. As such, I couldn't be 100% sure that if we freed the hostages, Delphion would come over to our side.

"Also... in the Battle of Delphion, the queen's attendant joins the fray as a spellcaster yet again."

In other words, I meant the game version of Kiara Credias. With that in mind, the land of Delphion was bound to stir up a lot of complex feelings within me.

"There's a chance Lord Credias may make an appearance in her stead," Alan pointed out. That was a good guess.

We knew that Lord Credias had played a part in Salekhard's attack on Trisphede. A good bit of time had passed since then, so there was a chance he had gone back to the royal capital, but it was equally possible that he was still in the area.

"I don't know what kind of magic Lord Credias uses, but whatever it is, we have to take him down," I declared, brimming with determination.

Reggie cast a glance my way, as though there was something he wanted to say.



After we returned to the castle, Cain, Master Horace, and I discussed tactics we could employ against Lord Credias.

"Gotta be honest with you, kid, it's hard to say when we don't know anything about the man's element or abilities. Heeheehee!" Worn out from playing tag with the kids, Master Horace was sitting with his legs sprawled out over the table.

"Are you sure you haven't heard any rumors of a spellcaster that might be relevant? Besides, you were indirectly in contact with him, weren't you?"

Back before I knew he was a spellcaster, I had only ever caught a quick glimpse of the viscount's face. I'd never spoken with him before, so everything I knew of his character was based on hearsay. The way he'd stared at me had

creeped me out; that had been my only initial impression of him.

Since Lord Patriciél was the one Master Horace had been in contact with, even he had never met Lord Credias face-to-face.

“He was being cautious, I’m sure. If he were the type to fight by sheer magic force, he would have shown up in the flesh and wiped the floor with me. Mmheehee! Considering he didn’t show his face even *after* I’d swallowed the contract stone, he must be real keen on keeping his abilities a secret.”

“Then is it possible he possesses a more unconventional power?” Cain asked.

Master Horace gave a deft shrug of his little clay shoulders. “Or maybe he thought that if he concealed his magic, it would be easier to put me down on the off chance I came to crush him with everything I had. The amount I swallowed didn’t have enough binding power to give us a full-fledged mentor-disciple tie. That’s why he was planning to off me once my job was done and why he stuck me with someone who could take me out at a moment’s notice. Heeheehee!”

Oh, right. There had been no sign of Lord Credias around when the soldier standing watch over Master Horace was killed, and that was why he had chosen that moment to make a run for it. And then he had been shot and killed for his trouble.

Clearly they had assumed Master Horace would never willingly join their side, and that was why they’d made a move against him. They must have been worried that if they let him run loose, he could have ended up allied to Farzia—which would spell trouble for their side.

Either way, we didn’t have enough information to draw a conclusion. All we could do was pray that the viscount wouldn’t show up to any future battles.

Dinner had rolled around when a post-horse arrived from the squad patrolling the Delphion border, confirming that the enemy had begun to advance. Their forces were composed of both the baron’s soldiers and Llewynians who had been stationed in Delphion.

Salekhard’s flag had been spotted among them, too.

Having already made our preparations for the upcoming expedition, we set

out immediately.



“Salekhard, hm?” Reggie muttered from where he sat next to me.

Alan was riding in the same carriage as us, and Master Horace was by my side as always. Everyone had packed inside for an additional meeting as a follow-up to our usual war council.

“It’s hard to predict what they’ll do,” Reggie fretted.

“Nonetheless, it seems the positioning of the enemy matches what Kiara remembers. This might be easier than we’d expect,” Alan responded, flipping through my memory guide.

We were lucky that the circumstances had turned out the same as in the RPG. The timing of the events was different, so I had assumed we wouldn’t be able to count on my memories at all. This way, we would have a much easier time forming our strategy.

“In which case, we know the battle will take place in woodland.”

There was a forested region near the border between Delphion and Cassia. Doing battle there meant weaving through the trees; in the RPG, it made the archers a real pain to deal with since their attacks could go through one or two obstacles. It took time to defeat the incoming foot soldiers, and in the meantime, the archers rained blows from the rear. Unfortunately, the trees made it hard to cut around behind them.

Basically, you were thwarted by obstacles at every corner while your party members’ HP was whittled down to nothing. I had found that part of the game really frustrating.

What’s more, you could always use recovery items in the RPG, but in the real world, the soldiers’ lives would really be chipped away. That was a lot more frightening to imagine.

But knowing Reggie, we could count on him to come up with a plan to minimize the damage we took.

“Salekhard probably wants to see us in action, considering they may have to

fight us next. And they just so happen to have the perfect underdog to put to use.”

“We already predicted that the incoming forces would be a mix of the baron’s soldiers and Llewynians. Delphion borders Trisphede, Sorwen, and Cassia. Seeing as Llewynne has seized the territory, of course they’ll want to use that to their greatest advantage.”

Reggie’s “underdog” remark was right on the money. In the RPG, as soon as the baron’s soldiers were defeated, the Llewynians ran for the hills. The whole point of the battle was just to trim down Farzia’s numbers, if luck was on their side.

Thinking about it from that perspective, Delphion was really getting a raw deal here. I had to assume the reason they were doing the Llewynians’ bidding was the same as in the game: the baron’s daughter had been captured.

“We can’t allow them to pare down our numbers *or* attack Cassia now that the province has just gotten back on its feet,” Reggie said, then flicked his gaze toward me. “And that’s where I have something to ask *you*, Kiara. Do you think you could fell some trees for us?”

“Fell them? Sure, if I had my golem stomp over them.”

“How big of an area can you cover? It doesn’t matter to me how you get the job done. So long as you don’t overexert yourself, that is.”

After giving it some thought, I answered, “If you want me to make us a decently wide path, I think I could manage about two hundred mers. If you want me to make it bigger, I’ll have to take breaks and repeat the process a few times over... or it might be faster to just have my golem run around the area blindly.”

Reggie closed his eyes and nodded, mulling that over. “Alright, thank you. I might ask you to try something once we get there.”

He was probably considering whether or not we could use that as part of our strategy—all to claim victory. I was so overjoyed that it was hard to keep from breaking into a smile.

The quicker I could bring our battles to an end with my magic, the less danger

Reggie and my friends would be exposed to.



We arrived at our destination three days later. What stood before us was the forest that served as the Delphion border. Except for the few gentle hills in the area, the earth was level and densely packed with trees.

The enemy had deployed their soldiers into this forest. Normally, we would raid the woods and fight them head-on, but after the discussion at our war council, we decided to set up camp close by instead. Not only would it be hard for our forces to navigate the forest, but even communication would get tricky. And here I had thought that all those obstacles had made fighting in the forest a pain in the *game*. Terrain was an even more essential factor in a real fight.

Naturally, the enemy wasn't going to give up their advantage just like that. Reggie's read on the situation was that leaving them be for one or two weeks wouldn't be enough to make them leave the forest. He had accounted for that in his plans, and thus had his troops take up position right outside the forest. The enemy was bound to grow impatient, having us nearly within their grasp. All we had to do was dangle the bait and wait.

The Llewynians were aiming to lure us into the forest. They wanted to draw us into a battle of attrition, just like in the game. Still, we figured that they wouldn't launch their attack during the night. It would be just as hard for *them* to navigate the forest in the dark; hence we predicted that the enemy's attack would come when the sun was up.

That said, we couldn't pinpoint precisely when it was going to happen, so the plan was to stand watch in shifts.

The ones standing at the forefront were the two squads belonging to "Opera Superstar" and "Grandpa Cane," Lord Azure and Lord Enister respectively.

"Do be careful on that goat of yours, Master. He'll eat anything in sight, so you never know when he might bring you to a sudden halt."

"Isn't this the goat *you* gifted me, lad? Here we have a creature born of the wild, gracious enough to let me ride on his back. If nature is calling, sometimes I have to let him run free."

So went the conversation I overheard between the two of them. *Uh, hold it! Letting him run free sounds like a terrible idea!*

I really wanted to butt in and say that out loud, but I held my tongue. We'd only just met, so we weren't exactly on familiar terms yet.

"Don't do that!" Lord Azure, the old hermit's swordsmanship disciple, jumped in with the same comment I'd wanted to make. Surely he would keep an eye on Lord Enister for us.

I had my own role to play, so I was waiting behind the front lines with Cain.

"Here! This is the first route Reggie told me to take." As we stared down at a simplistic map, I went over our initial plan of action. After that, the only thing to do was to keep on waiting.

Nothing happened on the first day. Since I had plenty of time on my hands, I asked Master Horace for advice on how I could learn to cast larger spells. He exposted to me at length about all his findings over the years.

"This body of mine makes talking so much easier! My throat never gets parched! My mouth never gets tired of running! I just love it! Heeheehee!"

As a matter of fact, I was probably the one getting tired out by his explanation, what with nodding every now and then like a good listener.

The first attack came on the second day. It was just before breakfast, so Lord Azure seemed to be struggling with hunger pains. He bellowed out commands in his resounding voice, eliminating the need for a runner; Reggie's and Alan's troops heard him announce the attack loud and clear all the way to the rear.

Just as we had predicted, the Llewynians pushed the baron's troops to the front lines. The Delphion soldiers' blue capes had been dyed black, signifying a change in their allegiance. Tasked with leading us into the forest, they had a lot riding on their shoulders, but if they failed, they would be doing little more than exhausting their own forces. Thus, I had been under the impression that they had no desire to be on the battlefield, but it seemed the Delphion men had good momentum going.

On the other hand, we had also anticipated that our Farzian soldiers might lose steam quickly without Llewynians to fight against; however, Lord Azure's

troops were determinedly forcing the Delphion soldiers back, overwhelming the enemy with their mighty voices.

In the meantime, I brought forth a golem bigger than my usual fare. I'd rolled up more of the surrounding earth into it than I had meant to, so there were trees jutting out of its back and arms—but that was a feature, not a bug. I could use them as shields against the enemy arrows.

I made its feet twice the usual size, too. Cain and I boarded the golem's shoulder, which reached higher than the tops of the trees, and advanced forward. The route I would be taking was a good distance from Lord Azure's group. Moving just fast enough that we wouldn't get thrown off as we bobbed up and down, I circled around to the northern part of the forest.

Once we were far enough from the ongoing battle, I had my golem stride to the west... or rather, *slide* to the west.

"The enemy is cutting around from behind us!"

"It's an earth giant! The spellcaster is here!"

The enemy soldiers started to panic, running helter-skelter out of my golem's path.

These soldiers had once belonged to Farzia... but now that they had swung their swords at us, there was nothing I could do to help them. Surely some of the men were too slow to flee, stamped into the ground under my golem's feet; however, I just looked straight ahead, concentrating on keeping my magic going.

Once I had advanced a good ways ahead, I turned my course southward. From the perspective of the Farzian troops, it must have looked like I was cutting straight through the forest. With each step my golem took, it culled the trees in its way, opening up a path.

Is this wide enough for two carriages to pass through?

Skidding along made the distance feel extra long. The enemy archers were gradually adjusting their aim for my height, and their arrows were beginning to reach us. Every now and then, one would bounce off the earthen fence I had built around us as a shield, and Cain had to brush more and more aside with his

sword.

“Can you go any faster, Miss Kiara?”

Even Cain felt this was getting too dangerous.

“Not if I want to make a path as big as we planned—ahh!”

An arrow whizzed right past the side of my head. By the time they reached our height, most of the arrows had lost their momentum, but that particular one flew even higher past our heads before plummeting to the ground.

Eep... That was terrifying!

Still, Reggie had entrusted me with this job. If I couldn't pull it off, our plan wasn't going to work. Plus, he'd probably never trust me with anything again, which was just about the worst thing I could imagine.

We finally made it three-quarters of the way through our course. *Just a little more to go.*

The moment I thought that, arrows started flying toward us in rapid succession. Just like the one that had nearly hit me moments ago, they were packing powerful momentum.

Cain knocked two of them away. One bounced off my golem.

The fourth sliced my arm, close to the shoulder.

“Ngh!” I nearly let out a scream. Yet I didn't bring my golem to a stop.

“How badly were you hurt, Miss Kiara?”

“The arrow didn't go through me, at least. Can you close the wound for me?”

“It will be difficult to manage when we're being jostled around like this.”

Cain, too, was gripping my earthen fence-slash-shield for dear life.

“Then let's take care of it when we get back.”

I took a look at my arm and was relieved to find it wasn't bleeding too heavily. If it had been a bloody mess, I wouldn't have had any room to play it off.

Eventually, we arrived at the final point of our cross-section. I switched directions to head back to our starting position, forming a new path as I did.

My arm was throbbing with pain. Even so, I was more concerned with whether my injury would be noticeable or not.

I saw Lord Azure's troops ahead of us. It looked like they had successfully driven back the enemy soldiers. The closer we came to our allies, the fewer the number of arrows flying through the air, until the stream finally died down entirely.

"Let's take a look at your wound, Miss Kiara. Does it hurt?"

"It's nothing I can't handle. How conspicuous is it?"

"Your clothes were ripped, but it's only a small tear. The wound itself might be deeper, though. There's blood dripping down your arm. Still, if the pain isn't troubling you, I doubt it was poisoned."

Cain returned his sword to its sheath, rolled up his sleeves, and quickly went to work administering first aid and wiping away the blood.

"Will I be able to hide it under my cloak?" I asked.

"I believe so, yes," was Cain's diagnosis.

I nodded, then lowered us down to the ground and returned my golem to a pile of dirt, now that we had found our way back to our starting point.

After that, I swiftly returned to my tent. It was a relief to have everyone's eyes off me at last.

"Ouch!"

Now that I could finally acknowledge the pain without worry, I kept yelping "ouch" over and over. I felt like every time I said it, the pain subsided a little.

"Is it that bad?" Master Horace asked from my waist.

With a dry laugh, I shoved him under the blanket deep inside my tent. "It's practically a scrape. But I'd like to take a proper look at it, so stay in there and behave, would you?"

Even now that he had transcended humanity, it would be unthinkable to get undressed in front of Master Horace. Still, if I wanted to take a good look at my injury or wrap it up in bandages, my sleeves would get in the way. It was too

close to my shoulder.

When I inspected my arm, I found it was just as Cain had said. The damage to my clothes was minimal—though the dress was matted with blood. Underneath the ripped clothing, I spotted torn flesh and found myself struck with the pain all over again.

My cloak hadn't taken any damage. If I patched myself up quickly enough, I could hide the cut and pretend like nothing had happened.

"Do you need any help, Miss Kiara?" came Cain's voice.

His question gave me pause. *Can I actually bandage this on my own?* While I was having my internal debate, Cain made a good point: "It'll be hard to treat on your own. Let me help you."

"Erm... If you would, thanks."

After admitting to myself that I really *couldn't* manage it on my own, I slipped one arm out of my dress, hid the front of my body under my cloak, and adjusted my clothes just enough to avoid indecency. Then I called for Cain.

When he came into the tent, he kneeled by my side, took some bandages and a bottle of medicine from a bag, and placed them on the floor.

"All I did earlier was apply some ointment. Let me treat it again—properly this time. The sooner your wound heals, the better."

Cain looked like he was taking this very seriously, but I couldn't help feeling a little anxious. I mean, here I was flashing him my bare shoulder! I looked at the floor, hyperaware of his fingertips brushing over my skin.

"I *am* flattered you see me that way, but try to relax."

"What?"

When I lifted my head, I found Cain staring straight back at me.

"One arm isn't such a big deal... but do you think you can grow accustomed to this? If you want to keep your injuries hidden from His Highness, I'm the only one you can go to for treatment."

Cain was exactly right. My arm was one thing, but if I got struck through, say...

my *shoulder* with an arrow, I certainly wouldn't be able to handle it on my own.

As I struggled to answer him, Cain gave me a small smile. "I'd like it if you did."

From there, it happened in an instant. I felt his breath against my bare arm, like a gentle flutter of wings.

Cain stood up, a faint smile still playing on his lips, and said, "I'll come back later." And with that, he left.

"Hey, Kiara?" I sat there in a daze until Master Horace called out to me, crawling out from under the blanket.

After all... I was pretty sure what Cain had just done crossed the line of "teasing."

The kiss on the cheek I could explain away. In past-life terms, this world was vaguely European, so it wasn't unheard of as a greeting between two close friends. I had always assumed that Cain's gestures fell under that category.

But my arm? Normally, you would never go around kissing someone's *arm*, right?

Of course, that didn't necessarily mean Cain was *serious* about me. He hadn't asked me for anything. If I went by what he had said to me, it sounded like he was asking me not to think of him that way. But if I went by his actions, it seemed like he wanted me to get used to him doing that... or, in other words, like he *did* want me to see him that way.

What would happen if I *did* think of him that way? When I tried to imagine it, I was ready to tear out my hair.

After all, I just couldn't see myself leaning into those feelings and learning to depend on Cain. I was afraid that the moment I knew I could rely on him, all the pain I had been holding in would come spilling out, and it would be too much for me to bear.

If that happened, I wouldn't be able to fight anymore. Coming this far, stubbornly insisting on having my way all the while, would all have been for nothing. Even *Cain* would be disappointed with the outcome, considering how

strongly he wanted me to destroy the Llewynians.

Meanwhile, I realized that what I was currently yearning for wasn't love or romance. All I wanted was someone who would protect me.

In that case, my only option was to pretend I hadn't noticed his feelings.

If I wanted to keep on fighting, Cain's help was indispensable. If I didn't want things to get awkward between us, I would have to follow his example and act like it wasn't a big deal, pretending like the thought hadn't occurred to me at all.

Just thinking about the kiss made me so embarrassed that I couldn't bear to look him in the eyes. Still, for the time being, all I could do was hypnotize myself into forgetting everything.

Once some time had passed and I had finally regained my composure, I glanced back at Master Horace, wondering if he might have any bright ideas. Experienced in the ways of the world as he was, I tried explaining to him what had left me in such a state of shock.

Master Horace went quiet for a bit. His clay face didn't show a change in expression, so it was hard to tell what he was thinking.

Eventually, he expressed his short take on the matter. "Feh! Damned lady-killers!" he muttered bitterly.

Drawing my own conclusions from that, I promptly decided not to ask Master Horace for any more love advice.



The next day, Delphion soldiers attacked during the evening. Most likely, they had moved out during the day and kept themselves hidden. The enemy had waited until it was dark out to lure our forces into the forest, hoping to assail and conquer us while we were panicked and unable to see our surroundings.

This time, Lord Enister's forces fended them off. The enemy didn't stray far from the forest, instead just shooting their arrows at the troops led by the goat-riding old man. As a result, our bruiser of a hermit was struggling to go on the attack.

Lord Enister's soldiers shot off some arrows of their own and waited to see what happened. Meanwhile, I climbed straight up onto my golem and went back to work culling trees, just as Reggie had instructed.

This time, I busied myself with dividing the parts of the forest I had already sectioned off into even smaller segments. In the twilight, I caught glimpses of soldiers scurrying away to avoid being trampled, fleeing to the remaining tracts of green.

Reggie had probably been keeping an eye on the progress of my mission; before I finished my rezoning of the forest, he moved his forces behind Lord Enister, ordering them to shoot their longbows at the Llewynians, who were moving atop the fallen trees for a better vantage point.

Before long, both sides were starting to run out of arrows. Once that happened, we would have no choice but to draw our swords and fight in close quarters. Yet the Delphion soldiers still refused to come any closer.

Lord Enister's forces took the chance to descend. A squad was assigned to each section of the forest, surrounding and attacking the Llewynians who had run out of the cleared path and into the groves of trees. Reggie's soldiers were dispatched to areas that were short of hands.

With all those fallen trees in the way, the enemy couldn't make a quick escape. Not only would it take them time to go help their other comrades, but their *own* hiding places had been inundated by Farzian soldiers, too. Thus, each division was obliterated one by one.

This was exactly the situation Reggie had been envisioning when he asked me to cull the trees in the area. The first step in the plan was to limit where the enemy could hide. If they planned to stay out of sight, stealthily draw closer, and then launch their attack, they would first have to cross the path I had made and slip into the groves I had left toward the front.

By knocking down the trees in those groves and creating even smaller sections, I had successfully limited the enemy's potential hiding places and forcibly reduced the number of soldiers who could take cover in one partition. They hardly had enough room to retreat, and a small group of enemies would be easy to surround and take down.

I saw more and more figures dashing through my pathways in order to escape the Farzian army's attack, attempting to return to the deeper parts of the forest.

However, the enemy didn't seem happy to have their soldiers running away. A bugle resounded from beyond the path, and a large number of Llewynians came forth, attempting to push the retreating soldiers back.

At that, I instructed Cain to head back to the ground. "I won't go any farther into the forest."

"Do you promise?" Cain asked, suspicious. After giving him several firm nods, I finally managed to get his consent.

It was a bit of relief to be on my own again. Cain was treating me the same as always, but pretending like everything was "normal" was wearing me out. Even now that we had gone our separate ways, my heart was pounding like crazy. I stood up, clinging on to my golem, and waited to calm down.

From way up high, I could see the sun, the color of a ripe orange, sinking down into the other side of the forest. If I wanted to burn the harrowing sight into the enemy's memories, I had to finish the next step before the sun set.

