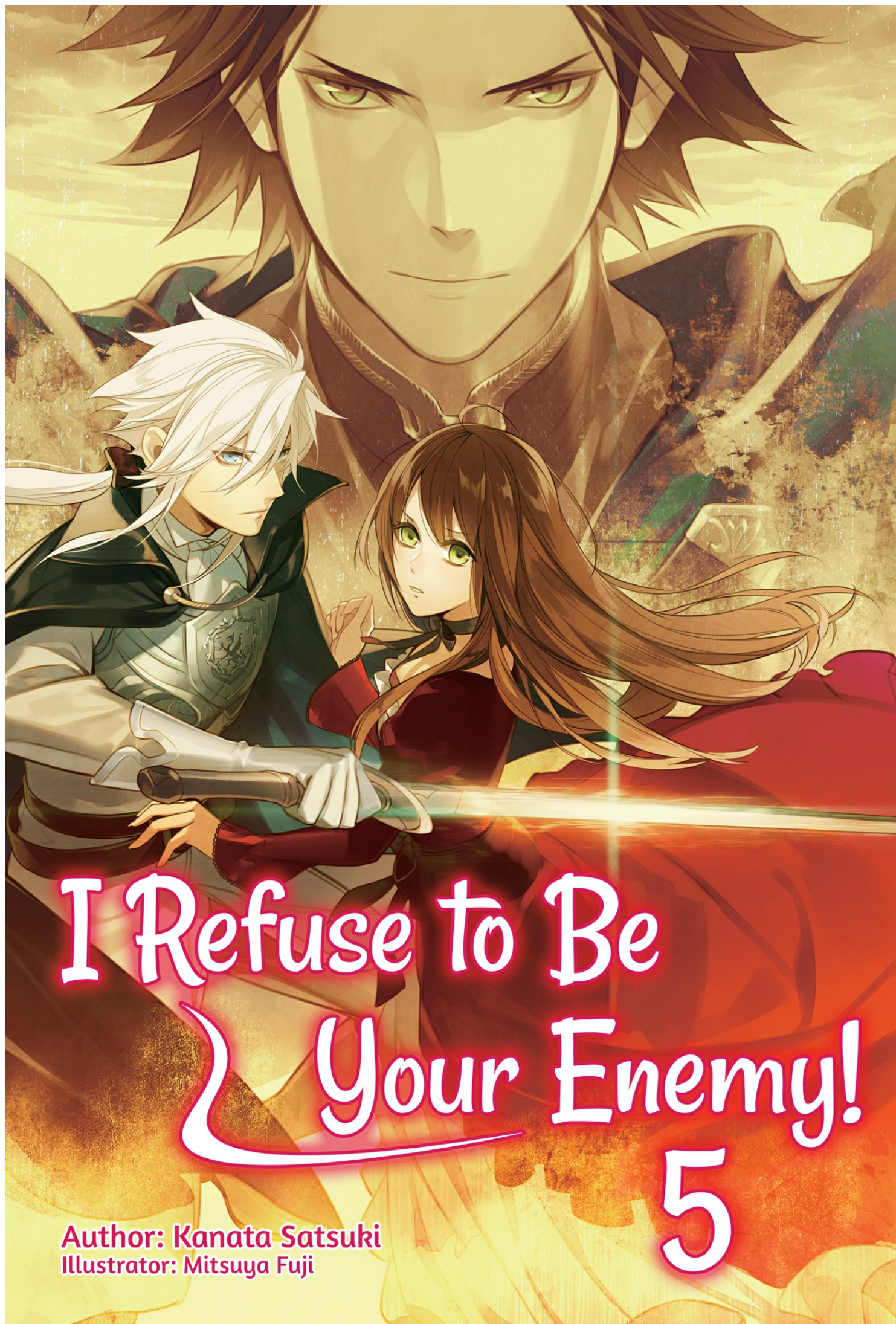


I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!

5

Author: Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: Mitsuya Fuji



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Salekhard

Kiara is here

Llewyne

Farzian Royal Capital

Erendor

Samhain

Trisphe

Tarinahaea

Delphion

Sorwen

Lake Luxia

Caudalie

Royal Domain

Cassia

Évrad

Sestina

Kilrea

Limerick

Fingal

Patriciél

Reinstar

Rodelk

Irvine

Forest of the Thorn Princess

Bertrand

Character Introductions



Alan Évrard

The lively son of the margrave of Évrard, who manages the border between Farzia and Llewynne. In the game from Kiara's past life, *Farzia: Kingdom at War*, he was the protagonist. Deputy commander of the Farzian army.



The resourceful prince of Farzia and the one leading the nation's forces against Llewynne. Commander-in-chief of the Farzian army. In Kiara's past-life memories, he was slain before the start of the game. Has harbored feelings for Kiara ever since he first took her under his wing.

Reginald Dias Farzia (Reggie)

Cain Wentworth

A knight serving under Alan, as well as Kiara's personal bodyguard. He lost his family in a war against Llewynne, and those emotional scars have led him to depend on Kiara.



Kiara Cordier

Our protagonist, an earth spellcaster. 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. Cue her meeting Reggie and the rest of our heroes. Much like in the RPG, the Kingdom of Llewynne invaded not long after, and she is now fighting as a spellcaster in the Farzian army.

Horace

Kiara's spellcasting mentor and father figure. 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.



The Farzian Royal Army

Groul

Captain of Reggie's royal guard.

Felix

One of Reggie's knight-guards.

Emmeline Finard

The daughter of the current baron of Delphion. An expert archer and a valiant young woman. She is currently leading the soldiers of Delphion as a general.

Lila, Reynard & Sara

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

Wayne Évrard

The margrave of Évrard. Alan's father.

Beatrice Lydia Évrard

Alan's mother, the wife of the margrave. Elder sister to the king of Farzia.



Girsch

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

Gina

A Salekhardian mercenary. A beast-tamer who employs the help of three frostfoxes. She used to be a Salekhardian noblewoman, but circumstances led her to join her mercenary band, and she is now under the employ of the Farzian army.



Faden Enister

The count of Enister. An old man with white hair and a beard to match. His trusty steed(?) is a giant white goat.

Jerome Limerick

Younger brother to the marquis of Limerick. One of Farzia's generals.

The Salekhardian Royal Army

Mikhail

A lord-in-waiting from the Salekhardian royal palace. He works alongside Isaac.

Isaac



The second prince of Salekhard who formed an alliance with Llewyne. He seized power by imprisoning his half-brother, Yefrem. Has approached Kiara under the guise of a merchant.

Llewyne's Co-Conspirators

Marianne

Reggie's stepmother, the queen of Farzia. Born of Llewyne, she is aiding the Llewynian army's invasion of Farzia alongside the count of Patriciél.

Ada Forsén



Queen Marianne's lady-in-waiting. She ran off in the heat of the moment, only to be taken in by the viscount of Credias and turned into a spellcaster.

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.

Count Owen Patriciél

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

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Chapter 1: An Unexpected Reunion at Liadna

Lord Credias' plump cheeks jiggled as he moved his lips.

Found you. Although there was still quite a bit of distance between us, somehow I just *knew* that was what he'd said.

A chill ran down my spine. Two years had passed since I'd escaped my marriage to the viscount. It hadn't been long before he'd stopped sending people to Évrard to fetch me, so I had always assumed he'd given up on me. Yet here he was now, staring at me with such *craving* in his eyes.

Despite inhabiting a clay body, Master Horace made a sound much like a click of the tongue. "I figured out the trick here, little disciple. Those magical presences were spread all over the place as part of a trap laid for you."