"What are you planning to do all on your own? You're pretty far away from the fight," Master Horace asked.

"This," I answered.

I transformed my golem's right arm into stone, then swung it around a few times. Once it had finally gathered enough momentum, I detached the arm entirely.

It went flying. It soared through the air like a ball and landed on the other side of the crossing.

There was a loud thud. Clouds of dust danced through the air. I could feel light tremors in the earth all the way back where I was, and I heard screams added into the mix, too.

Bugles, which I assumed belonged to the Llewynians, rang out left and right. The arm hadn't landed quite where I had been aiming, but it looked like the

rear units of the Llewynian troops had indeed suffered heavy damage.

My control wasn't the best, but there wasn't much I could do about that. I'd never had particularly good reflexes, so I deserved a pat on the back just for getting *that* close to my intended target.

"What do you think, Master Horace? That's what I call a golem-style cannon!"

"You always come up with the strangest things, kid," Master Horace replied, dumbfounded.

Back in the beginning, Reggie had asked me to go after the enemy once our forces seized the partitions, perhaps by throwing something at them. Thus, I had decided to make as big a splash as I could by catapulting a lump of earth right into where we were luring the main troop of Llewynians.

I hurled the golem's left arm the same way. Accompanied by even more screams, the Llewynians retreated further into the forest.

I spotted several flags deeper in the forest, where the trees were more sparse. Among them was the crest of a crown-bearing eagle on green fabric—Salekhard's flag.

However, that flag had retreated prior to the Llewynians. For the time being, it seemed we wouldn't have to worry about fighting Salekhard. I was relieved, though I soon found myself wincing at my aching leg.

When I had stepped into the woods earlier, my leg had been grazed by an arrow. I was glad I hadn't been shot through, but it still hurt plenty.

All the same, I was hesitant to report it to Cain. Thankful he hadn't noticed it in the dim twilight, I chose to remain quiet about it.



"What a disgrace! You couldn't even manage to lead them into the forest?!" The feeble yell came from a young man with curly ringlets who was adorned in heavy armor. Standing behind him was his servant, bearing the flag of Llewne, along with several of his knight-guards. He was the Llewynian count stationed in Delphion, Lord Erling.

Kneeling before Erling was a black-haired man on the upper end of what

could pass for “middle-aged.” This somewhat plump man, clad in a military uniform and curling tightly in on himself, was Lord Henry Delphion.

“My deepest apologies... but my men did their utmost.”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses! I want to see some *results*, you useless maggot!”

The whip in Lord Erling’s hand made several loud cracks. After each one, the baron of Delphion screamed. Not only was the Llewynian count viciously flogging him, but his poor aim meant the whip rarely came down on the baron’s arms and shoulders, often striking the top of his head instead. Lord Erling’s subpar skill meant there wasn’t much power behind the lashes, but nonetheless, the knights standing behind him averted their gaze at the sight of his temper tantrum.

Eventually, Lord Erling seemed sufficiently satisfied with the sight of Lord Delphion cowering in pain. With a smirk, he announced, “Hmph. I suggest you be a little more cooperative, or else I’ll have your daughters give their lives to serve as our cannon fodder!”

“No, please! Anything but that!” Lord Delphion jumped to his feet. He clung to the count, tears streaming down his face as he begged for him to reconsider.

Lord Erling sneered and brandished his whip once more, when...

“Ho, my Llewynian fellow. It looks like our work here is done, so we’ll be taking our leave now. See you back at the fort.”

The person who’d interrupted them was riding a bay, beautifully muscular horse. Wearing a green cape embroidered with the crest of an eagle, this tall, reddish-haired man gazed down at the count, his gray eyes narrowed.

“Oh, erm, Your Majesty! You’re leaving already?!” Lord Erling changed his tune instantly, rushing up to Isaac with an obsequious smile on his face. “Please do stay a little longer! We could use your—”

“All you asked of us was to stand watch against an attack from Sorwen. Either way, if Farzia carries on with their current method of whittling away at your men, even if you *do* manage to lure them into the woods for an ambush, you won’t have enough soldiers left to unite against them. Your plan has already

failed, so we're through with helping you. Bye now."

Following that curt dismissal, Isaac spurred his horse onward, only for Lord Erling to chase after him. Isaac glanced back at the man like this was all some terrible inconvenience. After waiting for Lord Delphion's men to lift him off the ground and carry him away, he issued the count a warning. "Their spellcaster can get a bird's-eye view of the battlefield from atop her golem, much like climbing a watchtower. If you don't leave this forest soon, she's going to hunt you down and crush you like one of those trees. I recommend you flee as fast your legs can carry you."

Cowed, Lord Erling dashed off to go order his troops to retreat.

"How nauseating... I can't stand men of his ilk," Isaac muttered, then returned to his position a short ways off. Mikhail and his knights, who had been waiting for him nearby, met him halfway.

"Would you stop provoking everyone you speak to, Your Highness? You're always so quick to pick a fight. You're going to put our plans to waste like that, you know. The next time you want to stop him, wait for the right opportunity and show a little restraint."

"That's 'Your *Majesty*' to you, Mikhail. And I *know* that. Why else do you think I refrained from punching him?"

"You may not have raised a hand against him, but you still threatened him."

Anything he could say would just be turned back on him, so Isaac kept his mouth shut. He never *had* managed to best Mikhail in a contest of words.

"That spellcaster certainly is impressive," a blond knight chimed in, perhaps looking to lighten the mood with a change of topic.

"Must be nice to have one in their ranks. I want one too," Isaac remarked, sounding very much like a child enamored with a particular sweet in a candy store.

Mikhail seemed amenable to the subject change. "Yes. She was already quite a sight to behold back in Clonfert, but I always knew she would become even more effective when properly incorporated into their strategy."

No matter what he said to the contrary, Mikhail was just as desperate to get his hands on a spellcaster as Isaac. Scheming was his specialty, but the way he always hoped to get a job done with as little fuss as possible was why he got on so well with the king.

“You said there were two spellcasters on their way from Llewyrne, did you not? And one of them is that middle-aged man who came by Trisphede?”

“Apparently, yes. But they *are* our allies, so they ought to work to our advantage, don’t you think?”

“Not a chance. Llewyrne is hoping for Salekhard, the country they dragged into their war, to take its fair share of damage amid all this. I’m sure they’re planning to invade us once they’re done with Farzia. In that case, they have no reason to loan us their spellcasters; they’ll simply watch and wait for our forces to dwindle as much as possible.” Isaac sneered, then said to the pair, “Thus, our best move is to ensure our forces dwindle as *little* as possible... for the time being, at least.”



The Delphion and Llewyrnian forces retreated from the border. All the same, we spent the following day combing the area to make sure they hadn’t left any soldiers behind. If we let them go unnoticed only for them to invade Cassia again, it would spell trouble for us later.

That said, we had no hope of catching *everyone*. Some of them could have fled back to their country all on their own, or they might have blended into the Farzian ranks, making it difficult to root them out. Thus, we limited the length of our search to one full day.

In the meantime, we traced where the Llewyrnian, Salekhardian, and Delphion troops had withdrawn to. Evidently, they had headed for a fort located within the province of Delphion.

The next day, we proceeded west down the high road, which stretched alongside the forest, and stopped our march once we had entered Delphion. We ended up near a shallow but relatively large river. Although we had to take turns standing watch, many took the opportunity to go wash up in the water.

Some washed the blood off their armor, humming to themselves all the while. Some played with Reynard, who had grown filthy with dust, laughing as he kicked and splashed water everywhere. Others just started doing their laundry. Most common of all were people who took the opportunity to bathe.

I was interested in taking a bath myself, so I went with Gina and Girsch to find a spot away from everyone else. I created a makeshift shower stall by transforming some of the boulders there, then hopped into the water. Girsch and Lila were standing watch close by, which gave me an added sense of security. The plan was for Girsch to have a turn once Gina and I were done.

Girsch was a maiden at heart. Ever since coming to that realization—and even long before—the mercenary had always been a little shy about mingling with men. Considering Girsch had a male body, it had been a constant struggle before Gina had become a close confidant.

Incidentally, it wasn't nearly as hot as it had been during the peak of summer, so the cold water had a little more bite to it now. Taking my sweet time soaking wasn't an option anymore.

We managed to scrub ourselves clean right down to our hair, but we were chilled to the bone by the end of it. When we threw on our clothes and stepped out of the "stall," we found the ever-considerate Girsch had started a fire for us.

"We can't have you girls catching a cold, now. Come warm yourselves up!" the mercenary insisted before hitting the bath. Gina and I huddled around the fire for warmth.



“Even with Girsch to look out for me, I never imagined I’d be able to bathe in such an open area! Thanks a bunch, Kiara!” Gina threw her arms in the air, delighted. She seemed to be a big fan of keeping clean, just like any girl would be. “But by the way...”

“What is it?”

“Is your leg okay? That looks like a pretty nasty injury.”

Gina pointed at my left calf, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. That was where I had been grazed by an arrow during the battle. Cain hadn’t noticed it, but after I had taken a good look at it in my tent, I’d found it to be even deeper than I’d anticipated. Thanks to the first-rate salves of this world, the wound had closed up in no time, but I could tell that it was going to leave a lasting scar.

“It’s fine. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“But what if it leaves a scar? It might hurt your chances at marriage.” Gina studied my leg with genuine sympathy in her eyes. “Did you have it treated right away?”

“Erm... I did what I could as quickly as possible.”

“*You* did? By yourself? Don’t tell me all you did was use a salve on it!”

I nodded, and Gina’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t want anyone else to know that I got hurt. I was afraid they might trick me into staying off the battlefield again.”

“At least tell Sir Cain! He could have called me or Girsch to handle it.”

Ouch. That was a sore spot. “Uh, you see... I kinda can’t ask Sir Cain.”

“Did something happen?”

You’re too sharp, Gina.

Gina demanded I spill my guts, assuring me that she’d keep whatever it was between the two of us. There was nowhere for “girl talk” to spread in an army full of men, and Gina’s experience as a mercenary probably meant she could keep a secret, so I gave in and confessed—specifically, about the kiss on my arm the other day.

“Oh, *now* I see.” Gina’s expression grew serious. “Then I have one more

question for you: have you caught on to his feelings yet?”

“Yeah. How could I stay oblivious *now*?” A dry laugh escaped my lips. Now that his actions had gone beyond what could be filed away as a misunderstanding, there was no way I wouldn’t realize he was interested in me.

“But it’s hard to come to terms with that, so you’re avoiding him?” When she said the word “avoid,” it finally occurred to me what I was doing. Instead of confronting him head-on, I was trying to pretend it had never happened. “Well, I suppose that goes without saying, given the situation. Let me guess: you don’t think you can reciprocate his feelings right now?”

“The only thing going through my mind is how much I want to depend on him. I can’t tell if I have actual feelings for him or not.”

For a moment, I dipped into some hypotheticals. Say I was living in my past life as a high school student, and exams were the worst of my troubles. If a really great guy made a move on me, I might consider it a chance to fall in love and try going out with him. But as the person I was *now*, I couldn’t afford to indulge in his kindness and stop moving forward.

“Besides,” I added, “I’m not sure if Sir Cain is acting purely out of love.”

I still had my doubts. What Cain wanted most of all was for me to charge into battle and destroy Llewyne. He was willing to fight by my side. Whenever he took up the task of protecting me, his kindness always came through loud and clear, and there were times I had nearly mistaken that for something more. But after hearing Cain’s true wish, I had begun to wonder if he simply thought of me as a high-quality blade he needed to maintain.

I had already told Gina just about everything else, plus she had never once objected to my desire to fight, so I went ahead and mentioned the promise Cain had made to me—that he would keep Reggie in check if he tried to stand in my way. I told her about Cain’s grudge against Llewyne, too, and how he was grateful to me for killing their men.

“I can completely understand why you wouldn’t have recognized his feelings as romantic. Some men have no reservations about kissing, whether there are deeper feelings behind it or not. It’s in their nature.” I sensed a bit of indignation in her words. Was that experience talking? “It’s easy to wonder if he

might be trying to trick you somehow. If you let yourself fall for him, and then he tells you that was just his way of saying hello, it'll take more than decking him in the face to pull yourself out of that funk. Still, you never know exactly what might blossom into love."

After listening to my whole story, it sounded like Gina believed there could truly be romantic feelings at play here.

"How was it for you, Gina?"

Based on how much advice she had, Gina *had* to have some experience with love herself. She clearly knew way more than I did. I stared intently at her, wordlessly imploring her to spill the beans, and Gina ran a hand through her half-dried locks. She looked so glamorous with wet hair.

"My feelings started as admiration. In the beginning, I wanted to be more like him. That's what I thought I loved about him... but a lot happened between us, and eventually, I just couldn't feel that way about him anymore."

"Admiration... I see."

I definitely admired Cain. If I were as strong as him, maybe everyone wouldn't always have to worry about me so much. Then again, I could say the same of Reggie and Alan, so it wasn't like he was uniquely special in that regard.

"Anyway, you're afraid you won't be able to focus on fighting anymore, right? So Cain's suggestive behavior is stressing you out."

"Exactly. And that's why I can't tell him if I get hurt."

Otherwise, I'd turn into an anxious mess.

It wasn't Gina who piped up with a suggestion next. "Why don't you tell Sir Cain that you were instructed to come to me if you get hurt?" Girsch, who had taken a bath and changed clothes, came along with a towel draped overhead. "Sorry for eavesdropping, by the way."

I shook my head furiously. "Don't be! We were talking out where anyone could hear, and I was the one who decided to start running my mouth."

It wasn't Girsch's fault.

"That's a good idea. That way, Sir Cain will get the hint that Kiara just isn't

ready for you-know-what.”

“I *don’t* know what,” I commented with a puzzled tilt of my head.

Gina just laughed. “When was your first love, Kiara?”

“Erm...” The reason I hesitated to answer was obvious: I was pretty sure I’d never fallen in love. I had thought plenty of guys were handsome or charming, sure, but those feelings weren’t much different from a celebrity crush. No matter how hard they’d made my heart throb, it was the same as squealing over an anime or manga character.

Above all else, anything I could have felt would just be washed away by the war and my position in it.

When I gave a small shake of my head, Girsch cut in, “Sir Cain has rushed to your rescue a good handful of times. That never gets your heart racing? It’s definitely worked like a charm on me, even with a fight raging. When someone saves you right in the nick of time, how can you *not* fall head over heels?”

Come to think of it, Girsch’s first love had been a man in the same line of mercenary work. Naturally, they would have met on the front, and if that comment was any indication, Girsch had apparently fallen for him in the heat of battle.

Right then, Master Horace finally chimed in with a devious cackle. “That’s not what this disciple of mine is *really* after. And until she gets what she wants, she won’t have a thought to spare for romance. I mean, just listen to her! She’s basically still a kid.”

“I can’t deny I’m a little childish, but geez...”

I had technically come of age, but it always stuck with me that if this were my past life, I would still be considered a child; consequently, it was hard to think of myself as an adult. That was *my* read on the situation, at least.

Girsch appeared to have come to a different conclusion. “What a wise guardian you are.”

“I’m the kindest mentor you’ll ever find! Mmheehee! But there’s only so much I can manage in a body like this—especially for a girl who’s never had any

decent parents.”

“I read you loud and clear, ‘Master.’” Girsch gave a nod, then suddenly patted me on the head. “Don’t worry. Just leave everything to Mama Girsch here. I’ll go have a little talk with Sir Cain myself.”

“Huh? About what?”

“Oh, just some grown-up things.”

The contents of this future conversation remained a mystery, but I felt a lot better after getting all my worries off my chest. When I left the riverside and headed back to my tent in good spirits, I spotted Sara under a group of soldiers’ adoring gazes.

“Want a bite, Sara?” A young soldier held out a piece of bread, blushing.

“Try this instead!” Another one was offering an unsalted bit of dried meat he’d saved from his soup. Sara sure was popular.

Being the little scamp that he was, Reynard was a favorite among the soldiers who loved playing with dogs, but the calm and gentle Sara drew in the soldiers who wanted an animal to quietly sit by their side. Lila would often provide a source of comfort when the men were feeling down, so many thought of her as a motherly type—someone who might not get close but who was always watching over you from afar.

Whatever the case, since we were fighting for our lives out here, it was nice to see so many people making the most of animal therapy.

It was right then that Reynard came ashore from the river and padded over. Seeing as he had just gone for a dip, he was soaking wet. No sooner did he come right up behind the soldiers offering Sara food than he started shaking himself dry.

“Ack!”

“Stop spraying water everywhere, you little rascal!”

“How can something so cute be so infuriating?!”

“We’ll feed you next time, alright?!”

Reynard snorted as he watched the men scurry away, shouting. After witnessing this series of events from afar, Gina and I burst out laughing. Girsch mumbled something, but I couldn't quite catch whatever it was.

"What *he's* doing is really no different from Reynard."



The next day, the Farzian army marched deeper into Delphion. In order to take back the province, we had to drive out the Llewynian soldiers, and for that, we had to make an ally of the baron's younger brother.

Lord Delphion's brother, Ernest, was in the process of gathering people who refused to fall in line with Llewyne. If you enlisted his cooperation in the RPG, you were given a huge advantage in the battle ahead. Having an ally who knew the lay of the land gave you boosts in both attack and defense.

That was when it suddenly occurred to me: we had fought plenty of defective spellcasters, but I had yet to meet one who wielded earth magic. Whenever I *did* finally clash with an earth user, would they use golems, too?

"Judging by the game art, the golems in the RPG were a little smaller than the ones I make. If we only have to fight one about three to four mers wide, could we take it down like we did in the game?"

"According to what you know, we can defeat a golem of that size?" Alan asked, having overheard my soliloquy.

I nodded. "If you're looking to keep the battle short and sweet, I know just the right strategy. First, have your archers get about two hits in. Then, you send in Alan, who has high evasion, as well as Cain and Jerome, who have high defense. Assuming you're around level fifteen by this point, if you surround the enemy with those party members... you can finish the battle in about three turns."

"Pardon?" Both Alan and Cain, who was sitting next to him, cast odd looks at me.

Yeah, I had a feeling they wouldn't get it if I explained it with numbers from the RPG. I'm not sure how else to describe it, though.

Reggie was there, too. I was in the midst of going over the events to come with everyone who was aware of my whole reincarnation deal.

“If we translate your explanation into reality... that means that if we surround it with archers and add their attacks to the mix, in addition to the men commanded by me and General Edam, we can take down an undersized golem,” Alan summarized.

“Basically, yes. On that note, I was wondering if it might be a good idea for you guys to fight against one as practice.”

The study materials would be provided by yours truly.

“There *is* always a chance we could encounter an enemy who wields the same magic as Miss Kiara. I believe it would be wise to come up with countermeasures for that scenario, and it’s a good idea to get our soldiers accustomed to combating magic.” Thankfully, Cain seemed receptive.

That was all well and good, but being around Cain still made me nervous. *Has Girsch already spoken to him? Or has no one said anything yet? If so, I should probably be the one to bring it up. He’s acting the same as ever, though.*

While I was overtaken by anxiety, Reggie made a decision on the matter. “Fair point. They may be used to having a mage for an ally, but Enister’s and Azure’s men have yet to clash with a defective spellcaster. Rather than thrusting them into an encounter with the unknown, it would be best to ease them in with something they know is relatively safe. Why don’t we give it a try?”

Reggie jumped into discussing plans for an improvised training session with Alan. He suggested that one golem would be enough per round, and that at the end of three rounds, even the soldiers relegated to observing should have a good idea of how to fight against one.

Ever since Sorwen, Reggie had ceased to object to my ideas. When he had told me he wouldn’t criticize me, I had assumed he’d just been talking about that one night. Had he finally given up, taking me for an unreasonable person who would only escalate things each time he tried to stop me? He was probably just holding his tongue, but still...

There were things we couldn’t say to each other and lines that had been

drawn, but I found the atmosphere strangely comfortable. When it was just the four of us, working toward a common goal, it reminded me a little of the time we had spent traveling together after I had run away from boarding school.

I had stowed away on their carriage with plans to make my own way, but I had been deeply relieved to receive a helping hand sooner than I ever could have imagined. That was exactly why each and every one of these men, who had accepted me into their circle, was so important to me. Much like I always did whenever I dreamed of my past-life family, I wished that this moment would last forever.

However, I knew that was impossible.



Training began an hour later.

Once you were standing before it with a sword in hand, even a smaller golem was apparently pretty hard to fight against. Some of Lord Azure's knights and soldiers went up to bat the first time around, and Cain joined them as backup.

"Let's begin, Miss Kiara!" came Cain's shout. I started off by advancing my golem toward them.

Lord Azure's men faltered as the golem strode forward, each footstep making a thundering thud. Concerned that they were scared stiff, I decided to mess around a bit to ease the tension. I had the golem clap its hand and spin in a circle, ending the performance with a little skip.

Not only did it fail to lighten the mood, but the soldiers looked like they couldn't comprehend what was happening.

Oops. Guess that didn't work.

"Enough with the eccentric maneuvers. Not even the enemy would do that," Cain chided me without beating around the bush.

Regret didn't take long to set in. "Sorry."

Once I had apologized, I followed Cain's guidance and tried attacking more like a real enemy would. After a few trials of me swinging the golem's hand down in slow motion while the team rushed to dodge the attack, Cain tried his

hand at going on the offensive.

Uh, I think that was a critical hit!

He held his sword high above his head and swung it down, severing one of the golem's arms.

Whaaaaat? He totally just lopped off one-third of its HP! Golems have pretty strong defense stats, so if he's going above and beyond that, Cain's attack power must really be something else!

Encouraged by Cain's strike, the House of Azure started raining down attacks of their own, and my golem swiftly hit its limit. Before I could even give it the command, it collapsed into dirt.

This had never happened before. I was fascinated as I observed the spectacle, learning at last what happened when my golem was defeated.

Next up was the House of Enister. After witnessing the previous battle, they came at the golem without fear.

"Don't you dare hold back, lads!"

Or maybe their enthusiasm was because they found Lord Enister, who was barking orders from behind, even *more* frightening.

The third group to go was a mixed squad. It was a group of about five soldiers and knights, including Groul, who was brimming with excitement after asking to have a turn, and Cain, who would once again be playing a support role.

Perhaps because it was their second go, I didn't see anyone shrinking back this time. Thus, I had my golem launch much more standard attacks than the previous two rounds. Every now and then, I tried lifting the soldiers off the ground and making them scream. I tried stomping its feet and causing a stir. I tried sweeping at them with its arms.

Not only was everyone dodging my attacks perfectly, but Groul in particular seemed to be having a great time. It put me in such a good mood that I let my guard down.

The next time my golem's right hand flew toward them, the attack caught one of the more exhausted soldiers, sending him flying.

“Oh!”

I hadn't meant to *hurt* anyone. I hurried to make my golem catch him, but someone rushed in to protect the plummeting soldier before I could—it was Cain. He caught the soldier just before he hit the ground, shielding him and grazing his left arm against the ground in the process.

I suppressed a scream in the back of my throat. In the same moment, my golem crumbled into dirt.

Thankfully, nobody had been hurt too badly; the soldier got to his feet right away, and Cain seemed to be fine himself. But of course, our battle exercises ended with that.

The final incident gave the exercises a sense of realism to everyone watching, so all the soldiers walked away satisfied. I, on the other hand, didn't feel an ounce of accomplishment.

“I'm so sorry, Sir Cain!” I ran up to him, bowing my head immediately.

Cain only laughed. “Don't worry about it. I forgot you were holding back for us and got a little too relaxed myself. Leaving that aside, it was my arm that was hurt, so it will be a little difficult to treat on my own. Would you mind helping me?”

I wasn't about to turn down my victim's request. I nodded my head vigorously.

I would be the one doing the nursing this time, so I assumed there would be less opportunity for things to get weird. Besides, Cain looked like there was something he wanted to speak to me about.

Cain took a seat atop a fallen tree a good distance from everyone else, ready to undergo his treatment. Nobody would be able to hear our voices here, but I was a little relieved that we were still within sight of the others. I rolled up Cain's sleeve and went to work treating the wound.

While I was busy wrapping bandages, Cain finally opened his mouth to say something. “Girsch spoke to me.” My hands stopped. “Supposedly, your heart hasn't grown past childhood yet. You walk at a slower pace than most people; it's easy for you to get left behind and end up lost, so I need to wait up for you.”

“‘Childhood’? Really?”

If this were my past life, I would be in the prime of my high school career, squealing over cute boys with my friends. It came as a bit of a shock that Girsch saw me as the equivalent of a little girl.

It *did* make sense, though. Forget getting swept up in a crush; here I was freezing up and hiding behind a reliable adult. The moment I had counted on Girsch to handle this, I was choosing to remain a child. As I came to terms with that, I tied off the end of the bandage.

“Does it bother you to be called a child?”

“Not really. I mean, it’s true. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. I didn’t know how to address the issue head-on, so I made Girsch, who’s always acting so motherly, take care of it for me,” I answered honestly.

Cain chuckled. “Girsch knows you too well, it seems. But if you’re a child, that means it’s still okay to do this.” He lifted his uninjured right hand and gave me a gentle pat on the head—just like he would do to a little girl.

At first, I tensed up. But each time he repeated the motion, I gradually grew a little more relaxed, until I finally let out a small sigh. Everything was fine now. With each stroke to my head, I became more and more assured that Cain wouldn’t do anything to me without warning again.

“For the time being, I’ll just wait and see what happens. I’d rather not scare you off, for my part. Once you’ve decided to do something, you’ll take off running without a care for anything else. If you decided to get away from me, you’d end up somewhere I couldn’t reach in no time.”

What was I, some kind of fleet-footed animal? I was a little put out by his description. For some reason, though, my lips simply wouldn’t twist into a pout; perhaps because the hand on my head was comforting enough to melt my heart each time I attempted to steel it. Here was conclusive proof that I preferred to be treated like a child more than anything else.

“The last thing I want is to make you hate me, lead you astray, and render you unable to fight as a result of it all. For now, I’ll remain by your side as a brother figure and nothing more.”

The words “brother figure” struck a chord with me. Why was that? It felt like something akin to nostalgia.

“I’ll wait until the day you want something a little more than that,” he added, tracing the skin just above my ear with his fingertips.

Swallowing down a yelp, I took this to heart—that what Cain *really* wanted to say was that he was just being patient for now. Unfortunately, I was still far too disoriented to take that in stride. My mind couldn’t catch up to what was happening, so I hoped that he would just stay as my brother for a little while longer.

But one way or another, I felt that Cain and I had finally managed to resolve our miscommunication. I wanted to go thank Girsch and Gina, but there was something else I had to do first. I had to go apologize to the soldier I had accidentally knocked aside.

After wandering in search of him and asking around, I soon tracked down the man in question. Reggie had called for him, for some reason, so I found him inside the prince’s tent.

The soldier appeared largely unharmed. He also seemed deeply uncomfortable to be sitting alone with the prince. The moment he saw my face, he broke into a relieved smile.

I feel you... Anyone suddenly called for a one-on-one chat with the prince is going to be terrified of what he’s got to say.

Given the circumstances, the soldier cast me a pleading look, like he wanted to get out of the tent as soon as humanly possible.

“How’s your inju—”

“Right as rain! There’s no need to be concerned!”

“Well, that’s good...”

“Is that all you wished to speak with me about?!”

He was giving off the vibes of a dog whining to be let out of a cage, so I gave in. “Yes, that’s all. I’m really sorry about what happened. Feel free to head back now.”

“Please don’t worry about it. Well then, farewell!” The soldier happily brought our conversation to an end and bounced his way out of the tent.

Reggie giggled at the sight of it. What a bully, having a good laugh when *he* was the one who had frazzled the man so. On that note, why had he called the soldier into his tent in the first place?

“Why did you do that?” I asked, and Reggie inferred what I meant.

“I knew it would be weighing on your mind.”

“You had him wait here just so I could see him?”

Reggie nodded, then explained, “It would be difficult for you to track him down on your own, wouldn’t it? Besides, given the lack of women in our group, I’d rather not have you wandering around by yourself.”

In other words, it was to save time and keep me safe. I gave a wry smile. “I would have been fine. I used my magic to trample a good deal of people into the ground just recently. No one would go out of their way to come near me.”

I had only meant to reassure him, but Reggie peered into my face with concern. “Does that hurt?”

The moment he asked, I felt a pang in my chest. Reggie had posed the question knowing full well that few people would be happy to be so feared.

It did hurt. I just didn’t want to show any weakness. Besides, I was the one who had given everybody a reason to be scared.

“I’m fine.” I made an attempt to smile back at him, but Reggie wasn’t buying it.

“Really? If that’s the truth, look me in the eyes when you say it.”

Reggie stood up and came closer to me, still staring. I wasn’t about to give him reason to doubt me, so I returned his gaze head-on.

His blue eyes were so beautiful. There was a teasing glint to them, but as we stared at each other, that twinkle suddenly disappeared, the hue of his eyes darkening.

“Kiara.”

Before I knew it, Reggie's fingers were at the side of my face, scooping up a lock of my hair. When he tucked it behind my ear, his fingertips smoothly brushed against my skin. A shiver ran down my spine. I recoiled from the sweet sensation, but as he stroked my hair again, the feeling began to fade.

"I won't tie you down or hold you back. But at this rate, you're just going to keep hurting yourself. At least say something when you're having a hard time."

Reggie's kindness tugged at my heartstrings. Still, I couldn't promise him anything. If I did that, I'd break down, just like I had once before.

If I kept that promise, it really *would* end with Reggie locking me away somewhere safe. He would convince me that getting involved in the war was a mistake, and the last thing I wanted was for him to keep me away from everything only to get shot and die.

This world wasn't a game. There was no returning to my last save.

I already had someone on my side. There had been a moment where I felt uneasy to have him—the one who wanted to see me fight—alongside me, but we had taken care of that issue.

Thus, I swallowed so many of the words I could have said, instead just smiling at Reggie. "Don't worry. It's gotten a lot easier for me."

Even so, lying to him made my heart ache.

Chapter 5: Welcome to Delphion

After emerging victorious from the forest battle on the Delphion border, we marched straight into the province. Our first stop would be to convince Lord Delphion's younger brother, Ernest, to join our cause.

According to the scout Reggie had sent out after we'd entered Delphion, Ernest had gathered a respectable number of soldiers.

"Back in the beginning, Lord Ernest kept to himself in his branch estate. Then people who weren't interested in falling in line with the baron after his surrender started to gather there... or at least that's how I remember it," I recounted.

"Everything seems to have gone the same way as your memories," Reggie remarked. "Half of the branch families' soldiers have gathered in Ernest Finard's territory. Many came in asking to enlist after their fields were ravaged, so it's safe to assume he's brought together even more troops than we predicted."

The farmers whose fields had been laid to waste bore deep grudges, but they were far too outnumbered to strike back with only their hoes in hand. Thus, they had all gathered under a single emblem for their cause. Reggie explained all this as he walked his horse alongside mine.

We were heading to the southern part of Delphion. That wasn't to say we were moving our whole army there, however. The rest of the troops were marching steadily to the west, toward the fort occupied by the Llewynian and Delphion soldiers. Alan and his knights were in charge of leading those men.

My squad, led by Reggie, was aiming to meet the baron's brother, Ernest Finard. After receiving a report from our scout regarding his whereabouts, we were headed to the House of Finard to the south.

In the RPG, this task was handled by Alan, the protagonist. However, our current commander-in-chief was Reggie. If we were out to win Ernest over, everyone determined that Reggie was the right man for the job. Or rather... we

held a meeting with only those who knew the full situation, then once the decision was already made, we told Jerome and Lord Enister what the plan was.

For the record, we had pinpointed where to send our scout thanks to my prior knowledge that the baron's brother was taking refuge with a large number of soldiers, which made it hard to explain our reasoning to anyone else. As far as everyone else was concerned, our scout had "just happened" to pick up on the rumors en route and had made his own call to inquire into Ernest's affairs. We had rewarded the man with a hefty sum of money to buy his silence on the matter.

"If only more people had memories of their past lives, everything would be so much easier," I mumbled out loud.

"True. Of course, that begs the question of why only *you* have those memories, Miss Kiara." Cain seemed to be wondering about that aspect of it. I would've liked to know the answer to that one, too.

"Fair point. But in your past life, the story follows Alan's crusade, doesn't it? Perhaps whoever remembered their past life in *your* world was the one who told Alan's story. Thinking about it that way, there might be a surprising number of people with memories of another world."

Reggie's suggestion made a lot of sense. Everything here was the same as in the game, right down to the tiniest details, so it was natural to think that someone might have witnessed the events in this world and written them down in a story in their next life.

But that "someone" would definitely have to be a member of our army, right? They had to know a good deal about both sides' circumstances, plus a deep knowledge of the enemy's formations... Wait, who could that even be?! Plus, the memories they possessed were of a world without Reggie in it.

"This is starting to sound like a time paradox..."

Many things had changed, mostly due to my own actions. In that case, the memories of whoever had reincarnated into the other world should have changed, too. Which would mean *my* memories ought to have changed to match what was currently happening... but that had yet to occur.

Either way, I had already left a record of all my memories on paper. If I found a discrepancy between what I'd written and what I remembered, I would know that something had changed.

"That aside, I wonder why Llewyrne is just leaving Lord Ernest be."

It was like that in the RPG, too. But if you really thought about it, they weren't in a position to ignore someone with a sizable number of troops.

"Perhaps that was a side effect of bringing Salekhard to their side."

Are there drawbacks to allying with Salekhard?

"Salekhard has allied with and invaded alongside them due to a common goal, but they're not acting in *Llewyrne's* interests. They have Trisphede now, but they might want some territories a bit further south, too. Llewyrne is likely being cautious of that."

Because they had prioritized marching west and taking the royal capital, Llewyrne hadn't left very many soldiers with the noblemen occupying each territory. If Salekhard moved against them, they would only barely have enough men to push them back. Thus, Reggie speculated that they couldn't turn their back to the allied country.

"But it looked like Salekhard was with them in the forest."

"Yes, because they had a common enemy. They've already decided to band together against Farzia, so it was easy for them to join forces there. Oh, look, I believe we'll be coming up on it soon."

We had departed from the Delphion border two days ago. Perhaps because we were traveling in a smaller group—Reggie's knights and a handful of other cavalymen, so about fifty men total—we had arrived sooner than expected. If it hadn't been for me, we might have gotten there even earlier.

At first, Reggie had suggested he go by himself, but that just seemed like a bad idea. I mean, he already had a track record of getting shot the moment I thought he'd avoided a death flag! I didn't want to send him out with only a few escorts, so I had insisted on coming along.

Besides, I had the most information about Ernest, and if Reggie was only

willing to take a handful of people along, at least I was as valuable an asset as they come. Since he had agreed to help me, not only did Cain not object, but he even managed to persuade Jerome. Thanks to that, I was allowed to accompany Reggie.

Recently, Cain had started treating me more like a little sister to look after, just like he had promised. I actually found that kind of fun. Of course, I had been an only child in my past life, and I might as well have been one in this world too, so I didn't know what siblings were really supposed to be like. But he'd do things like casually ask me if I was feeling tired, and when I told him I was fine, he'd give me an encouraging slap on the back... which made me incredibly happy.

Cain had worried that he was being a little too rough with a girl, admitting that he was probably treating me more like a little *brother*... but I was perfectly fine with that. I felt a lot closer to him this way.

"Oh, I see how it is. Heeheehee!" Master Horace had cackled as he'd watched us, but I decided not to think too hard on that.

Before long, we arrived outside the town in which the Finard estate, Ernest's home, was located. We were standing on a hill overlooking the town; down the slope, all the way to the fields by the river, the land was strangely bare of grass in a few places.

"I see something, Your Highness." Groul brought us to a halt, and we peered downhill. A moment later, a lump of earth popped up in one of the barren areas, only to be pulled back in, leaving a large hole in its wake.

Looking closer, we saw several similar spots. No sooner had I noticed than more dirt kicked up from the ground, plugging up one of the holes.

"Terramice," the sandy-haired Felix determined as he stepped in front of Reggie.

Right on cue, an animal popped its head out of a hole. It had golden, fluffy fur; round, black eyes; and tiny, little paws. Its size was nearly that of a human's, but make no mistake: it was the spitting image of a hamster.

"How cute!" I cried, spellbound by its dark, watery eyes.

Reggie burst into giggles. “You’d consider something of that size ‘cute’?”

“Just look at its face! That’s as cute as it gets!”

Who cared how big it was? That cherubic, hamster-like face won out over everything else.

Master Horace cut in from beside me, “Whatever you say, kid. Just don’t forget: if they’re out here, they’ve probably dug their holes along the high road, too. Mmheehee! Think you can still make it to the town?”

“Oh!” Now that I was looking for it, I noticed they’d made plenty of holes in the road winding down the hill as well. But hey, that wasn’t a problem with *me* around. “It’s fine! I can just patch up the holes along our path.”

I hopped down from my horse and placed a hand on the ground. The earth along the road hardened, gradually spreading over the whole surface. This way, our horses would be able to get across no problem.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t cover the entire area from here to the river in one shot.

“I’m going to go flatten the ground up ahead! Follow along nice and slow, everyone,” I instructed, walking on ahead.

“Let’s come down from our horses for now, just in case they trip. I don’t see any sign of the enemy, so we should be fine,” Reggie suggested. Everyone dismounted and set off on foot.

I jogged straight ahead. Right where the hardened patch of ground broke off, I kneeled down and pressed my right hand to the ground once more.

Just as I finished leveling the ground all the way to the bridge over the river, something soft and heavy suddenly flung itself at me from the side.

“Kiara!”

“Your Grace?!”

The moment I heard those shouts, everything went dark—suddenly, all I could see around me was dirt.

“What?!”

Within the time it took me to scream, I found myself in the embrace of a fur-covered marshmallow. I felt my body being jerked to the left, then the right, up, and then down. The terramouse that had snatched me up had to be even bigger than I was. From what I could tell, it had absconded with me into its underground burrow. It was too dark to see anything, and all I could feel was fur. Seeing as neither my hands nor my feet were touching the ground, there wasn't much I could do to resist.

Right when I began to consider biting my thumb and using my own blood, we emerged into a better-lit area. It wasn't so bright as to be disorienting; light seeped in through a thin crevice, dimly reflected off the white limestone. In the center of the cavern was a mound of copper stones. If I were to stand next to it, it would reach to my waist.

I was unceremoniously plopped down atop this gently sloping pile of stones.

"Owww!"

Sitting on top of a mountain of rocks was uncomfortable, to say the least. Ouch.

I climbed down from the heap, feeling pretty done with all this craziness. Perhaps the terramouse in question didn't care what I did so long as I stayed in the room; it didn't try to put me back on the pile.

"What's all this about, anyway?"

Why have I been kidnapped? I tilted my head to one side, puzzled.

Master Horace, who had been dragged along with me, was the one to answer my question. "I've got a good guess. Remember, these creatures are *monsters*. Mmheehee! Maybe he wants to keep you stored away as a sweet treat."

"A treat? Stored away? What?" I wondered why a monster of all things would bother with that, but then I remembered. "Did he bring me here because he wants my mana?!"

The reason Gina's frostfoxes had taken a liking to me was because they craved scraps of my magic power. The same phenomenon seemed to be happening with this terramouse.

“Oh, that makes it sound so *harmless*. Eeeheehee! You both have the same element, so I’ll bet this guy’s fixation goes way beyond those foxes of yours. He’ll chase you down the second you try to run away.”

“Great...”

As amazed as I was by the terramice’s fluffiness, if I had to cart them around everywhere *and* they were always right on top of me, I’d never make it to another battle. I had to find a way out somehow. Fortunately for me, there was plenty of ore lying around, so I figured I could use that to build a tunnel back to the surface.

However, the moment I placed a hand on the ground and attempted to cast my magic... *FWUMP!* From the three tunnels leading out of the white cavern, a swarm of terramice came hurtling along to pile on top of me, almost like they were tackling me in a game of rugby. *One* of them wouldn’t have been so bad, but the weight of six or seven human-sized hamsters was too heavy for me to bear.

“Ack! I’m dying! I’m being crushed!”

“Lay off the magic, kid!”

“I already stopped! I couldn’t cast anything right now if I wanted to!”

The pressure on my chest was making it hard to breathe. I flailed like a drowning man, but the terramice just kept nuzzling closer, blocking off my escape route. Just as my mind had begun to melt in the heat of their fur, a savior appeared.

Eek! Chirp! With a few adorable squeaks, the terramice suddenly jumped off of me. I was dying to know what had happened, but now that I could finally breathe again, I was too busy gasping for air to worry about anything else.

Someone picked me up from where I lay face down on the ground, lifting me up in his arms. I had a moment of panic over the sudden embrace. A hug from a total stranger was just alarming—that was my first thought, anyway, but something about the way he was holding me felt familiar. When I blinked and looked up at his face, I saw that it was Reggie.

“Are you alright, Kiara?” Looking a bit ruffled, Reggie cast a glance to the side,

readjusted his hold on me, and made a shooing gesture with his left hand.

I followed the motion with my eyes. The moment Reggie's fingertips brushed against a terramouse's belly, I could have sworn I saw sparks fly.

The terramouse gave a cute squeal, then swiftly scurried away from Reggie and retreated into one of the passageways. From there, it timidly peeked out at me.

Now that I was looking, I noticed that several other terramice had huddled in all three tunnels. Counting their faces, there were apparently fourteen of them.

"Huh? Reggie? Why...?"

There were a lot of different questions wrapped up in that "why." Why was he here? Where were the rest of his knights? How had he shot sparks from his fingertips?

"That was just a little sleight of hand. I came into possession of a thunderstone in Sorwen, and it appears these creatures don't take well to those," Reggie answered, a vaguely strained smile on his face.

Somehow, I got the feeling he was hiding something from me. Thunderstones were abundant near lightning-prone areas or colonies of zapgrass, yes, but I had never heard of them producing sparks so easily.

Of course, I knew that even if I pressed him about it, Reggie wouldn't give me a real answer. Worse still, I could easily see him convincing me I'd imagined the whole thing, so I kept my mouth shut. Nonetheless, I gave him a long and hard stare, far from convinced.