"A trap?"

"You know how that Ada girl was a spellcaster, but you couldn't tell because of the contract stone she always had on her? It's the same idea. That viscount scattered contract stones everywhere to throw you off his trail."

While Master Horace was explaining his theory to me, something was afoot around Lord Credias. Several moans emerged from the cacophony of clashing swords. Ten soldiers standing at the front lines had begun to scratch at their own throats in anguish; one had burst into flames, while another was growing stone pillars from his shoulders. Every single one of them had been turned into a defective spellcaster.

"Watch... out," I tried to shout at Cain, but I could barely get my voice out.

This wasn't looking good. When I got down from my horse, there was so little strength in my legs that I all but collapsed to the ground.

Slamming my knees against the earth really smarted. Lord Credias' powers were taking their toll on me, causing my mana to churn painfully throughout my body—enough to make me slump over on the spot.

I wouldn't let that keep me down, though. Lord Enister's men were few in number, so he already had his hands full keeping the Llewynian troops in check, and Cain had no hope of taking on that many defective spellcasters all by himself. If ten defectives attacked all at once, other soldiers were bound to get caught up in the crossfire, and soon we'd have no one left on the front lines.

My only option was to take them out here and now. Still, casting magic felt like an uphill battle. Not only was I feeling too woozy to concentrate, but my chills were severe enough to leave me on the verge of tears. *Get your head in the game, Kiara!* I scolded myself. *Why become a spellcaster if you're just going to be useless?!*

"I can manage *something* with a bit of recycling!" To psyche myself up, I slammed both hands against the ground. Accompanied by a harsh grating sound, the patch of land-turned-sand expanded outward. The sand engulfed the feet of the nearby defective spellcasters—as well as some of the surrounding Llewynian soldiers—before solidifying.

Unfortunately, it didn't have much effect on Lord Credias. His horse staggered after its hooves were caught in the sand, but that was the extent of it.

However, the knights under Lord Enister's banner charged forward, taking advantage of the opportunity to strike.

"That was so reckless!" Cain yelled as soon as he'd made his way back to me. He wasted no time picking me up, setting me down on his horse, and taking off; thus, I didn't get to see how many defective spellcasters Lord Enister managed to vanquish.

"Sir Cain..." Just taking my next breath took a monumental amount of effort.

Cain kept me tucked under his arm like a ball. "Quiet. Getting you away from him takes priority over anything else right now."

He was trying to get me as far from Lord Credias as possible. Unless we put some distance between myself and the viscount, there wouldn't be a thing I could to help. For now, I just had to pray for Lord Enister to hold out.

Not long after he'd broken out into a gallop, Cain glanced behind us. "Get down, Miss Kiara!" he cried hastily.

Before I could do as he'd instructed, he threw himself over me from behind, pushing me down against the horse. Moments later, a tree went flying right past us.

"What?!"

"The defective spellcasters are giving chase. I'm going to throw them off! Careful not to bite your tongue!"

"Uh, okay!" It was all I could do just to get out that reply. If I had tried to say anything more, there was a good chance I really would have taken off my own tongue.

Our horse dashed at breakneck speed through the gentle slopes of the woods. I was worried it was going to run us into a tree, but Cain spurred it onward, confident that it would steer clear of all obstacles.

Before long, the lethargy I'd felt had passed. We'd made it out of the viscount's sphere of influence, presumably.

"I can use magic again, Sir Cain. Let me dow—"

I didn't get to finish that sentence. A bolt of lightning tore through the nearby ground, drawing a cry from our horse as it bucked and threw us off. The only reason I managed to get out of it unscathed was because Cain had been cradling me in his arms.

"Are you alright, Sir Cain?!"

"I'm fine. I managed to stick the landing. However..."

Cain trailed off before breaking into a sprint, supporting my weight as he did. My legs still felt like jelly, but I did my best to keep up.

Someone flung a fireball at us from behind. Daunted by the explosion though I was, I managed to duck behind a particularly large tree for cover. When I glanced out from behind it, I saw three soldiers clad in the black capes of the Llewynian army, moaning and lumbering toward us. It was an ambush of defective spellcasters.

They looked like a bunch of zombies.

"Hey, little disciple," Master Horace whispered while I stood there in a daze.

“Something about these guys just isn’t right. I haven’t seen a single one of ’em fall apart yet.”

He was right. No matter how long we waited them out, their limbs never dissolved into sand, and they weren’t just blindly and mindlessly shooting off magic. And whenever they *did* start spewing fire, too overcome with agony to hold it in, they were clearly taking aim at us.

“I’ve never seen defectives act like this.”

“Then... do you think they’re just regular spellcasters being controlled?”

“I doubt it. Just look at the way they’re moving; real spellcasters would have too much presence of mind for that.”

It was an unexpected and inexplicable situation we’d found ourselves in, but our only option was to fight back. Now that I’d gotten away from Lord Credias and could wield my magic at will, I jumped into action.

“Sorry!” I apologized as I cast my spell.

The earth beneath the defective spellcasters’ feet stretched out like a giant needle, piercing two of them clean through. Blood splattered and turned to sand before it could even hit the ground. The rest of their bodies soon followed suit, crumbling away into dust.

Meanwhile, Cain sprang toward another defective, weaving his way through the man’s onslaught of fireballs until he’d gotten close enough to take his head off.

“That was the last one, Miss—”

Cain went pale. It was pure instinct that I raised a wall of earth before I even had time to turn around; however, that wall was swiftly blown away. As I toppled over along with it, I once again felt every last bit of strength drain from my body, making it a struggle to get back up.

As soon as Cain had helped me up to my feet, he gulped.

“If it isn’t the very woman who fled from me! My, you’ve grown to look even more like Annamarie since the last time I saw you.” The moment that voice reached my ears, a shiver crawled down my spine.

There sat Lord Credias, no less than thirty paces away. Lined up in front of his horse were several defective spellcasters, their gazes all fixed on me as they shambled forward.

I shuddered to my very core. What accompanied the fatigue that washed over me was an overwhelming sense of hopelessness.

While I stood there paralyzed, Cain threw me over his shoulder and took off running.

“There’s nowhere to run. You and I have a magical connection; I’m something of a father of yours, after all. No matter where you go, I can tell where you are instantly. And the more you run, the more I’m going to make you suffer.” His threat was accompanied by a repugnant guffaw.

The defective spellcasters bolted after us. Lord Credias didn’t so much as budge. Perhaps he knew the exact range of his power over me, and thus was in no hurry; he was confident I would still be well within those bounds by the time his minions caught me.

“Sir Cain... Put me down...”

I knew I had to take out as many defective spellcasters as I possibly could. Yet there was nothing I could do while I was getting jostled around atop Cain’s shoulder, and I was still too weak to move a muscle.

“We’re too close for you to start helping.”

“But...!”

The defective spellcasters chasing after us weren’t all that fast, but unfortunately, magic was a projectile weapon in practice. With all the fireballs they were hurling at us, it was a miracle that none of them had hit us yet.

No sooner had I thought that than we were assailed by a gale strong enough to shake the trees around us. The winds were too strong to move against; Cain’s feet were swept out from under him, and he fell to the ground, cushioning me in his arms.

I peeled myself away from Cain as he groaned in pain, tossing out a piece of copper ore I’d been keeping in my pocket before touching the ground. Despite

putting my all into the spell, the best I could manage was two golems, each about the size of a person.