When our eyes locked, he just said, "Don't worry, Kiara." Then, to avoid my gaze, he rubbed his cheek against the top of my head.

"Eep!" I'd gotten used to being held, but it was still embarrassing for him to bring his face so close to mine. My face was pressed against his jacket, and I could feel the hard touch of the chain mail he had begun to wear underneath his uniform ever since summer had passed.

Wrapped up in Reggie's arms, there was a moment I nearly forgot to breathe.

"Whew! Thanks for the save. For a second there, I thought this new body of

mine was doomed.” Master Horace, who had nearly been crushed alongside me, scratched at his head with one of his stubby arms.

“Are you alright, Sir Horace?” Reggie asked.

“Mmheehee! Nice of you to *pretend* like you care. You sure do love to show off.”

As soon as he said “show off,” I suddenly felt a lot more self-conscious in Reggie’s arms. I had totally forgotten Master Horace was here. Maybe Reggie was the one to blame for that; he was always touching me every chance he got, so I didn’t think twice about it anymore.

I rushed to peel myself away from Reggie, but he wouldn’t let me go—in fact, he even murmured “Don’t move.” Next, he addressed Master Horace with a nonchalant air. “Oh, but I *do* care. You and I are both Kiara’s guardians. I’m sure she would cry if she were to lose you.”

“I have to say, son, you’re refreshingly honest about what you’re after.” Master Horace gave a hopeless shrug of his shoulders. I didn’t really get what they were talking about. “So tell me, am I getting this right? My disciple here was kidnapped by a terramouse, and you jumped in after her all by yourself?”

“Not quite. I was dragged along for the ride.”

According to Reggie’s explanation, delivered somewhat dryly, over a dozen terramice had popped up from beneath the earth, aiming to take me down with them. Immediately after one of them had snatched me up, they had sent a knight who’d come running after me hurtling back, hitting Reggie along the way and knocking him down into one of the holes.

“Well, I suppose that *did* make it easy to get into their nest and find Kiara. I found a way to fend them off, too, so I’m glad I was here to save you.”

“It *is* a good thing for us you were here,” Master Horace reluctantly admitted.

“Since you can drive the terramice away, do you think we can make it back to the surface? Let’s hope they don’t just try to drag me back down again.”

“We’ll just have to give it a shot,” Reggie said, finally releasing me from his hold. I stood up.

Relieved, I looked around to see which tunnel was least overrun with mice... and that's when I finally noticed something: one mouse that had scampered right up to a tunnel opening was clutching a little girl.

The girl's dark, brown hair was tied up with a big, green ribbon, and she was wearing a green dress made from the same fabric. I assumed she was about twelve years old. There was a good chance she would grow up into an alluring beauty someday, going by the mole under one of her eyes.

She flung away a sack she was holding, her expression blank, and the terramouse immediately let go of her.

The girl landed with a practiced motion, then said impassively, "Hello. Who are you?" After that, she fell silent, apparently waiting on our answer.

From that reaction, even I could tell what was going on here. She was suspicious of us. Whatever her circumstances were, they meant she had to determine enemy from ally.

Judging by appearances, she was either part of a family with ties to nobility or the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Considering the timing and the situation at present, the former seemed more likely. When I considered *why* she might be down here, that left only one person she could be... or so I thought, but something about that didn't check out.

Ernest Finard's daughter was supposed to be older than me.

Reggie responded before I could. "Will this crest and the color of my hair provide proof enough of my identity?"

He drew his sword and showed off the design on the hilt. A ring of silver leaves bordered a shield bearing the image of a dragon, adorned with two crossing swords and a crown on top. That was the crest of Farzia. The hilt itself was made of gold, so it was clear at a glance that this sword was special.

The most undeniable evidence of all was Reggie's silver hair. It was a trait unique to those with the blood of the Farzian royal family running through their veins.

The girl was clearly aware of that, seeing as she curtsied on the spot. "I apologize for my suspicions. I am the daughter of Henry Delphion, the man who

rules over this region. My name is Lucille.”

“The baron’s daughter?” *That’s weird.* “I thought Lord Delphion’s daughter had been taken prisoner by the Llewynians.”

Lucille grimaced.

“Someone helped you to escape, didn’t they?” Reggie prompted.

Lucille nodded. “My cousin—Uncle Ernest’s daughter, Emmeline—allowed me to get away.”

“Ernest’s daughter, hm?”

Had the story diverged from the RPG again? No, we couldn’t say that for sure. We had set everything into motion six months earlier than the start of the game. If all of this *had* originally happened before the events of the game, only for Lucille to be captured a second time and killed, everything would line up.

Reggie asked her yet another question. “In that case, why did you come down here?”

“I came down to take a look at the terramouse nest. Llewynian soldiers will march to Uncle Ernest’s land sooner or later, so I’m to escape down here in the event of an emergency,” Lucille answered, then proceeded to explain why there was a nest of terramice here in the first place. “The terramice Emmeline bred made a nest here, and all the holes in the road keep the troops from charging in. Terramice usually won’t let humans come near their nests, either, so it’s perfect for warding off Llewynian soldiers. All you have to do to get inside is hold a piece of copper. The terramice will carry you all the way down here, and once you let go of it, you can slip right past them and leave.”

“But why did this Emmeline breed more terramice to begin with? Was there some sort of quarrel among branch families?”

“Emmeline had attempted to turn down a marriage proposal, but the man wouldn’t give up... She decided to use monsters to drive him away and ensure that he would never want to get involved with her again. She said that the newfound potential for making pitfalls was a nice side benefit.”

Uhh... Okay, I understood the feeling. I was essentially doing all the same

things as her: digging holes and breaking down walls with magic. Still, that sounded just a *little* extreme.

Lucille clasped both hands together and looked off into the distance, dreamy-eyed. "That's my dearest Emmeline for you! Oh, if only I were a man, I would come running to her rescue, sword in hand, and ask for her hand in marriage!"

"Oh... So you don't see a problem with that."

Evidently, Lucille was quite infatuated with this off-the-wall Miss Emmeline.

"Incidentally, we're interested in meeting with Ernest. Could you take us to him?" Reggie asked.

"Of course," Lucille agreed, then took off walking.

There was one small problem: the moment I headed toward a hole, the number of terramice there multiplied. Or at least, that's how it looked; they crowded around behind me, their faces peeping out as they sensed my presence.

I wasn't even using my magic when I was snatched up from the side... Are they ever going to let me out of here?

"Don't worry. I can scare them away like I did earlier," Reggie reassured me. Hugging me around the shoulders, he held me close and headed for one of the tunnels full of terramice. He was holding a stone in his left hand, one small enough to fit in his palm.

Apparently, his claim about using a thunderstone had been true.

Reggie let Lucille go ahead first. The terramice didn't bother with her as she squeezed through the gap, their eyes completely glued on me. Reggie proceeded after Lucille, thrusting out his stone as he took a step forward. Alarmed by the sight of it, the terramice scurried back one after the other.



Now we could finally pass through. Reggie and I traced our way back through the terramice's burrow. Lucille took us down one of the relatively brighter paths so it would be easier to see the ground under our feet.

The terramice Reggie had scared off hid in side tunnels along the way. Their eyes were all that shone in the dim light, so I could tell they were still watching me intently after we passed them by. Reggie was following right behind me, however, so they didn't try to come near us.

We made our way up the gently sloping passage, and before long, we came upon a pit that led outside. The light filtering down from the surface was almost blinding.

The exit was split into two. There was a boulder jutting out of the wall that served as a foothold for the smaller of the two holes, so Lucille easily climbed up and out through there. Unfortunately, said hole was far too small for *me* to slip through.

The other hole was too high up to crawl through on my own, and there was no stepping stone I could use to get up there. What a pickle.

"You go first, Kiara. If you're the last to leave, those mice might come snatch you up the moment I take my eyes off you."

"I'd love to, but I don't think I can reach it on my own. Could you hel—
Whoa!"

Right as I was about to ask for some assistance, Reggie hauled me up. I gave a little scream, surprised that he was strong enough to lift me up onto his shoulders... and because I was mortified to have my legs right next to a man's face.

"Don't worry; I won't drop you. Go on, climb up."

I chose to do as he said and head to the surface ASAP. That was my only option if I wanted to get out of this mess and make sure the terramice couldn't drag me back. I attempted to grab hold of the lip of the hole and make a quick escape, but unfortunately, my arms were so weak that I struggled to pull myself up.

“Ngh...!”

Reggie made an effort to help me out, holding onto my legs and giving me a boost. I made it to the surface at last, tears in my eyes, and Reggie effortlessly swung himself up behind me.

Upon witnessing that, I made a vow to myself: I was going to put a little more muscle on my arms. It was time to start doing push-ups in secret.

When we emerged from underground, I saw a bridge built over a river just past the hole-ridden ground, and that Groul, Cain, and the rest of their squad had flocked there.

“Miss Kiara! Your Grace!” Cain and the others were ready to come running over to us, but we headed over to them before they had a chance. If another one of the terramice popped up, Reggie could take care of the problem for us. If anybody *else* got dragged into it, however, we would have no choice but to wait around until they found their way out.

Once we had finally reunited, Cain said, “Thank goodness you’re alright.” Relieved, he nearly reached out to touch my shoulder, but his hand came to a stop before he could. He opted to give me a gentle pat on the head instead. “I was afraid you’d been devoured by terramice.”

“Sorry for worrying you, but we’re both just fine. It sounds like they don’t eat humans! Also, we met Lord Delphion’s daughter inside.”

“Lord Delphion’s daughter... Is that who this is?”

I nodded. Lucille, who had just come up alongside me, gave a curtsy. “My name is Lucille. I would be most honored to invite you to my uncle’s estate.”

In addition to Reggie’s squad, there were several other men wearing blue Farzian capes gathered near the bridge. It turned out that they were soldiers from the town. After noticing the color of our capes, they had come to see if more friendly forces had arrived.

Lucille asked them to inform Ernest of our arrival, and they politely obliged. One went running off to the manor while the remaining soldiers served as our guides.

One man remarked, “What a valiant man you are, Your Grace. To think you were taken down into a den of terramice, yet you remained no less composed than Lady Lucille... None of *us* have even ventured down there.”

“You haven’t?” Reggie gave a puzzled tilt of his head, and I couldn’t blame him. If that nest played a part in this town’s defenses, it was natural to assume the soldiers would have taken a look inside.

“Why, it’s a den of monsters! Not many are brave enough to wander inside. Lady Emmeline and Lady Lucille are the only two of the House of Finard who have ever had the courage.”

That was fair. Not many people would think to use a monster’s nest as a hiding place. The one who had come up with the idea, Emmeline, definitely sounded like someone ready to knock common sense out of the park.

When we arrived at the manor, a servant lady showed us to the parlor. That was where Ernest came to greet us. With his long, dark-brown hair and almond-shaped eyes, there was no doubt he’d been a hit with the ladies in his younger years.

“Oh, Your Grace! I’m so glad you could make it!” Unfortunately, he looked as though he might burst into tears at any moment and put those good looks to waste. “To be perfectly honest with you, I’m rather ignorant of military matters, and I always left that side of things up to my brother. Now that the two of us have gone our separate ways, I’ve had no idea what to do with the soldiers who have gathered around me...”

It seemed Ernest’s hands had been tied by his own ineptitude at commanding the troops.

“I assume you traveled all the way out here because you would like to bring on the soldiers who have assembled here. Naturally, if it’s to save Farzia from the hands of Llewyrne and liberate our home of Delphion, I am more than willing to leave them in your hands. I’m sure the men in question will have no qualms either.” At that, his eyebrows lifted with concern. “However... I’m afraid that upon hatching a plan to save my daughter and the rest of the hostages, some of those men from the branch families have already left for Delphion Castle.”

“Why?”

“In order to do battle with your men, Your Grace, the Llewynians and my brother’s soldiers had to travel to the border with Cassia. Thus, my men assumed that now was their chance to storm the castle. Many children of the branch families and other similarly influential figures have been taken prisoner, you see.”

Everything was starting to make sense. I finally understood why the baron’s soldiers had seemed strangely motivated during our battle on the border: the children of the families they served had been taken prisoner by the Llewynians.

Still, if there was a team so worked up about going to save them, that meant chances were high that Emmeline and the other children were still alive.

“If you could, I would be most grateful if you freed my brother’s wife and all the other children trapped alongside my daughter... If he loses his reason to stand against you, I’m sure my brother will bend the knee,” said Ernest.

Reggie nodded. If we released all the captives of the House of Delphion, we could move forward with far less hanging over our heads.

“Unfortunately, I don’t believe our children are being held where everyone ran off to. I have a feeling they’re somewhere other than Delphion Castle.” What Ernest mentioned next was a town near the baron’s residence.

“If you don’t mind telling us, I’m curious about something. Your brother chose to side with Llewyne, and yet you held out. Was there a reason for that?” Reggie asked. I wanted to know that, too. Why hadn’t Ernest’s love for his daughter been enough to bring him under Llewyne’s thumb?

“If I did that, I knew my daughter would berate me as a ‘milksof of a man’ or demand that I put the longevity of our house before my own child...”

Emmeline sounded like a pretty unflappable girl. When I said as much, Ernest broke down and blurted out, “Her mother was a force to be reckoned with, too. I was a bit of a... debauchee in my younger years. I certainly wasn’t faithful, at any rate. Even after we got married, I didn’t fall in line.”

To sum up the story, Ernest used to be a real playboy. However, after all that time spent putting the moves on various women, his wife just told him this: “If you’re going to cheat, it had better wait until you’ve finished your work.”

Ernest figured she was just trying to get a rise out of him, so he did exactly as she demanded... but it turned out his wife really couldn't have cared less about it. He was bewildered enough already, but then she followed up with, "If you have a baby with another woman, I'm going to adopt the child, so make sure she's alright with that."

Ernest was shocked to his core. He had never met a woman like her before.

Eventually, his wife told him it was preferable to having him meddle in any internal affairs. Apparently, she wanted to run the House of Finard however she saw fit. Ernest's playboy antics were all the more convenient for her, seeing as it meant she could do whatever she wanted; she was more than happy to have him go out and play rather than get in her way.

And that was how she had wrested control of the land right out of her husband's hands.

Ernest had been infuriated to be given the brush-off by his wife, considering how confident he was in his looks. He was so determined to win her over that he turned into a doting husband.

Their daughter had apparently inherited her mother's disposition. After all, it was thanks to the gallant Emmeline that Delphion's anti-Llewyne forces had managed to keep their flag held high.

And now, they were determined to rescue her.

His circumstances differed slightly from those in the game, but it seemed Lord Delphion's hands were tied because his wife had been captured. It sounded like she was being held in the same place as Emmeline, so if we could free all the women at once, a bunch of problems would take care of themselves.

We were to spend the night in the Finard estate. Either tomorrow or the next day, we were bound to receive some news from the group that had left for the baron's castle. Assuming we could pin down Emmeline's whereabouts with that information, the plan was to reunite with Alan's forces and go rescue them together.

I was covered from head to toe in dirt, so I took a bath with Lucille and got myself cleaned up, then collapsed into bed in my assigned room.

That was when it suddenly occurred to me.

“Huh? Master Horace isn’t here... Is he wandering around on those stubby little legs of his?”

I guess even Master Horace likes to go for a walk every now and then. I closed my eyes, ready for a short nap.



The moment he set foot inside the room, Reginald collapsed sideways onto the sofa, as if keeping himself upright was too much of a strain.

“Your Grace?!” His escort, Groul, panicked and rushed to his side. “Your Grace... Were you hurt? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“No, it’s not that. The old injury is acting up,” the prince responded, exhausted.

Groul frowned. “Then you’re hurt either way. Do you have any idea what could have aggravated it?” he asked.

Reginald gave a laugh, almost as if the knight had caught on to a little mischief of his. “It was when I was with those terramice. The power proved useful in driving them away... so I overdid it. They had flocked to Kiara, ready to crush her, so what else was I supposed to do?”

“Perhaps you should stop trying to wield it to your advantage now... Has it taken a toll on you?”

“No. I should be fine after I rest a bit.” So he claimed, but he wasn’t looking well. His face was pale, and the arm Groul gripped felt feverish.

“Shall I go fetch something to cool you down?”

“I’d appreciate it.”

Groul rose to his feet. But then...

“Eeeheehee! I *knew* there was something off about you.”

“Who goes there?!”

“It’s just li’l ol’ me!”

When the knight turned around, he found a familiar clay figurine standing beside the door, chuckling.

“When did *you* get there?” Reginald asked.

“I hitched a ride with that knight there. So, *Your Highness*... feeling some aftereffects?”

Reginald scowled. “You’ll keep this a secret from Kiara, won’t you, Sir Horace?”

“What’s the point of hiding it, son? Mmheehee!” There was no way he could have felt an itch, but Horace scratched at his hip all the same, ruthlessly threatening to expose the prince’s secret. “Just how long do you think you can keep this quiet for? You’ve been in bad shape ever since you were shot with that powdered arrow. Obviously there’s a connection there.” Horace took small, toddling steps toward the prince. “Still, never thought I’d see magic manifest this way. It’s my first time witnessing anything like it... But you know it’s too dangerous for you to control, right?”

“Whether I’m doing anything out of the ordinary or not, I’ll still run a fever from time to time, or tiny, painful sparks will suddenly fly from my fingertips. If I’m going to feel the effects either way, I figured I might as well use it to my advantage,” Reginald muttered with a sigh. “I see now that it’s quite difficult for someone without an aptitude for magic.”

“Of course it’s not that easy! Even *we’re* out here risking our lives. If you keep trying to wield it, your mana will eventually spiral out of control, and you’ll crumble to pieces. Heheheh! My poor disciple might just cry herself to death!”

Groul suppressed a scream. “See! I told you it was dangerous! You are not to use that stone ever again!”

“I suppose I shouldn’t.”

“That should have been obvious,” Horace remarked, exasperation evident in his tone. “I thought you were supposed to be smart.”

“Perhaps. But can’t someone feel like being a little stupid for once?” Reginald flashed a bewitchingly beautiful smile, and Horace took a step back with a *clack*.

“You think some pretty crazy things...” Horace heaved a sigh, then turned to face Groul and beckoned him over. When the knight approached, it turned out he just wanted to be dropped off closer to Reginald so the two could talk more easily.

Knowing that the doll couldn’t wield any magic of his own, Groul picked him up and set him down on the wide bed, just as he had requested... but immediately had some regrets. He had left the clay figurine close to Reginald’s right arm; from there, Horace began shuffling on all fours atop the quilt, sidling up to the prince. Groul couldn’t help but avert his gaze from the surreal sight.

“You’re a prince, aren’t you? Don’t you know of any spellcasters with a connection to the state?”

“I did some searching before, on Kiara’s request... What that led me to was evidently the House of Credias. That must be how the family gained their rank. The current viscount of Credias... or rather, all the viscounts since my grandfather’s generation have never served in a war. It’s likely that even the late king wasn’t aware Lord Credias was a spellcaster.”

“I see. So prince or no, he’s not exactly someone you can consult.”

Reginald nodded. He hadn’t realized that when he’d first started researching spellcasters. Kiara had yet to tell him much about her past life at the time, so Reginald hadn’t been given reason to believe that Lord Credias was anyone particularly relevant. However, once the possibility of him being a spellcaster had been mentioned, Reginald inferred that it had been him all along.

“There aren’t any other spellcasters in all of Farzia?”

“There’s the Thorn Princess, whom I met with Kiara.”

Horace gave a considering “hrm,” then advised, “If that ‘Thorn Princess’ doesn’t bear any grudge toward Farzia, you should try seeking her out. Even if yours truly or that hare-brained Kiara can’t think of a solution, a different spellcaster might know a trick to extract the contract sand from your wound.”

“Truly?” Groul demanded before he could stop himself.

“Well, I’m not saying anything for certain,” Horace responded.

Reginald appeared to mull that over for a bit. Finally, he told Groul, “Let’s give it a shot. Who was the knight we sent to the Forest of the Thorn Princess before? Ask for the same village boy as last time, and instruct him to get in contact with the Thorn Princess. If he can, he should hand her the letter I’m about to write.”

“Understood.” Groul nodded.

That raised some questions for Horace. “Why do you need to ask for a kid? Is he a relative of hers?” he asked.

“Oh, no. It seems the Thorn Princess has a preference for young boys,” Reginald explained with a wry smile.

Horace heaved a deep sigh. “Maybe the *true* criteria for becoming a spellcaster is to be a complete oddball.”



Reggie didn’t show up for dinner.

“Perhaps he’s tired from the constant string of battles. We should have rushed to meet you before he had to come all this way... Emmeline will be furious when she finds out,” Lucille reflected with a sigh. Ernest gave a frightened jolt.

Emmeline is ruling the House of Finard with an iron fist, isn’t she?

“Never mind that! Please, eat!” At Ernest’s urging, we began partaking of our meal.

Groul, Cain, and I were all sitting around the same table. There were the ten other knights of Reggie’s royal guard, too.

Yet the one Ernest spent the most time talking to was... me. Mind you, it wasn’t because of his womanizing tendencies. It was simply a matter of hierarchy.