My throat hurt, and my breath was coming as raggedly as if I'd been running nonstop. My whole body felt like it was on fire. Still, I pushed my golems to run forward, throwing themselves at the incoming defective spellcasters. Hindered by their impaired judgment, perhaps, the two men tumbled to the ground.

That was the limit of what I could do, however. My golems crumbled immediately thereafter, returning to the soil.

These petty tricks weren't going to cut it. Telling myself as much, I reached for my knife so I could draw my own blood, but I was stopped when Cain once again scooped me up into his arms.

We went back on the move. Another defective spellcaster, who had closed in on us while we were sprawled on the ground, started shooting fire. A nearby tree came toppling down, burnt to a crisp. Right as Cain swerved to avoid it, he was struck with a blade of wind.

I shrieked as I watched him take the blow, the cape on his back ripped to shreds. A huge gash had been cut down his armor.

He once again toppled to the ground from the impact. Although he managed to shelter me in his arms, he gave a pained moan when a fireball exploded nearby.

When I pulled myself upright, I saw that Cain's ever-stoic face was twisted in agony.

"No! Sir Cain!"

What do I do?! I was about to try my hand at one more spell, but Cain grabbed me by the wrist before I could.

"Calm down." After he'd opened his eyes to stare up at me, Cain pulled himself up off the ground, gritting his teeth through the pain. "Do you see that cliff up ahead, Miss Kiara? Is there a way to get us down from there?" he asked, getting to his feet and holding his sword at the ready.

I took a quick look around us. There did indeed appear to be a cliff about a

dozen mers ahead—and a pretty tall one, at that. To be more specific, it looked to be about as high as a four-story building. Considering the shape we were in, making a staircase for us to run down wouldn't be much of a solution. We needed a faster and easier way to get to the bottom.

“There is!”

“I'll leave that to you, then!” he instructed, then charged toward the defective spellcasters.

I nearly called him back, but I figured he had to have some kind of plan. After all, he hadn't suggested I leave him behind earlier.

Assured that he would be coming with me, I cut my palm with a knife, took a piece of copper ore out of my pocket with a trembling hand, and smeared it in blood.

For a passing moment, I came close to losing consciousness. I had to do this, though; it was the only way I could save Cain. After staggering all the way over to the edge of the cliff, I dropped the copper ore on the spot.

“I have to do it all... in one go...”

The less time this took, the better. With that in mind, I cast one giant spell.

A moment after part of the cliff crumbled away, giving way to exactly the structure I'd had in mind, I crouched down on the spot, strapped for breath. Of course, this was no time to be lying around.

“Sir Cain!” Confident that he would follow after me, I called out to him right before throwing myself down the slide I'd just built.

The slide, which I'd dug into the side of the cliff, propelled me toward the ground below at insane speeds. Cain slid down after me, catching me along the way. If he hadn't, there was no telling how far I would've tumbled after hitting the bottom, given my momentum.

Cain was wounded all over. The sleeve of his left arm was singed, and half of his breastplate had been sliced away. His legs were a bloody mess, covered in jagged cuts. Still, he fought on.

The defective spellcasters clearly didn't have any mental capacity to speak of;

two of them came chasing after us, only to fall off the cliff to their deaths. One of them, however, copied what we'd done and took the slide, while another lowered himself down with his wind magic.

I buried the first defective spellcaster under the earth, using up an entire section of the slide to do it. Cain took down the other one, tearing up his left arm even more in the process.

This was the first time I'd ever seen Cain out of breath. Nonetheless, he pushed onward, holding me in his arms—all to bring us just a little bit closer to Alan and his troops.



According to what I heard later on, Lord Enister had sent a handful of soldiers after us by this point. Lord Credias and his defective spellcasters had run off in hot pursuit of us, so he could see that we were in clear danger. He'd dispatched about thirty of his soldiers to back us up.

Although they'd managed to take down three defective spellcasters, ten of them had lost their lives in the process, and nearly all of them had been injured. Based on those numbers, if Cain and I had just stayed put, the defectives' numbers would have multiplied into the dozens... or maybe even more, and the count's forces likely would have suffered enough casualties to send them running.

The fact that Cain had taken down multiple defective spellcasters on his own was a testament to the strength of Évrard's and Reggie's knights.

At the time, I still didn't realize that Cain had made the best possible choice there. All I knew was that he was focused on giving Lord Credias the slip, and that was why he had chosen to go down the cliff.

Sure enough, Lord Credias had no way to come down after us on horseback; he vanished from sight, having left to look for an alternative route. The rest of the defective spellcasters took the same detour as the viscount.

Once we'd made it to the foot of the cliff, we walked a short ways before stopping for a breather. I had to make Cain rest; between his injuries and how exhausted he was, he'd clearly hit his limit. I shoved him down into a hollow in

the cliff, then hid us from sight with an earthen wall.

We couldn't stay put for too long, or Lord Credias would find us. Regardless, we needed the chance to recuperate and treat Cain's wounds. We were bound to get into at least one more altercation before we made it back to where Alan was. Seeing as I was functionally useless right now, it was of the utmost importance to raise Cain's chances of survival as much as we possibly could. Since we had yet to leave Lord Credias' sphere of influence, I was still feeling sluggish and shiver-prone, but I could still manage whatever first-aid didn't call for my magic.

I rubbed a salve on Cain's arm and back, where his clothes had torn, and laid his skin bare. The wound on his back wasn't quite as deep as I'd feared, but his left arm was in bad shape. Surely it was nothing that the miracle salves of this world couldn't heal, but the process was going to take a while.

All I wanted was to buy him a little extra time to rest. The fact that I couldn't was nearly frustrating enough to bring me to tears.

"Do you think, perhaps... that the viscount can't cast any magic of his own?" Cain mused aloud as I was tending to his wounds.

"The fact that he *still* hasn't attacked us directly is a good sign that he can't," Master Horace answered. Evidently, he had been giving Lord Credias' powers some thought, too.

I noted that Master Horace didn't appear to be as badly affected as he had been last time, however.

"Judging by those defective spellcasters' peculiar behavior, plus the way they never self-destruct, it could be that his specialty lies in manipulating mana—both his and other people's."

"You think?" I asked.

Master Horace jerked his head in a nod. "If he can control the flow of their mana, it explains why his defective spellcasters never fall apart no matter how much time passes. The way he gets them to do his bidding is probably the same as how I controlled those monsters way back when. He shared a sliver of the same contract stone with those men, then swallowed down the remainder

himself. Heheheh!”

Now I see, I thought. It explained why they weren’t acting like normal defective spellcasters, as well as why they never attacked the viscount himself.

It also explained why Lord Credias never made an appearance in the RPG. Given that no defective spellcasters had ever shown up in the game, he probably didn’t have as many contract stones on hand there. If I had to guess, he’d used up his whole supply in fishing for a spellcaster; hence why he’d forced Kiara to fight for him during the war, likely lurking somewhere in the shadows as she did.

In which case, perhaps Lord Credias had been quietly taken out not long after Kiara died.

Right as I envisioned that scenario, I faded out of consciousness. My fever had gone down, but the exhaustion still hadn’t left me; maybe that was why.

For a brief moment, I witnessed some sort of hallucination.

Well done, Kiara. I had no need of that man anymore, murmured a woman, offering me praise. It was my first time ever hearing her voice, yet somehow, it felt so familiar. *Now it’s time to give you that which you desired.*

She took out something to show to me. In a box small enough to sit atop her palm, there was a silver ring with a translucent green gem, fixed upon what looked almost like... a white rod?

This was all that was left of him. But you ought to be able to tell whether it’s the real thing or not, no?

At that, I snapped back to my senses.

“That puts us in a hairy situation, to be honest. As long as he has enough stones, he can make as many magic-wielding soldiers as he wants. Bet he hit the mother lode somewhere.” Master Horace was finishing his previous thought, so I couldn’t have drifted out of consciousness for more than a few seconds.

I pinched the back of my right hand—the one that wasn’t hurt. It wasn’t quite enough to clear my head, but there was no time for me to be spacing out. Not

until we got back to Alan's troops, at least.

"But it doesn't look like the viscount is having much effect on *you* this time around," I said to Master Horace.

"He's holding back, obviously. He's having fun watching you run around trying to escape, knowing he can crush you at any moment. Eeeheehee! The healthier your prey, the longer you can enjoy the hunt."

Lord Credias was letting us get away so he could watch us suffer, all to satisfy his own sadistic urges. From his perspective, the moment Cain was taken out of the picture, he could kill me whenever he wanted.

It finally dawned on me why the viscount had looked so complacent, and I heaved a sigh.

"Tired, Miss Kiara?" Cain asked.

"I'm doing alright. I'm still feeling a bit lethargic, but that's all."

In all honesty, I wanted nothing more than to lie down and take a nap. Of course, Cain was much worse off than me, and he'd *still* carried me all this way. I was in no position to be whining.

"Alan's troops shouldn't be too far away; we'll be there in no time. Let's do what we can." I didn't want to worry Cain, so I flashed him a reassuring smile.

With just the hint of a rueful smile, he responded, "If we don't make it back to the main body... would you be willing to die alongside me?"

I could practically feel my face fall. The very fact that he was asking me spoke to what grave danger we were in.

"I don't want to see you in the hands of that viscount."

He reached out to brush a hand against my cheek. Between the gentle gesture and the question he'd just asked me, I was lost for words.



“Under normal circumstances, being a spellcaster would guarantee you a decent level of treatment as a captive. But so long as that viscount is around, you’re as powerless as an old woman on her last legs. And based on what he said... the man is clearly obsessed with you. There’s no way he would leave you undefiled.”

Cain was exactly right. Lord Credias had made a strange comment about how I looked like someone else, and given that I’d run off on him before we could get married, there was a good chance I’d be subjected to the worst fate possible for a lady.

Lord Credias was the only opponent I couldn’t fight off with magic. There was no telling what he might do to me.

Still, I wasn’t going to give up and die—no matter how scary the thought was.

“If he’s that fixated on me, I doubt he’s going to kill me. He has no reason to keep *you* alive, though. It’d make more sense for you to leave me behind and —”

“I’m not going to do that,” Cain asserted. “Why would you ever think I’d abandon you? You’re irreplaceable to me—both as my sister and as something more.”

The declaration almost brought me to tears. He cared so much about me; that realization alone offered me a bit of salvation in this hopeless situation. Still, if I let myself get too immersed in those feelings, my will to keep running was bound to melt away with the rest of me. There would be no saving me *or* Cain if that happened.

“You’re my one and only brother, Sir Cain. I won’t let you die. Let’s do what we can to make sure *neither* of us does.”

If they lost Cain, Alan and Reggie would be devastated, too. No matter how much they claimed otherwise, both of them looked up to the knight like an older brother.

If my capture would lead to his death, I had to do whatever I could to keep from getting caught. I needed to get my slow wits in order and think of a solution.

It was then that, suddenly, I heard a sound—the crunch of footsteps over dried leaves and tree branches. Either a person or a horse was drawing near.

“Sir Cain!”

“If it were an ally, they would have called out to us. Let’s get going. If they get too close, they’ll be able to spot us easily.”

At the moment, we were sitting in a nook in the cliffside, with only an earthen wall erected to keep us hidden from view. Perhaps that could trick the eyes of someone far away, but the moment they got any closer, they’d be able to tell that something was off.

We stealthily slipped out from the hollow. Every now and then we would stop where we were, holding our breath and listening for the mystery guest’s footsteps. Whoever they were, they were still a good distance away... probably. I could hear the faint, metallic clank of their armor.

Purposely steering clear of the source of the sound, Cain walked along the edge of the cliff. The footsteps would sometimes get closer and sometimes get farther away, but they never faded into the distance.

“Sir Cain, let’s head up to the top of the cliff. I’ll make us a staircase. If our pursuer is on horseback, we’ll be able to shake him. The viscount and his lackeys shouldn’t be around anymore, since they left to find a way down.”

“Do you think you can manage it?”

“I’ll have to.”

There was no other way if we wanted to survive. Cain acknowledged that with a nod... only to thrust me away seconds later, the same moment I heard something slash through the air.

As I slumped down onto the ground, I watched an arrow whizz past my eyes. Cain, who had gotten to his feet to shield me behind his back, was staring fixedly at a certain spot.

Our assailant spoke in a tone casual enough to have no place on the battlefield. “Oho. Lord Bullfrog wasn’t lying, I see. You really *are* indisposed.”

There was no mistaking that voice—and this was the worst possible time to

be hearing it. Oh, how I wished it could have been anyone else.

“I figured the spellcaster would come this way, and what do you know? It looks like that prediction was on the mark. I was right to slip away on my own. Am I good or what?”

Singing his own praises, the man lazily emerged from behind a tree. His rusty red hair was a bit on the long side, and his eyes were sharp and gray—it was none other than Isaac.

The first time we’d met, he’d pretended to be a merchant. He’d seemed like such a good person, cheering me up when I was down about Reggie denying me the opportunity to fight. But now... I knew that he was the king of Salekhard, who had formed an alliance with Llewyne and invaded Farzia.

“Can’t say I expected you to have a knight with you, though.”

At first, it looked like he’d come here alone. Soon, however, I heard the beat of horses’ hooves approaching, followed by a dozen cavalrymen coming up behind him.

When he caught sight of Isaac’s green cape, Cain deduced that he must be a Salekhardian. Of course, the whole point of the different colors was to prevent friendly fire, so that was to be expected.

“You disguised the sound of your approach by moving alone, I see,” Cain muttered, realizing that using those noises to guide his escape had been his downfall. Still, he didn’t sound particularly upset; to the contrary, he appeared oddly calm about this turn of events.

As for me? I couldn’t even bring myself to open my mouth and say something. Whenever Isaac looked at me, it wasn’t with the same gentle gaze he’d shown me before. The ice in his eyes chilled me to the bone; I may as well have been a pebble on the side of the road to him. Worse still, he hadn’t even bothered to lower his sword.

Eventually, Isaac took a step toward us.

I had no idea how strong he actually was. What I did know, however, was that Cain’s injuries were going to put him at a disadvantage. I desperately tried to think of a way to stop him, but I came up empty.

“Isaac...” Sensing that this wasn’t the time or place to be asking for mercy, all I could do was call out his name.

The redhead came to a halt. “Why, if it isn’t our little miss mage. If I’m being honest, you present little more than an obstacle to me. I’ll kill you as soon as I’m done with this man, so wait your turn like a good girl.”

He wouldn’t even say my name in return.

It was then that I realized that I’d been holding onto the naive hope that he might help me out the way he always had in the past. But that wasn’t going to happen; right now, he was standing before me as the king of Salekhard.

Cain held his sword at the ready, blood oozing from his open wounds.

The color drained from my face. At this rate, he really was going to die. An image of Cain lying covered in blood crossed my mind.