Groul was the captain of the royal guard, but he came from a long line of knights. His family was actually higher-ranked than the one I’d been born into, though. He had worked his way up through the ranks, so he boasted a truly impressive career history. Most of the other knights, on the other hand, were of

noble origins. If I recalled, the highest-ranking one was the third son of Lord Tarinahaea.

And then there was me. I was “officially” the daughter of a branch family thanks to some family register laundering, which meant I was no more distinguished than Ernest himself. In fact, I ranked below him. But then we had to take *military* rank into account. As a spellcaster, I was regarded the same as a general. Of course, that was what enabled me to act however I saw fit... but it also meant I was the highest-ranked person at the table.

There was one more factor to take into account. Groul’s face had been set in a scowl ever since informing us that Reggie wouldn’t be coming to dinner, so Ernest was probably too scared to talk to him.

Being a fellow girl, it made sense that Lucille felt the most comfortable chatting with me.

Thus, the three of us ended up being the only ones at the dinner table to do any talking.

“I was surprised to hear you were a spellcaster, and even more so to see your power in action. What an impressive achievement for such a young girl!”

“Ahaha...” I laughed off Ernest’s compliment. Most people didn’t know much about the process of becoming a spellcaster, so of course he would think that.

Lucille paused as she was cutting up her venison sauté. Then, she cut in, “I’ve heard that spellcasters make a deal with the devil. Apparently, the Llewynians who invaded Delphion made use of failed spellcasters, hurting our soldiers by spreading their curse. Is that true?”

Hmm. How much can I actually explain here? If I tell her about contract stones and word gets around, we might have people pop up going, “Hey, maybe I’ll try my hand at becoming a spellcaster!” That would be bad.

“We don’t literally make a deal with the devil, no... but becoming a spellcaster *does* require a special ritual. The only ones who can survive the process are those who have the aptitude for magic. Anyone who fails will die the same way as a defective spellcaster. That’s why people took to calling it ‘a deal with the devil.’”

While I explained, I started to wonder about Master Horace. He was always very good at obfuscating these sorts of explanations... but where *was* he, anyway? He had yet to return.

I didn't find out where he had wandered off to until after dinner. With an even more distressed look than he'd worn before dinner, Groul asked me, "I'm very sorry to trouble you, but could you come with me to His Highness' room?"

"Did His Highness call for me?"

"No, not His Highness. The problem is your master."

"Wait, don't tell me Master Horace has been in his room this whole time!"

But why? I wondered, but Groul refused to explain.

When I followed him back to the room, I found Reggie, who had taken off his military uniform and was lying down on the bed. Meanwhile, a certain clay figurine was running circles around him.

"What on earth are you doing, Master Horace?!"

I hurried to try and catch him, and with a strange giggle, he tumbled off the other side of the bed. I reached out toward him, stretching my arm as far as it could go, but I still couldn't manage to grab him.

"Tch!" I wasn't about to walk right over Reggie, so I circled around to the other side of the bed, finally catching the clay figurine just as he was clawing his way back up onto the bed. "You're like a little bug buzzing around the room!"

I was panting. *Hey, Master Horace, why were you even running from me in the first place?!*

"Thank you, Lady Kiara. He told me that if I didn't handle him carefully, he would crumble into dirt, so I was at a loss for what to do," Groul said.

I dipped my head in a bow. "I'm so sorry! This awful little doll was lying to you! He wouldn't break even if you tossed him around! Right, Master Horace?" Smiling sweetly, I pumped some mana into Master Horace's body. Then, using a copper coin I took out of my pocket, I gave him an extra coat.

"Wh-What are you doing, kid? That tickles!"

“I just tried making you a little more sturdy. Yeah, I think it worked like a charm.” When I gently rapped him with the back of my hand, he made a metallic sound.

Since I had just added a new layer of magic, it would take extra mana to maintain it, but I assumed it would hold for the next few hours.

Next, I opened the window to Reggie’s room and stuck Master Horace out of it. “There’s a flower garden underneath us, so I doubt you’ll break. Why don’t we show Sir Groul how you can survive a three-story fall just fine?”

“Wha?! Don’t tell me you’re going to—”

“Oh, I am *absolutely* going to drop you. Do your best to find your way back!”

“Aaahhhhh!” Following Master Horace’s scream, there came a *fwump* from below. Yes, the flower bed seemed to be nice and soft.

After I closed the window, Reggie laughed and said to Groul, “I’d feel bad if he were mistaken for a plaything by a dog or a child. Can you go pick him up? I’m sure he’ll be covered in dirt when you find him, so ask someone from the House of Finard to clean him up for us.”

With a small sigh, Groul left the room.

“I’m sorry that mentor of mine made so much trouble for you, Reggie.”

He was already feeling under the weather, and with Master Horace jumping around, he probably hadn’t been able to get any rest. I went to Reggie’s side and offered a heavy-hearted apology, but Reggie just sat up and grabbed hold of my wrist. He had such a nice smile on his face, too.

“I have something I’d like to ask you, Kiara. What happened to your leg?”

“Eep...”

Shoot. When I had changed clothes earlier, I had set my boots aside and asked for slippers to wear, since those were more comfortable. I’d lifted the hem of my skirt just a bit when I was reaching for Master Horace, and without my boots on, the wound just under my calf had been plain to see.

“Erm, well... you see...”

Oh nooooo! I even managed to hide it from Cain, too! Why is the person I least wanted to see it the one who actually noticed?!

How was I supposed to explain this to him? If I told him I'd kept quiet about it because I didn't want Cain to have a reason to touch my leg, he would be absolutely furious. I lapsed into silence, sweating bullets on the inside.

Then, Reggie murmured, "In that case, would you care to trade secrets?"

"What?"

"Tell me the reason why you let the wound on your leg scar. And I'll tell you why I was feeling ill. I'll go first: I'm still feeling the effects of the contract sand in my wound. I ran a slight fever."

No fair! I thought as Reggie smoothly transitioned into telling me his side of things. Now that he'd already said it, if I ran away without doing the same, it'd be like I cheated... That was my first thought, at least, but it was quickly replaced with panic as what Reggie had said finally sunk in.

"Does it hurt? How does the injury look now? Show me—"

"Denied."

Reggie caught my left hand as I reached out for him. When I grumbled and kept trying to push forward, he burst out laughing. Grr! Here I was expending every last bit of strength I had, and meanwhile Reggie was relaxed enough to laugh.

"I won't let you touch me until you tell me your secret."

"Hrk..." I was torn. After a moment's indecision, I squeezed out the best answer my brain could come up with. "I was... too embarrassed to have it looked at."

"Oh?"

"I had Girsch take a look at it afterward, but apparently that was too late."

At last, Reggie let go of my hand. I breathed a sigh of relief, then asked, "So, did *you* have Sir Groul look at yours?"

"Yes. There's no issue with the cut itself."

“Can I touch it?”

“Sure. I did promise you.”

I placed one knee on the bed, then reached a hand toward Reggie’s shoulder. I gently touched his shoulder and back from over his shirt. He didn’t seem to be in much pain, even as I slid my fingers over his body, but he closed his eyes for a few seconds.

He definitely felt a little warm to the touch. I could feel the mana roiling around inside him, so I willed my own magic to curb it from the outside. Still, moving dirt or earth and manipulating the mana in a human body were two very different things. It was hard to make it flow, like there was something blocking the way.

Nevertheless, it felt like I was doing something to stimulate it, and once the mana interwoven with mine finally settled down, Reggie seemed to relax a little.

“Sorry... This is all happening because you shielded me.”

He had suffered an injury so terrible that he was still feeling the aftereffects... all because he had saved my life.

“It was my choice to protect you, Kiara. But if you truly do feel guilty, let’s call it even with this.”

He pulled me into a hug. I was taken by surprise, but Reggie stroked my head, draining my will to resist. Part of me wondered why I suddenly felt so relaxed.

I stayed put in his arms, and Reggie laughed once more. “Sometimes you truly remind me of a friendly puppy, Kiara.”

“Don’t call me a dog, Reggie! That’s mean!” Reggie couldn’t see my face, what with my ear pressed against his neck, but I pouted all the same.

“Don’t sulk,” Reggie mumbled, “I’m happy to have you stay by my side.”

When I heard those words, it felt like a pinch of sand lodged deep in my heart had finally been shaken free.

Interlude: The Farzian Spellcaster

This man truly wasn't suited for battle. He traveled in a carriage like a noblewoman, not a single sword to be found on his person. The size of his belly, large enough to prove a hindrance to running, was easy to see in spite of the doublet he wore. His arms looked so weak that, if he were to swing a sword around just ten times, his muscles would almost certainly ache for days to come.

When Isaac snorted disapprovingly, Mikhail gave him a light kick in the shin from the side. What an impudent servant. Then again, Isaac himself was the one who had encouraged Mikhail to adopt such a plainspoken attitude. Besides, it wasn't as though the boot to the leg had actually hurt, so he quietly tolerated it.

He took another long look at the man—the viscount of Credias—as he got out of his carriage. The nobleman didn't look like a spellcaster to Isaac. Ever since he had first met the viscount during their joint occupation of Trisphede, he hadn't witnessed the man so much as lift a finger of his own. He had worked his defective spellcasters until they'd exhausted their lives, using them to break down the walls of Trisphede Castle, send the place up in smoke, and then freeze it over again.

Salekhard's soldiers had nearly been caught in the crossfire, which had sent Isaac into a cold sweat. Thus, he hadn't been left with a particularly favorable impression of the man.

After all, defective spellcasters had lost all semblances of rationality. All they could do was attack whatever was in front of them or mindlessly shoot spells. They couldn't distinguish between enemy and ally. The only reason the viscount had been safe from their attacks was because his power as spellcaster gave him control over them.

Isaac had no idea what other kind of magic the man could wield. He found the complete lack of intel most aggravating of all.

Regardless, what would serve Isaac in the moment was an amicable attitude. After Lord Erling rushed over to greet the viscount, Isaac likewise stepped forward.

“It’s been a while. I was hoping to have the chance to see you again,” he offered with a genial grin.

Lord Credias did not return his smile. Perhaps, being a spellcaster, he was quite cognizant of the fact that anybody and everybody hoped to curry favor with him. With a disinterested grunt, he civilly responded, “I’m sure our country’s summer was much hotter than you’re used to up north, Your Majesty.”

“Not at all. I found Trisphede quite the comfortable place to live.”

“Is that right? Then I’m quite happy to have helped you obtain it. Good day to you.” After making a quick bow, as if this was all a great inconvenience, Lord Credias retreated into the fort.

Isaac didn’t follow after him. Deep in thought, he simply watched the viscount go. “If that bullfrog is here, they must fully intend to butcher the prince’s army,” he muttered.

“Quiet! He can still hear you!” Mikhail hastily steered Isaac away from the entrance. He dragged him off toward the courtyard of the fort, where soldiers could be seen clashing swords. The Salekhardian general who had been standing alongside Isaac, Vasily, followed after his king.

This being a fort, there were no trees or other such convenient hiding places. There weren’t many people over by the well, so the group found a spot there. It was far enough from any onlookers that nobody would overhear their conversation.

“Did you figure something out, Your Majesty?” Vasily finally inquired in a whisper.

“You always cut straight to the point, my good general!” Isaac praised, matching the hushed tones of Vasily’s voice. Perhaps he, too, thought it wise to tread more carefully. “As I was saying... If that spellcaster is here, that must mean they plan to launch an all-out assault against the Farzian army. This could

spell the end of the prince's troops."

"It's hard to say what might happen. The Farzians have a spellcaster of their own, and those earthen giants of hers pose a legitimate threat. It's difficult to chip away at earth with fire or water," Mikhail countered. Her magic may not have looked like anything special, but it was better suited to both offense and defense than one would think; Mikhail was keeping a wary eye on her.

"I don't doubt that Erling and the bullfrog are both well aware of that. Hence why I figured *that* was a part of their plan."

"What are you talking about?"

"I heard that another spellcaster would be accompanying the bullfrog, but there's been no sign of one. There's a decent chance that mystery mage is lurking somewhere within Delphion," Isaac posited.

Vasily nodded. "Good thinking."

"If you want to crush your enemy in one fell swoop, your best options are to either get someone on the inside or to stir up internal strife. Perhaps they slipped another spellcaster into the prince's ranks to deal with Évrard's little miss earth mage." Isaac smirked. "So there you have it. I'm going to single out this spellcaster and eliminate them before it's too late."

Isaac swelled with pride, only for Mikhail to fix him with a frown. "Do you really think it will be that simple?"

"If they've truly infiltrated Évrard's ranks, they'll be taking care not to blow their cover. There should be plenty of opportunities to take advantage of that," Vasily chimed in.

Emboldened by his general's agreement, Isaac doubled down on persuading Mikhail. "Even if I can't quite finish the job, stirring up suspicion within the Farzian ranks will be more than worth it. And if I *do* manage to smoke them out, we'll have killed off one of the bullfrog's underlings. It's a win-win situation for us."

"Hmm. I suppose that isn't a *terrible* plan..."

Right then, a young boy came running up to them. He was a Salekhardian

squire.

“Your Majesty! Will you be joining Lord Erling for dinner this evening?” he asked, handing Mikhail a small piece of paper.

“His Majesty is feeling a bit out of sorts today. He’ll pass on dinner. Instruct them to bring the food to his room,” Vasily responded.

Once the squire had sprinted off, Mikhail scanned the letter and announced, “Apparently, the viscount made a stop on his way here. It was a town called Inion. I believe there’s a large fort nearby.”

“I’ll bet you anything that’s where the second spellcaster is. Alright, to Inion it is. Vasily, I need you to arrange a body double for me again.”

“From the moment you brought it up, you had every intention of making the trip yourself, didn’t you, Your Highness?” Mikhail sighed.

“I keep telling you, it’s ‘Your *Majesty*’!” Isaac protested, but he didn’t deny Mikhail’s accusation.

“Let it go, Mikhail. He’s always been a lone wolf. Besides, do you really think he’d listen if you told him not to?”

“I most certainly do not, General Vasily.”

“Then before he can run off on his own, you ought to send him off with a proper escort. Be sure to pick someone who can take the reins of our willful king,” Vasily advised. In other words, he was telling Mikhail to take the second best option.

Mikhail drooped. “Everyone’s already pretty frustrated with us, you realize? It wasn’t that long ago that the two of us were trapped inside Cassia. All the men stuck waiting outside the city came complaining to me about their ulcers.”

“But he had you with him, didn’t he?”

“I was only there because His Highness dragged me along. He claimed that having a child with him would strengthen his disguise.”

“In that case, let’s have you join him again, Mikhail.”

Mikhail looked thoroughly put out.

Chapter 6: The Fort Inion Rescue Mission

On the second day of our stay at the Finard estate, we received news that the captive Lady Emmeline Finard and her companions were nowhere to be found in Delphion Castle. Word had reached us so quickly because Ernest had sent along a scout with orders to report back to him directly. He had suspected that the need might arise to promptly send reinforcements, whether the women were actually being held in the castle or not.

The assault squad hadn't made a headlong rush into the castle either; they had sent one of their men to infiltrate the castle and see what was going on inside. Given that it was Delphion Castle, the servants were naturally going to be Delphion citizens. With their assistance, the investigation was over in no time, allowing the squad to turn back immediately.

That being the case, our next move was to head for the place Ernest had suspicions about: a fort near a town called Inion, just south of the baron's castle.

The hostages Llewynne had taken were members of the nobility. Depending on the circumstances, they could serve as human assets—in other words, they could always be ransomed in the event Llewynne ran low on funds. Whatever use the Llewynians had for their captives, they had to let them live in reasonable comfort for the time being.

Moreover, if they didn't want to make it easy for us to come to their rescue, Fort Inion was the perfect place for the job. A long time ago, back when relatives of the House of Delphion had revolted, there had been too many detainees for them to accommodate. The solution had been to convert an entire tower of the fort into a prison.

Castles and forts always had dungeons, but those weren't terribly hospitable or hygienic living quarters. Some didn't even have ventilation shafts. As the years went by... Well, let's just say their prisoners came out in rough shape. Women and children wouldn't last long in those conditions. If the Llewynians

were looking to keep their hostages alive, Inion was the best place to lock them up.

Taking all that into account, I really had to admire the valor of Emmeline, who had acted as a decoy and allowed herself to be captured in place of Lucille. Even if it was preferable to a dungeon, prison life still had to be tough on a young girl.

Now that our plan of action had been determined, we had to capture the fort as swiftly as possible—that was Reggie’s stance.

“We’ll be in trouble if they catch on to our plans and move their prisoners elsewhere,” he explained. “Until we can secure the hostages, there’s always a chance any Delphion soldiers we accept into our ranks might defect later.” Then, he made one more request. “Try not to destroy the fort this time, Kiara.”

“What?”

“That would just make it harder to protect our soldiers and captives when the Llewynians come after us. It’s not easy for you to carry out large-scale repair work right after a battle, is it?”

“I see what you’re saying. Although... I wouldn’t say doing it this way is any *easier*.” I couldn’t help but groan.

Destroying things was simple enough, and I didn’t even have to expend a huge amount of mana to do it. To fight without destroying the fort—in other words, to leave the walls untouched and manage everything with my golems or whatever—would be much more challenging.

The first issue would be the soldiers atop the wall. We had to take them out first, or else we would have to worry about them pelting us with arrows, dumping hot water on us, or most dreadfully of all, pouring boiling oil over our heads. It would be great to have my fireproof, oilproof golem get up close to them, but if I were riding on top of it, I’d be painting a target on myself.

Wait, hold on! Cain won’t tattle on me this time, and I’ve gotten a lot better at handling my magic, so I could probably operate it from a distance if I blended in a few drops of my own blood.

I could just lie to Reggie and say, “Hey, guess what? I leveled up!”

Once my golem got within range, what came next? If my goal was to remove the soldiers without destroying the wall, would I just have to pluck them off one by one? Given that I would be attempting all this from a distance, the task sounded about as difficult as trying to split a watermelon blindfolded.

I made a drawn-out “hmm” sound, at which Master Horace laughed. “Now if only I were still alive and kicking... Eeeheehee!”

“Huh? Would you have had a good trick up your sleeve?”

“Darn right I would’ve. My specialty was wind, remember? Why, back in my prime, I could get around by flying through the air!”

“Seriously?! No fair! I want to fly, too! Aaargh, why did I have to be an earth mage?!” I sagged dejectedly, clutching at my head, and Master Horace gave a triumphant cackle.

Bitter as I was, I tried to imagine Master Horace in flight—but instead of an old man, all I could envision was a clay figurine soaring through the sky.

Launching Master Horace into the air wasn’t a terrible idea, really. He was hollow on the inside, so he didn’t weigh much. Perhaps I could make him fly if I attached a propeller to his head. He’d probably turn out similar to a remote-controlled airplane or helicopter.

But I would have to keep the propeller spinning somehow, right? If it stopped turning the minute he was out of my reach, he would just come plummeting down to earth.

While my mind was occupied with these inane thoughts, we made our way back to the main body of the Farzian army. Our forces were slowly but steadily marching toward the fort where the Llewynians were stationed. Alan had been cautious, it seemed, and refrained from recklessly charging in and attacking.

“If we can intimidate them into staying inside, we’re better off that way,” Alan explained. “Playing it safe was our best option here. Attempting a siege without you would have cost us too many of our men.”

I was struck speechless for a moment. With that one comment, I felt like all my hard work had really amounted to something.

“Yeah! When we do go attack the fort, you can count on me to lay it to waste!”

“Really now? ‘Lay it to waste’?”

“Perhaps you should choose your words a bit more carefully, Miss Kiara.” In a rare occurrence, Cain tried to interrupt me, a look of concern crossing his face.

But by then, it was already too late. Lord Azure, who had just happened to be passing by, had already overheard me.

“Wh-Wh-What did you say?!” He stopped where he stood, raising both arms to the sky. “God’s blessing truly rests upon Farzian royalty! Seldom is there a spellcaster who can offer such generous military contributions! Yet here we have a goddess of war who has descended to the prince’s side, ready to grant his any wish!”

“Erm, hey...”

Did he just call me a goddess of war? This is so embarrassing!

“Miss Kiara! We need to get out of here!” Panic overtaking his features, Cain tucked me under his arm and took off running.

“Oww! That hurts!”

“Just whose fault do you think this is?! Deal with it!” Alan yelled, running alongside Cain.

Exactly what can of worms did I open here?

Meanwhile, Lord Azure only grew more animated. “I would expect no less from the progeny of the silver-haired king—the chosen one! Indeed, this must be the will of God! Truly our land of Farzia was destined to be ruled by a silver-haired monarch!”

All the nearby soldiers had bolted without looking back. Even from a distance, I could hear the marquis loud and clear; I could only guess how badly my ears would be hurting if I were still standing next to him.

“Oh, glory upon FARZIAAA—*hrk!*”

Lord Azure’s cries of joy fizzled out soon enough. Lord Enister, who hadn’t

been anywhere near him just seconds ago, had come running over to knock the man out with his cane.

“It’s about time you fixed that habit of yours, lad. I don’t want to see you injuring soldiers outside of combat. Good grief... I can’t believe you made me use my cane over something so stupid.”

After his little soliloquy, Lord Enister wandered off as though nothing had just happened. A few of Lord Azure’s men showed up to carry him away somewhere. Relief spread over the troops once the unconscious marquis was safely out of sight.