I needed to get these two away from each other. I didn’t want Cain to die. I didn’t want him to get killed by Isaac. But I was scared of hurting Isaac, too.

“Wha...? Little disciple?!” By the time Master Horace cried out in dismay, I had already cast my spell. The ground all around me turned into a giant pincushion, spikes protruding from the earth.

“Go away!” I screamed.

The wave of earthen barbs rippled over the ground. Just as I’d demanded, the knights who had lined up behind Isaac hastily drew back.

And yet, Isaac himself only took another step forward. Weaving his way through the extending spikes that threatened to tear into his limbs, he rushed forward to clash swords with Cain.

That was when I knew that I’d failed. Isaac probably realized that if he got right up close to Cain, I wouldn’t be able to hit him with my magic. I couldn’t risk Cain getting caught in the crossfire, after all.

I couldn’t attack anymore. The mana in my body was spiraling out of control, painful enough to make me clutch at my chest. It was so bad that I would’ve coughed it up, blood and all, if that was what it would take to make me feel better.

“You fool! What, are you *trying* to take years off your own life?” Master Horace berated me in hushed tones.

Sorry, Master Horace. If I’m going to end up dead either way, I want to do as much as I can.

“Sorry for dragging you down with me.”

“Hey, don’t apologize. I’m not even alive to begin with.”

Master Horace’s words of reassurance tugged at my heartstrings. Even so, I *had* to create a chance for Cain to escape.

There was only one thing left that I could do.

“Just act like a real doll for a bit, okay?” With that request, I turned my gaze toward Isaac and Cain.

They were still in the heat of their silent battle. Isaac slashed at Cain, and Cain parried his strike. It looked almost like a sword dance they’d learned the moves to already. Cain was sent tumbling back by Isaac’s kick, knocking him off balance. He quickly pulled himself upright, pivoting into a thrust, only to be pushed back yet again. Then they exchanged blows once more.

Before long, Cain was running out of breath. Isaac, meanwhile, was composed enough that the smile hadn’t fallen from his face. “Now I wish I could’ve dueled you when you weren’t already hurt.”

Upon clashing swords for the umpteenth time, Isaac swept Cain’s feet out from under him. Even as he toppled over, Cain kept a firm grip on his weapon. Aiming to parry the next blow of Isaac’s sword, he raised his arm.

However, the tip of Isaac’s sword instead drew a smooth arc in the air, cutting into Cain’s leg, sending his sword flying, and then running him through the stomach.

The only reason I didn’t scream was because I couldn’t find my voice.

After Isaac pulled out his sword, dripping with blood, Cain crumpled to the ground.

My arms and legs were trembling violently. Still, standing there crying and doing nothing wasn’t going to help Cain. I forced my joints into motion, pushing

myself forward with everything I had. I threw myself over Cain, as if to shield him.

“Don’t kill him...” I didn’t have the energy to so much as raise my voice, but I couldn’t let myself pass out just yet. There was something I still had to do.

My movements were sluggish, but Isaac didn’t move in to stop me. That alone was enough to reassure me.

Thank God. That means he might actually go for my proposal.

I put my idea into words. “You want a spellcaster, don’t you, Isaac? Isn’t that why you asked me to go with you before?”

When I glanced up, I saw Isaac wordlessly meet my gaze. He stayed silent, fixing me with a stern look—as if pressing me to put my resolve into words.

“I’ll go with you to Salekhard. I’ll join your side, so please, just spare his life,” I declared, my voice wavering.

“Miss Kia—” Cain probably wanted to stop me. Stubbornly holding on to consciousness, he called out my name, but I pretended I hadn’t heard him. It wasn’t like I *really* wanted to do this, either. Becoming an ally of Salekhard meant becoming an enemy of Farzia.

“Let Sir Cain go. In exchange, I promise to serve under you.”

Isaac mulled that over for a few seconds before answering. “Hmm. Your resolve is admirable, Kiara. But are you sure? There’s no telling how you’ll be treated. You’re a spellcaster, after all. I can’t hand you an opportunity to trick me.”

Now that he was acting as king, Isaac wasn’t going to say, “Sure, why not?” and abscond with me just like that. The ice in his gaze—the way he looked at me like a stranger—was enough to make me wince.

Unlike the viscount, Isaac had no trick to keep me in check. Thus, I couldn’t imagine what he might do to ensure I stay in line. What was I going to do if he had me tortured? Or if he did something no better than what Lord Credias would?

Just thinking about it made me want to cry. Still, it wasn’t enough to break my

resolve to rescue Cain. Now that I could do little but sink miserably to the ground, this body of mine was the only thing I had to bring to the table.

Besides, his lack of confidence that he could keep the upper hand actually put my mind at ease.

I nodded. “I can’t use magic right now. I doubt I could put up much of a fight if you decided to carry me off somewhere, and if it means you’ll let Sir Cain go... I’ll listen to you.”

“Very well,” declared Isaac.

Cain tried to stop me. “No! You should just make a run for it—-”

Although he’d just asked me to die with him earlier, I knew Cain would never let me run off to my doom. Thus, I just smiled and said, “I don’t want you to die. You’re my only big brother in the whole world. How could I just stand by and watch my loving family get killed?”

“But there’s no need for *you* to sacrifice yourself. What about His High—?”

I touched a finger to his lips, cutting him off. Surreptitiously, I placed the back of my hand on the wound on his stomach.

“I’m sorry; I know I’m being selfish. Either way, it’ll be fine for you to go back on your own. I know Reggie will understand. He knows better than anyone how much I wanted a family. If it was to save you, the person who’s like a brother to me... he knows I’d do something like this.”

I clenched my teeth together, holding back a sob. Cain looked like he still wanted to argue, but I didn’t give him a chance to say anything. Using my blood, which was still flowing freely, I attempted to heal his wound with my magic.

Pretending to cry, I hung my head. My tears were falling of their own accord, soaking Cain’s clothes, so Isaac would probably believe I was merely sobbing. That was only going to buy me a tiny bit of time; still, I wanted to do whatever I could to increase Cain’s chances of survival.

Perhaps due to the pain of the spell, Cain appeared to have lost consciousness. I continued to cast my magic, concentrating my efforts on his internal injuries. If I’d healed the external ones, Isaac would have caught on to

what I was doing. Besides, a little salve in the right place was all it would take to patch up those flesh wounds.

Unfortunately, I'd lost a little too much blood, and using my magic had cost me even more stamina than my injury. Although I'd managed to keep Cain alive for now, there was no telling if Alan and the other Farzians would be able to save him. It was going to take another miracle for Cain to survive this, but this was the limit of what I could do.

Strangely enough, I didn't feel much worse than before, even though I'd just cast magic when I was already pushed to my limits. Why was that?

"Have you finished your goodbyes?" It was some number of seconds later that Isaac finally asked me that, gripping me by the shoulder.

Knowing that I'd done everything I could, I felt some measure of peace.

"Let him go," I said, my gaze fixed on the ground.

Isaac's tone softened. "There's not much a man on the verge of death can do, so I suppose I ought to hold up my end of the bargain. You there! Mount this man onto a horse and send him away."

I had no strength left to resist, so there was little I could do as Isaac hoisted me up in his arms. Unable to do so much as lift my head, I let it hang low. However, I could see a Salekhardian soldier load Cain onto a horse, tying him down so he wouldn't fall off.

Before long, he gave the horse a light slap, spurring it into a trot. My bleary eyes followed the horse as it wandered off into the forest, but eventually, it disappeared from sight.