Cain heaved a sigh and put me back down. “Azure is the region with the largest Jeremian population,” he explained. “As I’m sure you know, throughout all the oldest kingdoms—Farzia included—the royal family’s rule is justified with the claim that the king once received an oracle from God in a dream, after which he built his country on that land. In most other territories, military strength has become the greatest basis for loyalty and trust in the royal family, but the devout Jeremians of Azure still believe that the royal family was promised the throne by God, and consequently that Farzia was meant to be ruled by a silver-haired monarch.”

“Oh, I see... That’s why he got so worked up.” I sighed, resolving to take extra care not to light any more fires under Lord Azure.

Anyway! It was time to revisit my initial problem: I wasn’t allowed to break down the wall. So, how were we supposed to capture the fort?

“Hmm... the people atop the fort... umm...”

I was overthinking this to the point that I began to suspect this was just a trap of Reggie’s. Then again, if he really were setting me up, he wouldn’t have hesitated to say, “If you can’t think of something, we’re going to leave you behind.” Clearly Reggie hadn’t given me that restriction just to be mean. Besides, his reasoning made sense enough. It *had* taken a long time to repair Fort Clonfert.

If he had handed me the task believing I was up to it, I had to prove my worth by rising to the occasion.

During one of our breaks on the way to the fort, I decided to do some experimenting. I was following up on the idea I had considered earlier: attaching a stone propeller to Master Horace's head.

Frankly, I can't deny that this bizarre idea may have been a product of my brain overheating. Even I knew this was nuts, but hey, anything was worth a shot.

"If this works out, I might be able to build something I can fly in, too! Got that, Master Horace? Go on, take to the skies!"

"Hmm. Flight would be pretty ground-breaking, I'll give you that."

As an ex-spellcaster, Master Horace never seemed bothered by these sorts of experiments. He was willing to go along with my ideas to satisfy his own curiosity.

First things first, he was going to distance himself from me if he really ended up flying, so this called for a drop of my blood. I used one of Girsch's sewing needles and pricked my finger. I smeared the blood over some ore, which I used to make a stone propeller bigger than Master Horace. I attached the finished product to his head.

I made the part underneath shaped like a round cap, careful to build it so that the propeller could rotate freely without the risk of flying off on its own.

Cain, who had been watching from off to the side, was staring at me like I was insane.

"It'll be fine! In theory, this should work!" I asserted.

If it's good enough for helicopters, it's good enough for this!

For all my confidence, Cain still didn't look very convinced.

"Okay! Off you go into the big, blue sky, Master Horace!" I shouted, turning the propeller with my magic.

But then, we ran into an unexpected development.

"Hey, something tickles—whoaaaaa!"

No sooner had the propeller on his head started blowing puffs of air than he

soared up into the sky at an alarming speed.

And then... Master Horace vanished into the skyline, never to be seen again.

Just kidding. Instead, he started plummeting to the ground from a great height, likely because he had used up all my mana.

“Waaaaah!” Master Horace didn’t have a sense of pain, but he was still a sentient being; he shrieked as he hurtled toward the ground.

“M-Master Horaaace! Somebody please break his fall! I’ll do anything you ask!” I called out desperately.

A few soldiers who had been watching me from a distance came running over.

“Quick, catch him!” one barked.

“He went that way!”

“Whoa! Got ‘im!”

At last, someone caught hold of him. When I hurried over to see if he was okay, I found an awfully young soldier clutching Master Horace. His propeller had come to a stop.

“Thank you!”

Once I got close enough, the soldier spoke up, his cheeks reddening. “Erm... Did you really mean what you said about doing *anything*?”

“Y-Yes! So long as it’s something I can do!” I replied.

Cain grabbed me by the arm, holding me back with a worried look. “I really don’t think you should agree to that, Miss Kiara.”

“It’s fine!” I insisted. “Now, what would you like?”

At my prompting, the soldier boldly voiced his desire. “I want to ride on your earth giant’s shoulder!”

According to this boy, a great number of soldiers had secretly yearned for the opportunity. I *had* promised, so I let the soldier hop aboard my golem’s shoulder and had it run a lap around the campground, steering it from where I sat atop its palm.

Observing this, Girsch mumbled, “Any child would love to go for a ride on that. I bet we could market it as entertainment, charge a fee for each lap, and make a killing off of that.” Girsch had started counting our chickens before they’d hatched, and Gina didn’t look terribly impressed.

“What happened back there, anyway?” I murmured to myself, tilting my head.

Later on, I tried turning the propeller again—this time, all by itself. It floated up into the air as it spun, but there was no accompanying gust of air. As much as I wanted to determine the reason behind that, I was strapped for time, so I decided to leave it for another day.

Incidentally, I also designed a propeller chair big enough to lift *me* into the air. Unfortunately, it was way too heavy to get off the ground, and the only thing that went flying was the propeller stone itself after it broke. Cain gave an extremely out-of-character shriek and proceeded to ban me from any further experiments, insisting that it was too dangerous.

Consequently, by the time we reached Fort Inion, all I had to show for my efforts was an incredibly simple trick.

I had Reggie order his soldiers to wait somewhere outside the range of any arrows, and then Cain and I stepped forward. I created a golem which, just as I had planned, I could operate remotely.

First, I had my golem sprinkle a few copper pieces just outside the gates. In the meantime, it was pelted with arrows; there were a great deal more than had been shot from the forest on the border. I was feeling pretty good about my decision not to ride my golem today.

With Cain to accompany me, I edged toward a spot where my golem could serve as our shield.

“Kiara?!” Seeing as I had promised him I wouldn’t be fighting alongside my golem, Reggie was caught off-guard and moved to stop me.

Cain was the one to cut him off at the pass. “I’ll be there to protect her. Don’t worry.”

Holding a shield in hand, he covered for me as I stepped out in front of my

golem, migrating to an area where I could get a decent view of what was happening atop the walls.

Now everything was ready.

I had my golem toss a piece of copper nearby.

“Let’s get a big hole going... right *there!*”

I dug a hole in the ground gigantic enough to fit a good number of objects—as deep as a two-story house and as wide as the main tower of the fort. Next, I had my golem advance toward the rampart.

The Llewynian soldiers panicked and started shooting at my golem like crazy. Consequently, its front side was beginning to look like a porcupine. It could still move, though, so there was no problem.

Maybe sticking it with arrows isn’t enough to put a dent in its HP? I guess you have to chip away at it in order to take it down.

Since it was fortunate enough to lack a sense of pain, my golem ignored the arrows and placed a hand on the wall, gathering up the nearby soldiers into its palm like it was scooping up a handful of sand. Then, it lifted those soldiers up and transferred them into the hole I had just made.

For a moment, the remaining Llewynian soldiers forgot to keep shooting, simply gawking as the scene unfolded before them. They continued to watch in a daze as my victims were dropped into the hole, screaming. A few among them had even fainted.

“Oho. So the hole is a makeshift dungeon, huh?” Master Horace mused aloud.

“Exactly. It’s not very exciting, I know. But this way, I can move the Llewynian soldiers somewhere they can’t do us any harm.”

It didn’t involve any damage to the wall, so this method ought to have met Reggie’s criteria.

While I was busy explaining, my golem methodically finished its task.

More Llewynians were climbing up to the wall, which meant we would just find ourselves a target of their arrows once more. Unfortunately, I couldn’t see the entrance from where I stood on the ground, so instead, I packed dirt into

the passageway atop the wall. That way, no one could walk through it anymore.

Naturally, their next move would be to hole up inside the fort, so I moved into phase two of my plan. I set my golem out to destroy the gates. All it took was a few good kicks to knock them down.

The Llewynians piled up various objects near the gates in an attempt to block the entrance, but I had my golem fling handful after handful of earth into the fort. Eventually, they gave up, concluding that they weren't any better off inside.

Llewynian soldiers started pouring out from inside the gates. Just as they charged forward to attack, I used the copper my golem had scattered around to form a hole under their feet. At this point, I was starting to feel a little drained, so the hole turned out shallower than I had planned. Luckily, there was still plenty of room for men and horses alike to topple in.

That was a close one, though...

At Reggie's command, the Farzian troops swooped down upon the Llewynians. I moved on to the next part of my plan.

"We need to get all the way up to the walls, Sir Cain," I pressed him.

Cain nodded, hesitating only slightly. "Very well."

I left the golem where it was, nothing but an unmoving sculpture. For a brief time, all eyes would be focused there, providing the perfect distraction for us. With that, Cain and I made our way right up to the wall, where we dismounted our horse.

Cain sent the horse—and only the horse—back to our original position.

Then, I bored a hole in the wall. We were going to sneak inside Fort Inion.

Amid this whole attack, our biggest concern was the safety of the hostages. There was always a chance the enemy might use them for human shields as a last resort. It was equally likely that they might pick the girls off, starting with the daughters of the lowest-ranked branch families to serve as an example to the ones of the highest standing.

It would be even worse for us if the girls ran away.

Of course, Reggie had also arranged for soldiers to be sent inside. Still, in order to get to where the hostages were, they would first have to kill all the Llewynians trying to force them back at the gates, then take down any other soldiers who attempted to obstruct them along the way.

When compared to your usual siege, we had carried out this raid on pretty short notice, but I was convinced we had to act even faster. Thus, my plan was to determine the hostages' whereabouts ahead of anyone else, construct a stone wall, and hide us all behind it.

Seeing as Cain and I were fending for ourselves, I didn't want to be spotted by too many enemy soldiers. So, although I had opened up a hole in the wall, I didn't make it go all the way through to the other side. We were going to travel along the inside of these thick walls.

While we were on the move, I made a peephole every now and then to check what was going on inside the fort. I dug a tunnel as we went, progressing little by little. By the third time I made a peephole, we had reached an area with almost no one around, as far as I could see.

Evidently, entering the fort some distance away from the gates had been the right choice. All the soldiers seemed to be concentrated over there.

"The earth giant stopped moving!" came a shout.

"The spellcaster exhausted her magic! Now's the time to push back!"

I asked Cain to take a look for himself and make a judgment call. "What do you think?"

"At this distance, we should be alright if we make a run for it. We're likely to be noticed by lookouts in the inner main tower across the way, or the ones on top of the wall, but as long as we're inside before the guards can shout, we should be able to give them the slip. They won't be able to tell where we've gone."

Fort Inion was designed so there was another fort built within the outer walls. With most forts, the main tower and everything else were built into the walls themselves, but here, the tower and structures were all part of the inner fort. That was where the prison holding the hostages was located; thus, our goal

here was to sneak inside the inner fort.

“Let’s go!” Cain urged. At his command, I created an exit, turning just enough of the wall into sand to allow us to slip through.

I was used to battle by this point, but infiltration was new to me. Cain pulled me along by the hand, and together we made a run for it. I was so nervous that I could barely register any of the sounds around me. To make matters worse, I couldn’t even take the initiative by riding in on a giant golem. This was pretty terrifying. The *real* icing on the cake was that we didn’t have any allies in the vicinity.

After running as fast as my legs could carry me, I somehow made it all the way to the wall of the inner fort without tripping. There, I opened up a hole in the wall, and...

“These walls are so *flimsy*!”

When I made the hole for us, it turned out there was already a tunnel inside the fort wall, so all I had really done was build a new entry point.

Right before us was a soldier who had just happened to be passing through. *Oh, I see your cape is black. Does that mean you’re a Llewynian, sir?* I could have asked, but that clearly went without saying. I was fully aware that he was an enemy, but I was so shocked that I found myself frozen to the spot.

Cain grabbed me and took off running. “Come back to your senses, Miss Kiara!”

“Ahhhhh!” came my delayed, hushed cry as we escaped, Cain dragging me along with him.

Caught off-guard by the sudden encounter, the Llewynian man likewise seemed to have been paralyzed for a few moments. After a brief delay, he gave chase, but there was already a good distance between us... *Wait, there’s another one coming from the other direction!*

Panicked, I made an exit leading into the courtyard, and we rushed outside. We had found our way out of the wall, sure, but all that had done was save us from a pincer attack. Since this was a fort, structurally speaking, I figured there would be a courtyard beyond the wall, and there were bound to be soldiers

working inside.

As expected, several soldiers had gathered near the inner gates to tighten the guard there. They noticed us immediately.

“Eeeeeek!” I screamed.

Cain grabbed me by the arm again, and I desperately sprinted away with him.

“Right here, Miss Kiara! Hurry!” Cain hissed, and I managed to make an entrance just in the nick of time. This time, it led into a room.

I closed the hole as fast as I could before running even farther at Cain’s insistence. We fled to the next room over, then the next... Wherever we finally ended up, there were no soldiers to be seen.

I plugged up the last entrance I had made, then slumped down on the spot. It was quiet there, which made my ragged breathing sound all the louder.

We had stumbled upon a small chapel. It was narrow enough that there was only room for about twenty people to kneel. There weren’t any chairs for people to sit in and quietly listen to the sermons of the priests and friars, either. However, the ceiling was high, and adorning the altar was a statue of the goddess said to bestow men with dreams foretelling their fates.

“This is the chapel, right? That means...”

This fort had formerly been supervised by the baron of Delphion. Ernest had drawn us a map of its internal layout.

I unfolded the piece of paper. Cain and I checked where we were, then determined our next move.



Groul glanced back at Reginald, stunned.

“Is something the matter?” the prince asked.

Groul turned to face forward again, flustered. “No, not at all.”

Most likely, he had overheard the click of Reginald’s tongue. No doubt he was shocked by the unusual outburst, but the prince felt the reaction had been more than warranted.

Reginald was just about ready to cut ahead of the front lines and barge into the fort. If only he could rush inside and ensure Kiara's safety, there would be no need for him to make those sounds. Unfortunately, he couldn't make any careless moves. This wasn't a situation where he needed to be on the forefront, so he simply watched over his soldiers as they worked to break through the gates.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Wentworth. He knew the knight would protect Kiara with his very life. After all, this was the man who had guarded both Alan and himself for years now. Reginald had complete faith that he would never break that particular vow.

All the same, he had grown more concerned in recent days. He knew the real reason: it was because Wentworth and Kiara had gotten closer.

Reginald himself was the one who had created the opportunity for that; he had denied Kiara what she wanted over and over again. Thus, Kiara had chosen to find an ally in Wentworth, who seemed much more receptive to her ideas.

Worse still, Wentworth had stopped holding Kiara back altogether. He had even allowed her to do something as reckless as infiltrating the fort with only him to accompany her. If Wentworth was permitting *that* now, Reginald couldn't help but wonder if he had made some special sort of pact with her. If Wentworth had agreed to go along with anything she said in order to be the one she chose, and Kiara had accepted that...

"Then perhaps it's time to let go completely."

If she had picked Wentworth, Reginald knew he had no choice but to accept that. He didn't want to tie her down. He didn't want to see anyone other than himself worn down by their inescapable circumstances. If Kiara had managed to escape the place she had been tethered to, he wanted her to remain free. That desire was why he had never acted on his thoughts of locking her away, although he was fully aware it was the best way to protect her.

That was why he had always used such roundabout methods of stopping her. If it was something Kiara had chosen of her own free will, Reggie couldn't object.

Wentworth had played a part in Kiara's injury, but ultimately, Reginald hadn't

said anything about it. Kiara had asked for someone else's help and dealt with the matter on her own, and still she chose to keep Wentworth by her side. So long as Wentworth wasn't actively ignoring Kiara's wishes, there was nothing Reginald could say about it—no matter what loomed over his heart.

Regardless, for the time being, he had to hurry up and capture the fort. He put his feelings behind him, telling himself that this was all he could do to protect Kiara.

His soldiers had already broken through the gates. Some of the Llewynians who had poured out of the fort were fleeing now. The battle within the gates would soon come to an end, and at last they could move on to the next step.

The moment he thought that, a loud scream rang out from inside the fort.

A soldier came tumbling out of the gates, enveloped in burning flame, and an ally quickly covered him in soil to extinguish the fire. The victim was a Farzian soldier. Most likely, a defective spellcaster had made an appearance.

Gina ran past, her ice monsters in tow. If it was bound to turn into a bloody battle, Reginald couldn't push Kiara to the front lines; thus, the plan had been for Gina and Girsch to rush over if a defective spellcaster appeared.

"Let's go, Groul." Reginald dismounted and headed for the gates. Once he was inside the fort, his horse would be nothing but a hindrance.

Inside the gates, the situation was being handled according to plan; the foot soldiers had the defective spellcaster surrounded at a distance but were concentrating on the other Llewynians. There were concerns about an attack from the rear, but Gina and Girsch protected the soldiers as they sent their frostfoxes around to keep the flames from spreading. Whenever they had a chance, they launched attacks with the help of several archers.

But perhaps that soldier had a bit of aptitude, after all. Smoke was pouring from his body, but he had yet to disintegrate. As blood flowed from his hands and spilled onto the ground, it too caught flame, raising countless pillars of fire around him. Nearly all of the arrows shot at the defective spellcaster burned away before they could even touch him.

Reggie threw a spear at the defective spellcaster, who was currently focused

on Gina and Girsch.

The spear flew high into the sky, and once it was above the defective spellcaster's head, it began to plummet with its sharp tip turned toward the ground. The shaft burned away, but there was enough momentum behind the blade to pierce the man through.

A moment after taking that spear right between the eyes, the defective spellcaster's entire body burst into flame. A few seconds later, he turned into black sand and disappeared.



When I looked down at the map Ernest had drawn, I nearly let out a whoop. We had lucked out; the tower-turned-prison we were looking for was right nearby.

"Do you have enough magic left to use?" Cain asked.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I took stock of how I was holding up physically. I was feeling a little tired, but I was still good to go. I was carrying some copper ore on my person, and I probably had just enough mana left to bring out a golem and tear down a wall if I wanted to.

That was when I suddenly realized something was off. "Wait, what?"

We had been so busy running, I hadn't noticed: even now that my puffing and panting had subsided, I still felt a small pain in my chest. A small wave rode in from who-knows-where, and each time I felt it, my heart started pounding like crazy.

"Don't tell me there's a defective spellcaster around!" I cried out loud.

It was the same sensation I had felt back when I was searching for Master Horace—and whenever there were defective spellcasters nearby, too.

When I tried to pin down where it was coming from, I got the sense it was hitting me from two different directions. One was the gate of the fort. That was where Gina and Girsch were, theoretically. The other one, however... felt like it was coming from the same tower we were heading toward.

"Is something the matter?"

“We have to hurry, Sir Cain! One of the hostages may have been turned into a defective spellcaster!” I rushed over to the wall closest to the tower.

“Just be careful not to use up too much of your power. The next room over is the priest’s quarters. Let’s head in from here.”

We headed for the door beside the altar. Considering the chapel didn’t appear to be in use, we assumed there wouldn’t be a priest inside. Nevertheless, Cain opened the door with the utmost caution. He carefully inspected the room, sword at the ready.

It did indeed appear to be empty. Inside the simple room, its stone walls covered in white plaster, there was nothing more than a writing desk and a wooden bed with no sheets.

“Our best option is to check what’s past this wall first. There’s a good chance that the hostages are all gathered at the top of the tower and they have soldiers guarding the lower levels.”

“Good point. We’d be better off going straight up, in that case. I’ll take a look.”

I made a small hole that led to the other side of the wall. It was no bigger than the peephole one might have seen on a front door in my past life.

Apparently, there was someone on the other side; I could hear a couple of voices.

“As I’ve been saying: surrender now, and I can guarantee your safety.”

“Don’t lie! Do you honestly believe a mere hostage has that kind of authority?!”

“Heheh... Remember, we were taken hostage precisely because we’re the wives and children of those who *do* hold that authority. We have husbands, fathers, and relatives who are close to those in power. I am certain I can get through to His Highness, the one who’s attacking this place as we speak. There are only a few of you here; to have you spared would be a trivial matter.”

I tilted my head, puzzled. Now this was strange.

The voice demanding surrender belonged to a woman. The one calling her

suggestion outrageous was a man. To make matters even more confusing, I was getting strong “villainess” vibes from the woman’s laugh.

After some indecision—and after having Cain listen to some of it, too—I patched up the hole and conferred with him.

“That had to be one of the prisoners... right?”

“I have to assume as much. So long as they don’t volunteer themselves, women can’t be conscripted.”

Even so, we couldn’t quite grasp what was going on.

To get a clearer idea of the situation over there, I transformed half the width of the thick masonry wall into sand, made another peephole, and peered out at what was happening with Cain. The wall was bulky—easily one meter thick—so earlier, while we had been able to pick up on the conversation, we hadn’t been able to see much. Now that wouldn’t be an issue.

Apparently, the first floor of the tower had been designed as a prison that could hold a large number of people. It hadn’t been prettied up with a coat of plaster; the wall was made up of rugged, bare stone, and iron bars ran down the middle of the room, splitting it in two.

The only sources of light were two simple lanterns sitting on the floor, so we couldn’t get a clear view of everything. Still, I could tell there were about fifteen women. Two children were mixed into the group, and half of the remaining bunch were young women. The other half consisted of middle-aged ladies—probably wives of the branch families or the House of Delphion.

Leading the pack was a girl with long, straight, dark hair. Standing with her head held high, her features were placid, but her gray-violet eyes were steadily fixed on the soldiers outside the cell.

There were three Llewynian soldiers, and one of them was holding another woman in a full nelson. The victim looked about one or two years older than me. Her brown hair was falling loose from its bun, and her turquoise, upturned eyes were narrowed in agony.

Judging by the situation, I assumed the soldiers were threatening the women. So what was up with the conversation we had just heard?

From the sound of it, Reggie and his men had successfully invaded the inner fort while I was busy deliberating. I began to hear shouts and the clangs of swords clashing from outside the window.

“See? You’re running out of time to consider your options. Release that woman and surrender,” the dark-haired girl urged the soldiers as they grew fearful of the tumult outside.

There’s no sign of a defective spellcaster anywhere, though. That’s weird.

Maybe they were somewhere else? That would certainly be preferable. If there were a defective spellcaster among all these noncombatants, it wouldn’t surprise me if none of them survived the encounter.

Regardless, we couldn’t leave things as they were. After Cain and I exchanged nods, I blew open the wall and we burst into the room.

Right off the bat, Cain attacked the soldier who was keeping the woman pinned. He stabbed the man through with his sword, pulled the woman away from him, and escorted her back to the cell behind us.

“Dammit!” Cursing, one of the soldiers produced a vial of red liquid. Then, he poured the contents of the container into the mouth of the man who was bleeding out on the floor.

My heart began racing wildly, as though I’d just been given a fright. A moment later, the body of the fallen soldier froze over. The soldier kneeling beside him turned to ice, too.

I instantly flipped my switch to attack mode. The stone wall I’d just started building stretched out into dozens of sharp spears, piercing the body of the fallen soldier. A spine-chillingly cold wave of air swept through the room, and in the next instant, the man turned to sand.

The frozen soldier stayed as he was—a silent corpse. The other remaining soldier had fainted on the spot.

I turned the spears back into a wall. Then, while Cain was busy restraining the unconscious soldier, I gripped the hand of the woman I had just saved, who was looking completely overwhelmed.

“Are you alright? You’re not hurt, are you?” I asked.

“I... I’m fine.”

She nodded with a dazed expression. Now that I was looking at her up close, I could see that her hair was an auburn color. It looked like she still hadn’t recovered from the shock.

While I was relieved to see that nobody was hurt, I abruptly noticed that the pain in my chest had yet to fade away. When I looked for the very close source of the sensation, my gaze fell upon the woman I had just saved.

Could it be...? I thought for a moment, but my eyes were immediately drawn to the stone pendant hanging from her neck. It was a dark red... probably. It was hard to differentiate colors in the dim light, but that was definitely a contract stone. Perhaps I had mistaken that gem for a defective spellcaster.

Relieved to have an explanation, I decided to inform the girls of what was going on outside. I approached the straight-haired girl who had been threatening the soldiers. “Hello. I am the spellcaster serving under the first prince of Farzia, His Highness Prince Reginald. I’ve come to save you girls.”

The straight-haired girl curtsied in response, then went on to introduce herself. “I am the daughter of Lord Henry Delphion’s younger brother, Ernest Finard. My name is Emmeline. You have my deepest gratitude for saving Ada, as well as the rest of us here.”

Oh, I see. So this is Emmeline.

I caught myself staring at her a little too hard. Since she appeared to be the most levelheaded of the hostages, I gave her a cursory briefing on the situation—completely oblivious to the way Ada, who was standing off to the side, was chewing on her lip as she watched me. Of course, I was planning to make it so no one could access this dungeon from the outside, so all I asked the girls to do was wait here quietly until the battle was over.



Emmeline gathered up the other hostages and started explaining the situation. Meanwhile, I buried the door to the tower under a wall of stone. Now nobody would be able to break in.

However, it sounded like the battle was still raging outside.

"I should go help them," I insisted.

"No. You should rest, Miss Kiara." Cain held me back.

He did have a point. I was pretty tired. The last thing I wanted was to push myself too hard, fall apart in the midst of everything, and become a liability, so I opted to lay low for a while.

Instead, I decided to go see what was happening from a crenel on the roof of the tower. Necessary as it was, I almost regretted taking a look. Ever since the fighting had moved inside the fort, it had turned into a bloody battle, a mess of enemies and allies jumbled together. It wasn't like watching a clash on a vast battlefield; witnessing people meet their end inside a building felt so close to everyday life that it held a different weight. I trembled, the fear I had nearly forgotten rushing back to me.

Blue-caped and black-caped soldiers alike collapsed against the wall, covered in blood, still sitting upright as they breathed their last. Among the Llewynian troops were soldiers from the House of Delphion, no doubt. Knowing that fellow countrymen were fighting against each other down there, I couldn't help but wonder if there was more I could have done.

"You can close your eyes and rest, Miss Kiara. I'll be here to watch," Cain offered, but I shook my head.

"I'm fine. More than anything, I have to wonder why I'm still not used to this."

Most people would be scared if they were told to go to war. Nobody *wanted* to die. But there probably wasn't a single soldier out there who hesitated over the act of killing itself. The people of this world never had doubts when it came to battle.

I knew full well that even if we tried talking things out with Llewynne, they wouldn't withdraw their troops. We had no choice but to force our demands on

them through a display of power. If we just let them invade, they would ignore our pleas. That was what we were fighting for, and there was no way around it... but that didn't make it any less distressing sometimes.

It felt almost like I was killing another version of myself.

"Perhaps it's because we held you back for so long. In a sense, all that did was make it harder for you to adjust," said Cain. "If everyone is always telling you to run away, of course you would hesitate to fight."

Part of me wondered if that was truly the case. Still, I couldn't come out and say that to Cain when he was just trying to be nice.

It took another hour before the battle came to an end.



Shortly afterward, I found myself under attack by Girsch.

"Kiara, dear! Are you alright? Tell me you're not hurt!"

I had just come down from the prison tower after I saw the flag flying from the main tower had changed. I wanted to know what exactly had happened, so I was on my way to hear a report from Groul, who had led the conquest. That was when Girsch caught me.

Girsch swooped in from the side, gave me a big bear hug, then grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me over. Next thing I knew, I was spun the other way to make sure my back wasn't injured either. Following that, the mercenary exclaimed, "You're good!" and immediately ran off somewhere.

I was somewhat taken aback by the whirlwind of events. When I asked Groul, who had been watching nearby, he explained that as a skilled seamstress, Girsch had gone to attend to the injured. Gina was assisting, too. She was using her frostfoxes to help stop bleeding and heal bruises or fractures.

I went to work helping to carry the injured. My mana had stabilized while I'd stayed put observing the battle earlier, so I figured I was up to the task. Cain took care of our report, and meanwhile, I used part of a nearby wall to make a stone golem that looked a lot like a paper doll. The golem was even taller than Cain, so it had no trouble hefting even the largest of soldiers.

After running around and swinging their swords for so long, even the uninjured soldiers were exhausted, so they were more than happy to accept my help. I made three more stone golems, then repeated the process of carrying the wounded men to Girsch's station in a hall inside the fort, or wherever else they needed to go.

By the time the task had started taking a physical toll on me and I stopped to take a break, the fort had been cleared of all enemy soldiers. Weakling that I was, as soon as I was shown to a room where I could rest, I passed out before I even had time to eat dinner.

Not long after that, Ernest, Lucille, and all the Delphion soldiers who had gathered under the House of Finard apparently joined up with Reggie's troops. I say "apparently" because I wasn't actually there when they arrived; I heard about it later on.

I clearly had expended more of my mana than I'd thought, seeing as I woke up around noon the next day. As embarrassing as it was to be the only one sleeping the day away, everyone else around me just assumed that was normal for a spellcaster. Gina told me as much when she came to wake me up, advising me to eat something.

"My frostfoxes tend to sleep for half a day after they use a lot of magic, too. Our doting Miss Lila and our little warrior Reynard are out like logs today. Sara is watching over them."

"Oh, so this is normal? I've been stuck in bed with fevers a few times since becoming a spellcaster, but I've never really slept this much before, so I didn't realize it was so common," I replied, devouring the simple meal of soup and bread Gina had brought for me.

"Your mana reserves must outstrip the average spellcaster. Heheh!" Master Horace speculated from the side. He had been placed up on the windowsill. Evidently, he'd complained that sitting right in front of food he couldn't eat was a special kind of torture.

"Where did the arrivals from the House of Finard go?"

"I'm not sure about Lord Ernest himself, but the baron's daughter went to go see the hostages."

“Oh, that reminds me! Have we run into any problems taking care of the girls?”

Branch family or no, they were all members of the nobility. It would be hard for them to manage everything on their own.

“It doesn’t seem like it. Some of the people who used to work here are still around.”

Oh, right. The noncombatants who took care of the cleaning and cooking were probably left somewhere inside the fort.

“Were any of them hurt?”

“No. They were hiding out in the cellar. Apparently, soldiers who originally belonged to Delphion helped them escape down there.”

“Oh, I see...”

If noncombatants happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, they couldn’t complain if they got caught in the crossfire—that was how wars in this world worked. It made sense that fellow countrymen would help each other out. As for those Delphion soldiers, though... I certainly hoped they had either surrendered or escaped in one piece.

Of course, I was pretty confident that Reggie was counting the Delphion men as separate from the Llewynian soldiers. But considering they *had* fought on the opposing side, they would still need to be punished somehow.

I wanted to know what Reggie was planning, so once I was done eating, I went to go find him. I stopped by his room first, but the middle-aged soldier standing guard outside his door told me he wasn’t inside. Left to wonder where he had gotten off to, I wandered the fort aimlessly.

After asking around, I learned that he had gone up one of the outer fort’s towers. The fort made up part of the wall, so it was the perfect spot to get a bird’s-eye view of the surroundings. Unfortunately, walking all the way over there wore me out; this fort was pretty huge.

By the time I was most of the way there, I realized I could have just asked Groul or somebody, but by then it was too late. Turning back at that point

would just have been a waste of effort, so I did my best to climb the stairs of the tower. Eventually, I heard Reggie's voice.

I was relieved to have finally tracked him down, but when I overheard a snippet of his conversation, I stopped in my tracks.

"That was too dangerous, Wentworth. What were you thinking, infiltrating the fort all by yourselves?" said Reggie, his voice calm but laced with worry.

"I'm not sure I agree, Your Grace," came Cain's nonchalant reply. "It was Miss Kiara's idea, but I was confident we could pull it off, for my part."

Oh no. Was Cain getting rebuked over what I had done? There had always been a chance we'd get in trouble, but I had assumed we would *both* be reprimanded for it. And why wasn't Cain using the excuse that I had ordered him to do it?

Whatever the case, I had to go explain that it wasn't Cain's fault. I started climbing the stairs again, only to hear:

"I thought you understood that part of your job is to balance her out and keep her from pushing herself. Surely there must have been a safer way to go about it. Or else... would you charge through the gates of the underworld, so long as she wished for it?"

Perhaps Reggie *had* guessed that I'd ordered Cain to help me. Truthfully, maybe he had a point. Maybe my plan *had* been dangerous. Still, what had mattered to me most then was reaching the hostages as quickly as possible, and Cain had figured out the safest route for us to take to get there. Wasn't that good enough?

There was no time for me to get a word in, however.

"Doesn't that mean going against her will? I thought you wanted Miss Kiara to be free. If you want to keep her any safer than that, you have no choice but to stop her altogether. She's going to resent you again, I'm sure," Cain responded. Reggie was struck into silence. "Besides, it's not as though Miss Kiara herself wants to rush headlong into danger. So long as the enemy doesn't develop a strategy to use against her specifically, our side will always have the initiative. If she's drawing on her magic, it's easier for her to keep herself safe fighting alone

than as part of a larger assault.”

Exactly. I thought our plan this time had worked so well because it had involved us hiding in the walls. I’d figured that if we made it just a little further down the wall, we would be much safer than Reggie and his men, who had rushed right in through the gates.

“Besides,” Cain went on, “if you truly want Miss Kiara to be free, why won’t you let her protect you? If you can’t even allow that, you ought to have just shut her away, no matter what it took.”

Here we had Cain, voicing all the things I should have said myself. It ought to have been a relief to hear someone else say it—to know that I wasn’t the only one who thought that way. Yet for some reason, all I felt was anxious and shaken.

I got the sense that I wasn’t meant to hear the rest of their conversation, so I turned and left the tower. After considering where to go next, I decided to go check on Lucille and the other girls.

Thus, I never knew what they said next.



“If you try to tie Kiara down, she’ll just run away.”

“You expect me to believe you couldn’t figure out how to do it? I’m sure you of all people would know plenty of ways to drive her to fixate on you,” Cain responded, exasperated.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Reginald said, “You’ve become quite the extremist as of late.”

“If so, there’s no one to blame for that but you and Miss Kiara,” was Cain’s blunt conclusion.

Reginald sighed. “I’m meant to be dead. Wouldn’t it be wrong to force her to protect me? To keep her by my side, even if it hurts her?”

“By that logic, if Miss Kiara hadn’t run away, she too would have died in the not-so-distant future. It isn’t wrong for you to live, Your Grace.”

“I’m not like Kiara. I haven’t run from anything, and I haven’t made any

choices of my own.”

“You always *have* been a stubborn one. But if you’re going to be like that... I don’t want to hear you object to my actions, Your Grace.”

Side Story: The Spellcaster's Side Hustle

It was summertime. The town we were staying in—Sorwen—was up in the mountains, so it was a bit cooler there than down in the plains. Nonetheless, today was a swelteringly hot day.

From where I sat in the manor, I could see soldiers who had taken off their jackets and rolled up their sleeves flocking to the water. There was a throng of people near the fountain in Lord Sorwen's garden... or rather, they were already packing into it like sardines.

Oh, I see some of Reggie's and Alan's knights in there!

It was a little unsanitary, honestly. When they were splashing around like that, they looked no different from the junior high school boys of my past life.

A separate group was praying to Reynard, who had climbed up to the roof over the front entrance to the manor.

"Let it snow, we beg of you!"

"We don't mind if it melts into raindrops!"

"Please bring us a cool breeze!"

Such were the pleas I heard from outside the window. The men placed both hands on the ground, prostrating before their tributes as they made their wishes. I got the feeling I was witnessing the birth of a new religion here.

Sly as the fox he was, whenever someone offered up one of Reynard's favorite fruits, he would jump down, take only that in his mouth, and return to his place on the roof. Perhaps he needed some bait for his fish; he would whip up a snowstorm for a few fleeting seconds, then turn all his attention to nibbling at his food.

"Look! Saint Reynard wants another pear!"

"You've got to be kidding me! That was the last one the fruit seller had!"

"We need something else! Find another offering!"

The new converts dispersed into smaller groups. Reynard looked on, leisurely eating his fruit, before slinking off somewhere else.

Won't it make them hotter to run around looking for offerings? Maybe they're just busying themselves to forget about the heat.

"Here, have a fruit drink, Kiara."

"Oh, thank you!"

Gina handed me a glass, and I took a sip of the thin, orange beverage. It was refreshing, sweet, and tasty. Combined with how cool it was inside the room, I felt like I was in paradise.

This room was the venue of a girls-only gathering. We were sitting in chairs we had dragged inside, relaxing.

Anyone would want to go for a dip on a hot day. However, the troops stationed here were filled with nothing but men. Let's say, hypothetically speaking, there was one spot marked off for women only...

"The men would definitely show up to peep," Gina had asserted. All the women aside from me had nodded in agreement.

Our group consisted of girls with ties to the House of Sorwen, plus the servants of the manor. Girsch counted as a woman, too.

There were limits to how much clothing we could take off. Still, we wanted *some* way to cool down, at least while the midday sun was blazing, and we would collapse if we pushed ourselves to work in these conditions. Thus, Gina had proposed that all the women and girls assemble in one room while Lila and Sara kicked up a nice, cool breeze. It was like cooling off in magical air conditioning.

For the record, we hadn't told any of the men about this. I hadn't even told Cain... or, well, I had told him where I was, but I hadn't said a word about how cold it was in here.

Reggie had guessed what we were up to, but he was keeping quiet about it. If Alan found out, he would probably yell about how unfair it was and start nursing a grudge.

“Why, we had to oust a miscreant from our family just the other day. I am so truly sorry for what that man did to you, Lady Spellcaster,” Lady Sorwen apologized with a deep bow. Her golden-brown hair was tied back in a beautiful braid. She was a different sort than her weak-kneed husband; she was younger than him, but she gave off strong “badass mom” vibes.

“Please don’t worry about it! It wasn’t *your* fault,” I reassured her, but she looked no less contrite.

She was apologizing for the incident just the other day, when one of the marquis’ relatives came on to me in the dead of the night. Evidently, the man in question had been chased out of the manor after incurring Reggie’s wrath.

That was no surprise, given Lord Sorwen’s fight with Reggie the following morning.

“Have you forgotten that a spellcaster is even more valuable than royalty? Knowing that, you still intended to stick that man with a collar ensuring his return to Sorwen?”

“I-It’s not like that... I had nothing to do with the matter, and I’ll be sure to sternly reprimand my nephew.”

“If you were completely unaware of it, clearly you’ve been negligent in your duties as the marquis. It means that you failed to relay the instructions I’d given you regarding our spellcaster before midnight.” Reggie’s expression had remained as mild as ever, but his voice had had a cold edge to it. Lord Sorwen had shivered in spite of the summer heat. “You don’t truly intend to let him off with a mere warning, do you?”

“Erm, I don’t have any children yet, you see. If I were to lose my nephew, then...”

“Yes, it sounds like you married somewhat late in life. But your wife is still young, and I seem to remember there being other men among your relatives.” Lord Sorwen was lost for words as Reggie continued his relentless assault.

“Well, if you can’t guarantee our spellcaster’s safety, we have no choice but to return to Cassia straightaway. We can’t have one of our most valuable assets be hurt. Sorwen will just have to hold out on its own. You’ve conserved most of your forces until now, haven’t you?

“I do have to wonder about this year’s harvest, though. It will take you quite a while to clear out the Llewynians, won’t it? You’ll have to buy enough food to get you through the next year, no matter if the prices of your ore are driven down. And who knows how many of your citizens will have been lost to Llewyn by then. I’ve heard that miners have rather violent tempers; I wonder what they’d do to an ineffective marquis who drove reinforcements out of his territory.”

“I-I-I understand, Your Grace! Please, have mercy!”

The day after the marquis had begged Reggie on his hands and knees, the relative in question had been forcibly adopted into a small village. It had been all but confirmed when I’d overheard Lord Sorwen saying to Reggie, “You and the Lady Spellcaster will never have to lay eyes on him again, so please, forgive me!”

It was someone else’s family, so it wasn’t my place to butt in, but I hadn’t expected the man to be threatened into leaving the heart of the territory. Even as his would-be victim, I thought that was a little excessive... until I heard the other women speak up with relief in their voices.

“Truth be told... I was so relieved when I heard he had been sent away. I’m truly thankful for His Lordship’s firm judgment.”

“Me too. He hung all over me any time I had to see him. It was extra tiring in the summer. I’m glad he’s gone.”

The two girls were a little bit older than me. Both of them were married relatives of the marquis, clad in beautiful, sleeveless dresses. Lady Sorwen had brought them along when she came to apologize to me after the incident. If these two had also fallen victim to that man, it probably meant he was a genuine predator. Perhaps exiling him was the right call, after all.

“I truly am sorry he caused so much trouble behind my back. It seems men are quite lenient with each other when it comes to these matters.” Lady Sorwen hung her head even further.

I was starting to feel bad for her, so I said, “It only happened because I went out in the middle of the night. Normally I have Master Horace with me, so no one ever tries to come near me.”

“Master Horace?”

“Here he is.” I plopped Master Horace, who was equipped to me like always, onto the table.

All the women in the room automatically rose from their chairs. I knew full well that they had been doing their best to keep my bizarre, stuffed-animal-sized pottery doll out of sight. I mean, he was uncanny enough to keep *men* away from us.

“Hey, my little disciple?”

“Yes, Master Horace?”

Master Horace seemed a little cranky.

“‘No one ever tries to come near me’? Isn’t that pretty cruel thing to say about your own mentor? Don’t forget that *you’re* the one who gave me this form! I never asked to look like this!” Master Horace lambasted me for my bad taste.

Lady Sorwen glanced over at me and asked, “Wait, truly?”

“Erm, he turned out like this because, in the heat of the moment, I just happened to remember something else that resembled him. I promise this isn’t my idea of cute or anything!” I rushed to make excuses, but I got the sense that nobody believed me.

Then, one of the aforementioned harassment victims muttered, “You know... this could actually work.”

She was 100% straight-faced as she stared at Master Horace. I had to wonder if that lecher hadn’t been her first bad experience with a man.

“True. A mini-Horace would make for a trusty man repellent, I bet,” Gina commented with a laugh.

“Oh, but it’s just so *ugly*!”

“Right?”

Whispers broke out among the servants huddled together in the back.

For whatever reason, Gina decided to cut in. “So long as it’s not too big, most

people won't notice it right away, even if you wear it somewhere conspicuous. And if *everyone* is doing it, what's the problem?"