Everything went pitch black. I'd probably closed my eyes, but it was hard to tell myself. I didn't feel any pain or anguish, though; I just felt like I wanted to sleep.

Only then did Isaac finally notice the condition I was in. "Wha... Hey, Kiara?!"

By then, however, I'd already lost my grip on consciousness. It was too late to even offer an explanation.

Consequently, I remained blissfully unaware of how the cut on my hand

slowly continued to grow... and how the bleeding had yet to show any signs of stopping.



“Hey, Kiara! Answer me!”

The man jostling Kiara in his arms was apparently someone whose name and face she knew.

Horace had first met him back at Fort Inion, when he’d claimed to be a merchant. It was clear to him, however, that his disciple had met this man once before that, and that the pair had already known a thing or two about each other by then.

Somewhere along the line, Kiara had realized he was actually the king of Salekhard.

It was possible that this man hadn’t been solely out to deceive her. Despite the cruel things he’d said only moments ago, he seemed awfully concerned for Kiara now that she’d lost consciousness. But also...

C’mon, boy! That’s going to make her feel even worse!

“You’re shaking her too much, you numbskull!”

“Oh, you’re that doll of a geezer...”

When Horace spoke up, the man called Isaac was startled for a fleeting moment, but quickly recalled who he was dealing with. Isaac’s cavalry, on the other hand, gasped in horror.

“Look at that doll! It’s moving on its own!”

“Did the spellcaster place a curse on it?!”

“We’re all gonna die!”

The knights steadily crept away from Isaac.

“Really now? A heartless lot, aren’t you?” he muttered.

“Your Majesty, we don’t want to be cursed to death!”

“Dying on the battlefield is one thing, but if anyone finds out I was killed by a

curse, my wife will be ostracized for it!”

After overhearing that snippet of conversation, Horace was confident that these men were Salekhardians. Perhaps due to the harsh climate up north, the people of Salekhard tended to be a God-fearing sort. They were particularly afraid of curses.

That was just one more reason why he and Kiara were better off here than in Llewynian hands.

What’s more, there was no longer any question that Isaac was the king of Salekhard, given that he’d just been referred to as “Your Majesty.” How on earth had Kiara met him in the first place? Horace hadn’t the faintest idea, but what he *did* understand was why Kiara had allowed him to take her captive in her desperate attempts to save that knight. This was a man who could be reasoned with. And if he was a king on top of that, he could easily dismiss the objections of a Farzian nobleman like Lord Credias.

Might as well run with it, Horace thought.

“Who said I’m cursed? Don’t be so rude, you whippersnappers! Heeheehee!” He deliberately let out a cackle, knowing full well how ominous it would sound.

Isaac, the one standing closest to him, let out a sigh. “What in the world *are* you, anyway? I remember Kiara called you her mentor, but that’s all I know.”

“Call me Horace. I’m this girl’s mentor; you got that part right. But forget about *me*. Right now, you ought to focus on hauling my disciple back from the brink of death.”

“What do you mean, the brink of death?”

“Take a look at her left hand.”

Upon taking a closer look at Kiara’s limply dangling hand, Isaac initially just looked puzzled; he assumed she was only suffering a minor injury. However, the one subordinate of his who hadn’t cowered in fear of Horace—a blond boy soldier—stepped forward to observe it more carefully, only to comment, “Is the wound *growing*? Is this magic, too?”

“It’s because she used up too much of her mana—and your spellcaster ally

didn't help matters, either. At this rate, she's going to turn into sand from the hand up and die."

"Hey now," said Isaac, a note of alarm in his voice. "If it's a magic thing, what are we supposed to do about it?"

"Close up the wound, then head west as fast as you can. Once you get her away from that frog of a spellcaster, her condition will stabilize. Meanwhile, you should let him know that you've apprehended the spellcaster and that she's at death's door. Considering how badly he wants to toy with my disciple here, I doubt he'd want her killed."

After giving those directions a few seconds of thought, Isaac began handing out orders. "Mikhail, tend to her wound. You there! Go find my horse."

The men sprung into action at their king's command.

"It really is growing." Mikhail grimaced as he dressed the wound. He likely had no idea where to begin treating it.

Once he'd wiped away the blood and slathered on a liberal amount of ointment, he wrapped a bandage around the affected area.

Even after her hand was swathed in white cloth, it continued to ooze blood. Still, it was better than leaving it unattended. All that was left to do was move out as quickly as possible.

"Hurry it up, will you? C'mon, son!"

"Never thought I'd see the day when a king was bossed around by some doll," Isaac muttered, striding over to his horse as soon as it was brought over.

Horace tacked on one more thing while he still had the chance. "Let me give you a word of advice: if you want to make my disciple listen to you, you ought to take me hostage. That alone will be plenty to ensure she doesn't run off on you."

Isaac snorted, his lips curving up into a knowing smile. He understood Horace's implication: *There's no need to threaten the girl herself.*

"Your disciple is quite precious to you, I see."

"She's a teenage girl. Handle her too roughly and she'll break."

Isaac silently mounted his horse, briefly handing Kiara off to one of his soldiers before taking her back in his arms. “We’ll see how it goes. Well... assuming she recovers enough to give us the chance.”

Horace shared that concern. “If she *doesn’t* bounce back, I’ll make sure to curse you.”

“What?” Isaac boggled at the doll, his eyes as wide as saucers. Gratified to see such a dumb look on the face of such a stud, Master Horace let out a cackle.

Interlude: Out of His Reach

Houses were swallowed by flame one after the other. The citizens of the town had likely been evacuated as part of the plan to ensnare the Farzian army; their absence was the one silver lining in this predicament.

Reggie directed his soldiers toward the west gate. “Break up into smaller units and escape through the alleyways.”

Llewynian soldiers were bound to be lying in wait along the larger streets, he figured. His prediction turned out to be correct; there weren’t very many enemies blocking the backstreets. Thanks to his quick thinking, the majority of his men managed to assemble near the west gate.

As they prepared to flee Liadna, for a fleeting moment, Reggie was stifled under the weight of the sacrifices they’d made to get there. “I’m so sorry, Felix.”

Reggie had always left Felix to deal with Ada. That was probably why the knight had shouldered the responsibility for not realizing she was an enemy sooner, signaling to the prince that he would be the one to go after her.

Regardless, there was no time for Reggie to dwell on his regrets.

“Was there anyone outside the gate?” he asked.

“Not that we could see,” Groul responded.

“Let’s head south, keeping our distance from the walls. Stay vigilant against enemy archers. We need to join up with the rest of the troops.” With that, he ordered his soldiers to march out of the town.

It wasn’t long before the troops led by Lord Limerick’s uncle, General Jerome, came into view. By that point, however, they were already engaged in battle with the Salekhardian army. They had likely looped around to the west gate to assist Reggie, only to find the Salekhardian troops meant to ambush the prince upon his escape. Now they were fighting to keep them at bay.

There were about 3,000 Salekhardians, and Jerome was leading a force of comparable numbers. Although the Farzians were unlikely to be outmatched here, the sooner they could force the enemy to retreat, the better.

“Salekhard and Llewyrne are doing everything they can to keep our forces split up. We should take General Jerome’s troops and meet up with Alan as quickly as possible.”

Reggie’s knights led the surviving soldiers, striking the opposing Salekhardian forces from the side. Perhaps they hadn’t expected Reggie to make it out of the town so soon; the Salekhardians held out for a while, but eventually, they began to fall back. Reggie didn’t bother giving chase.

“Alan’s forces may have been split up, too.”

His prediction was spot-on. Alan had been fighting off Salekhardian troops with nothing but a joint force of Évrard and Delphion soldiers.

When he heard that Kiara had headed east for a hit-and-run, Reggie was filled with a sense of foreboding. Then again, when *wasn’t* he worried about her? No matter how many enemy soldiers she could take out on her own, her ability to protect herself was always a matter of concern. Still, at least she had Wentworth by her side; in accordance with the margrave’s orders, he would protect her with his life. Even taking his personal feelings into account, he was likely to put her safety above his own.

His feelings toward the knight were complicated, but Reggie believed in Wentworth. Although his affections weren’t quite as pure as Alan’s, he similarly trusted the man like an older brother. Precisely because he knew Wentworth’s character so well, if Kiara had to be taken from him, he was glad it would be by the knight and not anyone else.

Reggie sent Gina, Girsch, and his own knights over to Lord Enister. He’d heard word that defective spellcasters had entered the fray, which was a sign that Lord Credias had had a hand in all this. If Kiara was in a tight spot, having the frostfoxes for backup ought to relieve some of her burden.

No matter how badly Reggie wanted to run to her side, he couldn’t. At the very least, he first had to drive back the Salekhardians before him so as to allow her a chance to rest once she made it back.

Or so he'd thought.

Girsch and Gina came running back sooner than he'd anticipated. With them was Wentworth, comatose and moribund.

Reggie could hardly believe the condition he was in. Ever since he'd lost his family in Llewyn's invasion, Wentworth had trained incessantly in a desperate bid to become strong; never had the prince imagined that he would be defeated on the battlefield.

Kiara wasn't with him. There was no one to ask for an explanation. Based on his injuries, all Reggie could deduce was that he'd fought against several defective spellcasters, followed by a clash with a swordsman.

What's more, the warhorse Wentworth was riding was from Salekhard. When he heard that the knight had been tied down to keep him from falling off, Reggie murmured, "Did Kiara give herself up to Salekhard in exchange for Wentworth's life?"

While Girsch tended to Wentworth's wounds, a glum look passed over the mercenary's face. "Probably. Also, it looks like Sir Cain was stabbed clean through his stomach, since there are gashes to prove it... but his insides haven't taken any damage at all. Thankfully, that means a salve should be more than enough to close up the wound. I'll bet you anything he would have died otherwise."

Alan's expression turned grim. "Kiara probably pulled the same trick she did on Felix." Hanging his head, he quietly muttered, "How am I ever to repay her?"

Reggie could only nod. Kiara had saved both of their lives just as they were about to be lost, sacrificing herself to do it.

Deep down, all he wanted was to shake the knight awake and ask him what had happened and where she was. Unfortunately, the battle was still raging. Tossing conventional tactics to the wayside, the enemy had divided their forces into tiny units and gone on the attack.

In the face of this abnormal maneuver, Alan's forces were struggling to strike back. If they tried to focus on wiping out a single unit, the other squads would swarm in like ants to defend them. Another unit would then launch an attack

from elsewhere, and the squads would use that chance to split up and run off again.

Given the stalemate they were trapped in, Lord Enister's forces had started to pull back. At this rate, taking down the enemy was going to prove difficult. In which case, their only option was a temporary retreat.

When Reggie said as much, Alan replied, "That leaves the question of where to."

"Let's head directly south. We can seize the same fort we stormed earlier."

The prince ordered his Farzian troops into a tight formation. The next time the Salekhardians tried to lure them in, they were going to take advantage of it and break through their ranks to charge south.

Of course, given that they were charging straight into enemy lines, they weren't going to make it through without even more sacrifices. Nonetheless, the soldiers once led by the late Lord Azure volunteered to handle the left flank, which would put them at the greatest risk of clashing with the enemy. Knowing that their loyalty to the royal family made them the most dependable of all, Reggie resolved to exploit the Azurans lives for all they were worth, though it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Or at least, that was how it was all *supposed* to go.

"Lila?!" came the surprised cries of the mercenaries.

When Reggie looked back over his shoulder to the rear of the troops, what he saw was a frostfox that had grown all the way up to Gina's shoulders. Though he wouldn't have known it if not for their shouts, it was evidently the fox named Lila. Wondering about what had happened would have to wait until later, however.

At Reggie's command, Gina used Lila to launch a fierce assault. The Salekhardians were stunned when they saw the giant frostfox barreling toward them, and the subsequent blizzard effectively put a stop to their attacks.

Thanks to that, Reggie and his men found shelter in Fort Liadna with minimal casualties.



Once they'd safely arrived at the fort, an ambush still had to be laid in preparation for Salekhard's attack. Regardless, relief washed over the entire army now that they were somewhere they could take breaks in shifts. The way the overgrown Lila was sitting on her haunches and standing guard over a crumbled section of the wall only further reassured them.

Those with ties to the injured and fallen, however, wore miserable expressions. Lord Azure's men in particular were deep in mourning. After all, the marquis had been betrayed by Ada, the very girl he'd trusted and sheltered, and had been killed as a consequence.

Reggie had managed to hear the full story from them. Apparently, Ada had masqueraded as a devout Jeremian, using the morning services as an excuse to interact with Lord Azure. Generally speaking, Azurans were always gracious toward fellow Jeremians. After getting into the marquis' good graces by faking her faith, she'd relied on him to cover up the fire she'd started inside Fort Inion.

The source of that abnormal fire had evidently been Ada killing a couple of soldiers when they caught her up to something—though of course, the girl in question had claimed *they* picked a fight with *her*.

Lord Azure's corpse had been found when Kiara's team headed into town after Reggie. Kiara had run into Ada there, but the enemy spellcaster had run off in tears without even raising a hand against her.

"Perhaps she grew attached to Felix," Reggie murmured. "Or was it Kiara?"

"I would wager it was the both of them, Your Grace," Groul responded. "The lady Ada always did seem rather starved for love."

That *would* explain why she had grown so obsessed with Reggie, despite meeting him only once in the royal palace.

"Given how many times Felix had to drag her away from you, perhaps that felt like he was paying her special attention. Lady Kiara comforted her once as well. Seeing as they were fellow spellcasters, she may have felt a special sort of connection there."

Reggie hoped that Groul's assessment was right. If Ada had refrained from

attacking Kiara out of sentiment, that increased the likelihood of her pulling some strings for Kiara while she was Salekhard's captive.

"Still, I never would have thought Lady Kiara was a healer, too. We owe her quite a lot. Felix's arm is hardly any worse for the wear, and his burns should heal in time."

Felix remained in a coma, but he was going to make it. This introduced a different problem, however.

Kiara had used up too much of her magic in this battle. She'd saved Felix's life, launched an assault against the Salekhardian army, and even aided Lord Enister in his attack on the Llewynians. To begin with, mending wounds took such a large toll on Kiara that she'd passed out after the time she healed Reggie.

Although Kiara had surely learned to cast more magic since then, she had *also* fought off nearly ten defective spellcasters with only Wentworth's help. Would her body hold up after all that?

"Just tell me she's still alive..."

All he could do was hope that she was still breathing.

Once the soldier had finished relaying his message, Reggie left the room. There was someone he had to confirm a few details with.

"We've been expecting you, Your Grace."

The ones kneeling inside the tiny chapel of the fort, waiting to welcome him, were Gina and Girsch.

"First, I'd like to hear about what happened to your frostfox," said Reggie.

He still hadn't heard *why* the frostfox named Lila had grown to such enormous proportions.