The women's expressions changed, seeming to say, *Maybe she has a point.*

I was reminded of the proverb, "There's safety in numbers." It would be tacky if you were the only one carrying it around, but if *everyone* had one, it would transcend those classifications. Gina was awfully clever to have come up with that on the spot.

Gina went straight to urging me to put the idea into practice.

"All you need is a stone, right? We don't want them breaking too easily. Wait here for a bit!" With that, Gina energetically rushed out into the blazing outdoors.

When she came back, she was carrying a handful of smooth, white stones that looked like quartz. At her command, I made a few palm-sized clay figurines, attaching a hole for looping string to the top of their heads. Never anything less than prepared, Gina hung one up on some twine she happened to have on hand, then showed it off to the girls.

"See? This way, you can easily tie it up somewhere. Since it's white, it won't look too odd from a distance, but people will still be able to tell you're wearing a freaky accessory."

"*Freaky*, huh?" While Master Horace was getting downright demoralized, the surrounding women oohed and ahed. They picked up the dolls, conferring among themselves and expressing their tentative approval.

One of the girls cheerfully remarked, "It's just the right size to hide from someone I *do* want to keep around."

"That's a good idea. If everyone starts doing that, concealing your doll can become a gesture to wordlessly convey interest. Even the most inarticulate of girls will have a way to express their feelings."

"I like that! I think I want one, after all!"

"Hmm. But don't you think some men will be put off by a woman walking around with such a strange trinket?" one of the servant women worried.

The other women teamed up to talk her into it. “Who has time for a man who would pick his woman based on something like this? If the two of you are really in love, it shouldn’t matter whether you have one of these or not!”

“Maybe you’re right... Yes, you do have a point there.”

“Will you be buying one, then? Everyone who wants one, please sign your name here! We’ll produce them upon receipt of order!”

Gina held out a piece of paper and a charcoal pencil so that everyone could put down their names.

When did she even get those?!

“Hey, Gina? Don’t tell me you—”

Just as I was about to finish that thought with “want to sell them,” Gina looked back at me, grinning from ear to ear.

“How much do you want to charge? It’s the price of your labor, plus you’re using magic to do it, so I’d say they shouldn’t come cheap.”

Apparently, Gina planned to make a business out of my mini-Horace dolls.

Or, more accurately... I was going to be the one making a business out of it.



In the end, Gina did in fact pressure me into marketing my dolls. For the time being, I had to create one for each of the thirty-seven women who had been in that magically air-conditioned room.

“I just have to think of it as a chance to make some pocket money.”

I didn’t have to worry about putting my soul into it like when I’d created Master Horace’s body or my golems, so it wasn’t terribly difficult to make them. All I had to envision was a miniature version of Master Horace—an itty-bitty clay figurine.

Lady Sorwen and her relatives would have had no problem buying them even if they were a little pricey, but I would’ve felt bad if the servant ladies couldn’t afford it, so I wasn’t charging all that much for them. A single figurine cost about the same as ten loaves of bread.

Originally, I'd wanted to make it even cheaper, but Gina had told me that I shouldn't lower the price too much if magic was involved in the process. Plus, the same product carved through normal means would cost almost as twice as much.

Being the shrewd businesswoman she was, Gina was naturally collecting a finder's fee. It amounted to a very modest sum of money, so she couldn't have hammered out the idea for the sheer purpose of profiting from it... or at least, that was what I chose to believe.

I didn't really need the extra money myself; I received a regular allowance from the military, after all. Considering that Sorwen would be contributing to those funds this time around, it occurred to me that I was sucking money out of the territory twice over—once for my salary and once for my sales—but I decided not to worry about it.

Anyway. Making mini clay figurines was all well and good, but doing the work in my room meant I had to deal with Master Horace's sulking. Nighttime though it was, I decided to take my project elsewhere. That just left the question of where. It was bound to be cooler outside, but I didn't want to risk getting into trouble again.

Holding the bag of stones Gina had given me in one hand, I wandered the marquis' manor until eventually I settled on a small balcony toward the end of the second floor. The platform jutted out from the building, so it was exposed to the refreshingly crisp evening breeze.

Just as I knelt down and went to work making miniature figurines, lining them up one by one, someone called out to me.

"More magic experiments?"

When I turned around, I saw Reggie standing there. It wasn't all that late yet, so I doubted he was wandering around because he couldn't sleep, but perhaps it had been too hot to stay put in his room. All he was wearing over his torso was a shirt, of which the top three buttons were undone. I could get a clear view of his neck and collarbone, giving him a strangely... *alluring* look.

He looked down at me from where he stood, then averted his gaze uneasily, kneeling beside me with a sigh. "Shall I go find you something to wear over your

dress?"

"Huh? No thanks. It's pretty hot out."

Plus, I couldn't ask His Highness of all people to go fetch some clothes for me.

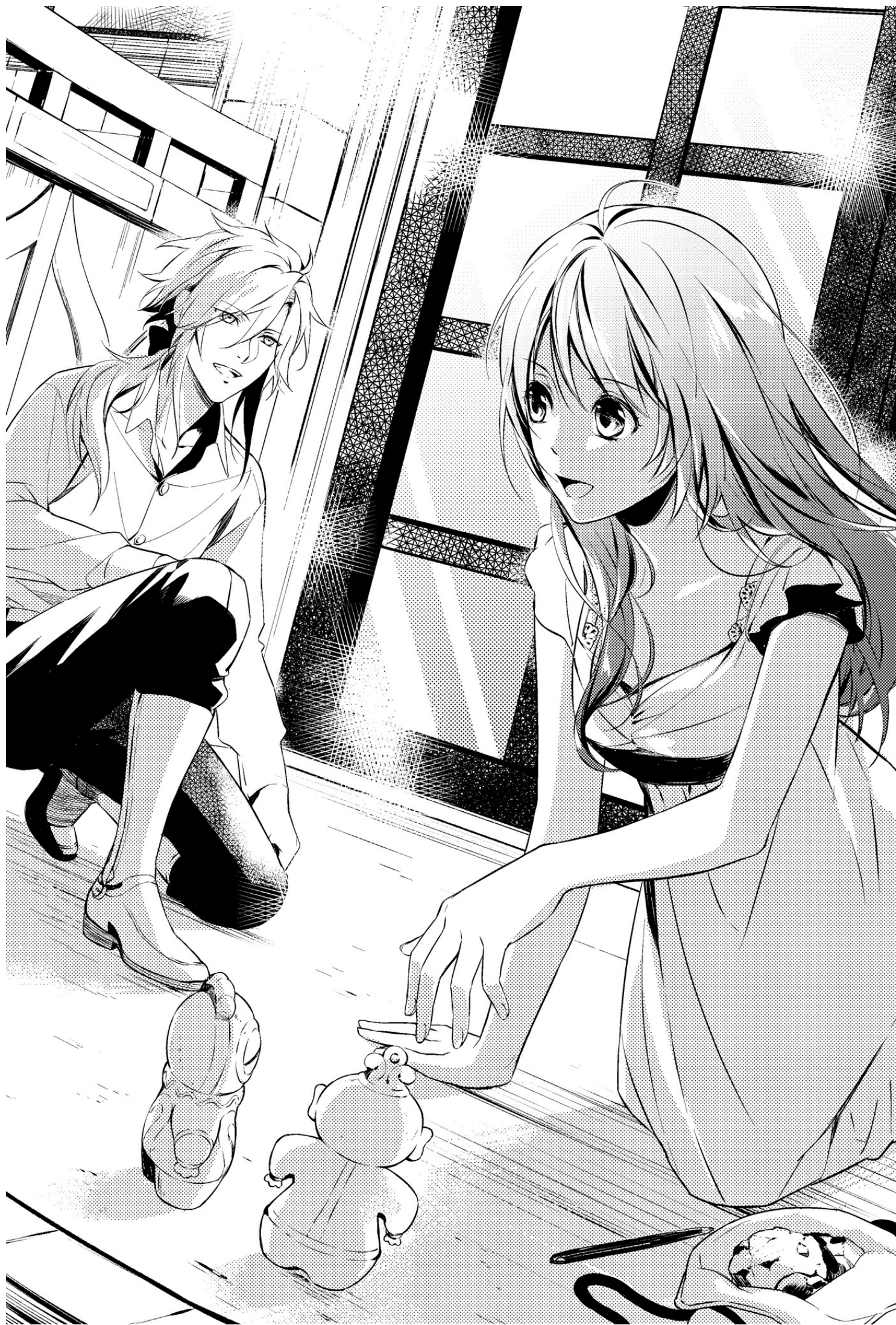
"You should wrap something around your neck, at least... No, I suppose there's no point in covering only that. What to do?" Reggie kept muttering under his breath.

Oh, maybe I dressed too lightly? Now that I was conscious of it, I suddenly felt very vulnerable in the soft, thin dress I had thought of as nothing but breezy and comfortable just moments ago. I had a cloth I could throw over my shoulders, but it was pretty flimsy. And perhaps I was showing off too much of my chest today. I was living life on the road, so what I was currently wearing had been borrowed from Lady Sorwen. The size wasn't a perfect fit.

"Erm, don't worry about it! I'll be done soon."

I was just about ready to crawl into a hole somewhere, so I rushed to finish making my goods. There were only three left to go.

There, all done!



When Reggie took a closer look at the contents of my bag, he finally seemed to realize what I was making. He gave me a questioning look. “Are you replicating Sir Horace?”

“Gina suggested it would make for a good charm to ward off men, and everyone who was there decided to place an order.”

When I explained how I’d landed this side job, Reggie burst out laughing.

“They may be mercenaries, but those two will make a business out of anything and everything.”

“But I’m the only one making a real profit off of this, and Gina never seems too fussed over money. Maybe it’s just a hobby for her?”

She *had* seemed to have money on the brain when she was promoting her mercenary services back in Maynard City. She seemed satisfied with her current salary, though, so she wasn’t too fixated on that anymore.

“It’s kind of fun to make some money of my own, though.”

I was earning a salary now, and I’d had one when I had worked as an attendant in Évrard, but selling something of my own creation was a different kettle of fish.

“Is it your dream to become a merchant, Kiara?”

“Not really. I’ve never even thought about it before.”

“Is there anything you *have* aspired to be?”

“Aspired? Hmm... When I was little, I wanted to be an artisan. It didn’t matter if I made embroidery or whatever else. I just figured that leaving home and striking out on my own was what would make me happiest.”

“And after that? You didn’t want for anything once you were taken in by the count, did you?”

“Well, there was always food on the table, but I still wasn’t *free*. It’s just... I had been so robbed of my freedom that I think I gave up for a while. I was his daughter for appearance’s sake only, so I knew that I was going to be married off to someone convenient for Lord Patriciél eventually. I just hoped it would be

to a good guy, at least.”

If all I’d learned was that I was to be married to Lord Credias, I might not have tried to run away. It was the revelation that my past life hadn’t been a dream, as well as the knowledge that I was on the path to my death, that had driven me to find a new future.

“Now that you’re a spellcaster, you can go anywhere you please.”

“Yeah.”

The moment I agreed with him, I noticed a terribly despondent look in Reggie’s eyes.

Reggie was a prince. He would never want for food, clothing, or shelter, but in exchange, he could never escape the duties others needed him to fulfill. Even after the war was over, that wouldn’t change. He could never become anything else. He could never travel anywhere freely.

Unlike me, Reggie had chains that were more than just a detriment. There were things only a prince like Reggie could do. Thus, for the sake of all the people counting on him, he couldn’t just run away.

“If I asked you to stay by my side, Kiara... would you?”

I wondered if that question came from a place of loneliness.

“Don’t worry. I’ll come see you. If you can’t come to me, I can go to you. You’re like family to me. If you’re ever feeling alone, just call for me.”

Reggie blinked, and then a teasing smile rose to his features. “Is it alright to want you around whenever I’m lonely?”

“What? Of course it is!”

“You never know; I might keep you from ever leaving so I don’t have to be by myself. Would you be angry with me if I did?”

“I wouldn’t get mad over something like that.”

“I hope you’ll stay with me forever, then.”

The moment he said those words, all of a sudden, a memory started to come back to me...

“Kiara? Kiara!”

Apparently, I had zoned out for a moment there. Reggie called me back to reality.

“Oh, sorry. Don’t worry about it. I think it’s because it was so hot this afternoon; I’m still a little spaced out.”

Reggie looked relieved. “You must be tired from the heat. Why don’t you head to bed?”

Even I thought I was acting strangely, so I went to bed early on Reggie’s recommendation.

Once I had drifted off to sleep...

“Oh, how I wish you could stay with me forever. You plan to go back, no matter how much you’ll suffer there?” Reggie said. He was sitting on the sofa of a beautiful, white-walled room, holding me in his lap.

Where am I? I vaguely wondered. Something about the place felt nostalgic, but I had never seen it before. This certainly wasn’t the simple and sturdy manor of Évrard. If anything, it was closer to Lord Patriciél’s estate. While it wasn’t exactly brimming with overpriced furnishings, the pillars and walls were so elaborately decorated that it still managed to look terribly extravagant.

Atop the amber table beside us, there sat the large tail feather of a starbird. A translucent stone was fixed to the tip of the bluish-black plume. The intensity of the light filtering in through the window fluctuated with each flutter of the curtains, making the gem glisten.

“Do you prefer spending your time with him?” Reggie gave a faint laugh.

I shook my head. Just earlier, he had been using the feather to tickle me, like he was teasing a cat. I’d tried to steal it away to stop him, but Reggie was too tall; my hand couldn’t reach even if I jumped for it. He’d laughed at me, too, giving me nothing but embarrassment for my trouble.

Once I was tired out from raising all that fuss, Reggie had placed me on his lap like a cat. He’d wrapped me up in his arms, asking me not to leave.

Of course, I couldn’t comply with his request. I was a spellcaster, and there

was nothing I could do to escape Lord Credias.

I was keeping quiet about that detail, however; I didn't want him to know. When we'd first met, Reggie had learned everything there was to know about my circumstances, except for the part where I was a spellcaster. Yet still he tried to keep me with him.

"You still won't tell me the reason? And yet you've grown familiar enough with me to settle down inside my arms. What can I do to get you to talk?"

Reggie continued to coax me, lifting my chin with his fingers and bringing his face close to mine. I didn't take that as anything out of the ordinary, until...



"Wh... Ahhhh!" I let out a scream and was jerked awake by the sound of my own voice.

When I opened my eyes, there was no one else there. I was in a room inside the Sorwen estate, its plastered walls decorated with cute pictures of flowers.

After I glanced around at the decor, which had grown so familiar to me over the course of the past few days, Master Horace asked, "Aren't you a noisy one, waking up screaming? What, did you have a dream that was bad for your heart? Eeeheehee!"

"You know what? Yeah. I think I just had a really bad dream," I answered.

And with that, the dream that had felt so vivid just moments ago began to fade from my mind little by little.

Afterword

It's Kanata Satsuki again! Thank you for reading *I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!* 3. To my great pleasure, we've made it to the publication of the third volume.

In this volume, the main character, Kiara, travels north to Sorwen and then west to Delphion to reclaim the stolen territories. Amid all that, she meets someone who helps her work past her problems. While she's preoccupied, other characters start to change their way of thinking, and there's some progress on the romance front as well.

Lots of new characters make an appearance this time around. As our antagonists start to look more and more threatening, Kiara cooks up strange ideas under the watchful eye of her clay master. I hope you all continue to watch her grow, too.

Just like the previous volume, the print version includes several additions and edits to what was posted online. This time, I'd say the bulk of changes involved tidying the story up and fleshing out a few scenes.

The side story takes place during the summer. Your author here happens to hate hot weather, so it ended up mostly focusing on how nice it would be for frostfoxes to exist, along with a little anecdote touching on Kiara's reincarnation. Since so much of this story focuses on the battle sequences, I threw in an extra dash of much-needed romance, too. I really hope you all enjoyed it!

Lastly, I tweaked the map in the table of contents. That should make it easier to track the march of each country, so take a look at it if you need a reference.

Moving on, I would once again like to extend my thanks to my wonderful editor.

My illustrator, Mitsuya Fuji, based the volume cover on the nighttime scene in Sorwen. I absolutely love the nocturne atmosphere of it, and she even drew a few birds to go with it! And my favorite part of all is Girsch in the insert

illustration! I burst out laughing the moment I saw the picture, but I think she captured the character perfectly. Alan and the fox look adorable eating their cake, and Gina's smile looks just like I imagined it. Thank you for drawing all the other new characters, too!

I'd also like to thank the editing department at Shufu to Seikatsu Sha—the proofreaders, the printers, and everyone else who helped get this book published. And finally, I'd like to extend my gratitude to all my dear readers.

As thanks for purchasing this volume, I'll be posting a short story to my blog on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. I hope you enjoy it.

—Kanata Satsuki, May 2016

Bonus Chapter: Reginald and Gina

Gina knew that the royalty of Farzia had silver hair. It wasn't every day you saw someone with that brilliant shade. There were plenty of people with pale-blond hair up in Salekhard, but silver was a rarity. What Gina *hadn't* expected was for him to be so beautiful. For a moment, she had nearly mistaken him for a statue come to life.

Too dazzled to think, it was only when he asked her to leave him alone with Kiara that Gina finally remembered: Alan, the margrave's son, had mentioned that Kiara was very precious to this prince. Assuming there was no problem with letting the two have some privacy, Gina was about to leave the room—only to have the clay doll Horace thrust upon her on the way out.

Oh, he definitely wanted to be *alone* with her.

From that, Gina could tell just how attached he was to Kiara. It was hard to keep herself from grinning. Of course, she gossiped all about it with Girsch later on.

That prince was one of the people who didn't want to let Kiara fight. Someone had told Gina that he was pretty stubborn for a man of such mild features, and she could believe it. In her experience, princes were always obstinate men deep down.

However, even though she was a total softie most of the time, Kiara never seemed to back down on *her* decisions, either. In spite of any attempts to negotiate with her about it, she'd sulked when she was deliberately excluded from a battle, and the incident had only left her all the more determined to fight.

During their battle on the way to Sorwen, Kiara had been very proactive about using her magic. Given how high-profile her attacks were, she'd more or less painted a target on herself, but she *had* managed to keep their losses to a minimum. Still, Gina worried that her behavior would only encourage the prince to further restrict her movements.

Still, Prince Reginald didn't speak of the matter to Kiara—not even once they'd entered Sorwen. If anything, he seemed to have backed off a bit... or so Gina thought, until Kiara talked to her about it later on when they were cooling off in the breezy shade of a tree together.

“He told me he wouldn't get angry with me.”

Gina found that to be a questionable turn of phrase, but Kiara looked quite happy about it, her expression softening.

“Maybe that means he's finally acknowledged my strength. Though he might've just given in to my stubbornness rather than my actual abilities.”

That he was tolerating it at all seemed to be more than enough for her.

“That's great news. You were worried he was going to be mad, weren't you?” Gina remarked, and Kiara gave a shy nod.

One look at her face made it clear: more than anyone else, Kiara couldn't stand to fall out of the prince's good graces. It reminded Gina of the blind affection a child might have for a parent.

From that angle, Gina thought Kiara and Prince Reginald shared a very odd relationship. Kiara adored the prince like a father, yet at the same time, she realized he was a man of no *actual* relation to her. Thus, she didn't hang off of him to an inappropriate degree.

The prince, on the other hand...

Once Kiara left, having spent a good long while chatting about Prince Reginald's reaction, the very prince in question approached Gina and Girsch.

“I never got the chance to speak to you two at length,” the prince said, taking a seat nearby. He had no escort with him, perhaps because they were inside the grounds of Lord Sorwen's manor. Although he still had a sword hanging from his waist, there was a very easygoing air about him, which threw Gina and Girsch for a loop.

After all, they were foreigners—not to mention that their homeland of Salekhard was an enemy. Alan may have hired them, but it didn't seem like a wise idea to approach them so casually. Prince Reginald, however, didn't seem

bothered in the slightest. He asked the duo a handful of questions—about where in Salekhard they usually lived, and about the current state of the country.

Following that, he switched gears. “I see you get along well with Kiara.”

“Of course! We’re all girls, after all!” Girsch chimed in.

In contrast to Cain and the other knights, the prince didn’t look the least bit dismayed. He simply responded, “I see. That makes sense.”

At the very end, he asked them to look after Kiara.

“There aren’t any other women in our army, so I hope you can help Kiara through any of her troubles.”

“Of course we will.”

“I’m glad we recruited you two. I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Given how quickly he rose to his feet, that may have been all the prince had come to say in the first place.

“Wow. Looks like the prince loves Kiara enough to go around asking favors for her,” Gina muttered.

“It sure does,” Girsch agreed.

Yet something about his attitude came off as hesitant. Was it because Kiara had trouble recognizing those types of feelings? Once Kiara learned to pick up on romantic love, what would happen next?

Then again, Gina got the feeling that for her part, Kiara was purposely staying oblivious to his feelings.

“Uh-oh. This is a problem.”

“What?”

“I’m really having fun in the Évrard army.”

She had plenty of freedom, and it was fun watching someone else’s love blossom. Kiara had taken to her like a sister, too.

Considering it was war that brought me here, this isn’t all too bad, Gina

thought to herself.





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I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Volume 3

by Kanata Satsuki

Translated by Tara Quinn Edited by Taylor Fonzone

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