"I'm not sure of the reason myself. All I know is that Lila licked Sir Cain's clothes while Girsch was tending to him... and ended up like that."

Ended up a giant, in other words.

Could a monster really undergo such a dramatic transformation just by lapping up some blood? More than anything, the change in size seemed to

indicate an increase in power.

That was when Reggie suddenly remembered: according to the report, when Kiara restored Felix, she had applied her own blood to the wound. Perhaps it was a vital step of the healing process. In which case, it followed that she had done the same thing to Wentworth.

“So it was *Kiara’s* blood, hm?”

A miniscule amount though it was, some of Kiara’s mana was contained within her blood; hence why using her own blood made it easier to create her golems and such, according to what Reggie had been told.

Plus, the frostfoxes always *had* been drawn to Kiara in hopes of soaking up some of the mana she exuded. Thus, there was little doubt that her blood was the secret to Lila’s sudden growth spurt.

Once he’d arrived at his own conclusion, Reggie said, “I understand now. Thank you,” and turned to take his leave.

“Um, Your Grace?” Gina called him to a halt.

Reggie turned around, and the next thing he heard from her wasn’t quite what he’d been expecting.



The next day, the Salekhardian and Llewynian troops in Liadna marched farther north. With that, the Farzians could finally afford to relax their guard.

As an air of relief settled over the fort that evening, Reggie headed to Wentworth’s quarters, having heard word that he had finally woken up.

When he stepped inside the room, the first thing he heard was: “The one who took Miss Kiara away... was King Isaac of Salekhard.”

Alan was asking questions, and Wentworth was lying in bed, offering stilted answers. Perhaps his injuries had him running a fever, judging by how red his face was.

“Did he introduce himself?”

“No; Miss Kiara is the one who called him that. The two were previously

acquainted, it seems. They both knew each other's names."

Alan was flabbergasted. "How did she know an *enemy king*?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't tell you that part." Wentworth gave a shake of his head before he went on to describe the king's defining features: reddish hair, gray eyes, clad in the green cape of Salekhard, and accompanied by a cavalry.

"Isaac, hm?" Reggie was sure he'd heard the name somewhere before. It couldn't have been directly from Kiara's mouth; if she had ever spoken the name of a man who wasn't part of their military, Reggie would have been keeping an eye out for him.

Searching his memory, Reggie finally remembered the merchant Kiara had been talking to back at Fort Inion. That had to have been King Isaac. Had he come to do some reconnaissance under the guise of a townsman? Reggie struggled to understand why the king himself would undertake such a task. While it was no business of his own, the very thought gave him secondhand anxiety; what had he been planning to do if something happened to him along the way?

When Reggie mentioned what he'd remembered, Alan heaved a sigh. "He was probably digging for more information on our spellcaster."

"Probably. Miss Kiara did say that he wanted a mage of his own." Wentworth continued to relay what he knew in fragments.

"Did he demand that she surrender herself to him?" Reggie asked.

"No. She offered it of her own volition so that he would let me escape with my life. I had sustained injuries prior to our encounter."

So it had happened exactly as Reggie had imagined. If she hadn't done something of the sort, there was no way Wentworth would have come home alive. He wouldn't have made it back to their troops without the work of that frostfox, either. Soon after Wentworth had been loaded onto a horse and sent off, Lila had gone running off to find him.

After pausing to catch his breath, Wentworth turned to Reggie. "My most humble apologies for showing my face here after failing to protect Miss Kiara. I'll make this right, even if it costs me my life."

“Oh, Wentworth...”

Having witnessed Kiara get stolen right out from under him, it was no surprise that he was beating himself up over it—both as a knight and as a man. What could Reggie possibly say to stop him?

After some deliberation, he instructed Groul and Alan to wait outside the door. Now that they were alone together, Reggie walked over to the bed where Wentworth lay, taking a seat on a stool.

“Your Grace,” Wentworth said. “Once I’ve recovered, please order me to rescue Miss Kiara.”

“There’s no need to push yourself, Wentworth. I know you feel responsible, but you’re going to have a hard time infiltrating enemy territory all by yourself.”

“But someone *has* to save her. It will be a considerable blow to our army otherwise. Besides, if Miss Kiara ends up under Lord Credias’ control, even your life and Lord Alan’s could be in danger.”

“Lord Enister mentioned that the viscount could control defective spellcasters. Is that why you’re saying that?”

Wentworth nodded. “Sir Horace speculated that as the trade-off for being unable to cast a direct attack, he knows a spell to control defective spellcasters. I ended up fighting against ten of them in practice. Depending on the circumstances, it wouldn’t surprise me if he could puppet Miss Kiara herself.”

If that happened, it would put them in a tough situation in the battles to come.

“In the worst-case scenario, we may have to...”

Reggie calmly predicted that he was about to end that sentence with “kill Miss Kiara.”

Of course, Wentworth didn’t *want* to say that. His hand lying atop the blanket was clenched in a fist. However, taking his priorities as a knight of Évrard into account, he knew he had no other choice.

Reggie’s mouth was filled with a bitter taste. Wentworth’s next words only made it worse.

“If it came down to that, I would want to be the one to do it. As long as the two of us fell together, I thought I could be at peace with that outcome. And if it saved you and Lord Alan in the process, I would take no issue with it.”

“Wentworth...” Reggie hung his head. “You don’t have to resign yourself to your fate. I don’t want to lose Kiara, but I don’t want to sacrifice you to save her, either. You’re like a brother to me and Alan, you know. Kiara loves you like a sibling, too. She wouldn’t want you to die just so she can be rescued. Just leave the matter in our hands.”

Wentworth was someone who had always stood by Reggie’s side. Perhaps because they were closer in age, or perhaps he was already a brother to Alan... unlike Groul and the rest, Wentworth was the only knight who would ever scold Reggie like a younger sibling.

He wanted them both to live. Reggie was always prepared to cut people off in order to preserve his own standing or his own life, but this was the one point where he refused to compromise.

Wentworth blinked. “Miss Kiara knew you would say that.”

“Say what?”

“When Miss Kiara let me escape, she said that she wanted to protect me because I was like a brother to her. She claimed that you would understand her choice, even if it meant her falling into enemy hands—that you knew how much she wanted a family.”

Both Reggie and Kiara had lost the only relatives they could count on. Reggie had shed his attachment to the idea of family, but seeing as Kiara remembered the warmth of her past-life home, she yearned to have another family like them. That was why she always likened the people close to her to parents or brothers or sisters; it was all to satisfy that longing in what little ways she could.

Kiara’s words had brought about a change in Wentworth. “When she said that to me, I couldn’t help but remember how I’d felt when I lost family... how much I wished I could have saved them, even if it meant dying in their place. But here, I was placed in *their* position. That’s when I realized: if you consider someone family, you’d want them to live rather than die alongside you.”

Reggie bit down on his lip. He and Alan had always known how much Wentworth regretted losing his family, but they'd never been able to do more than quietly watch over him. All the while, they'd worried that one day, he would lay down his life in exchange for his revenge.

Kiara had turned that on its head—by risking her own life for his.

So that's why, Reggie thought as something finally dawned on him. The reason Wentworth wanted to rescue Kiara so strongly was because he'd realized he was someone irreplaceable to her—and of course, because he wanted Kiara to live, too.

"Kiara always tells other people not to throw their lives away when they have so many precious things to live for. Yet why is she always so careless with her own life?" Reggie murmured.

Reggie, Wentworth, and even Alan treasured Kiara deeply. If she knew that, why did she always try to sacrifice herself for them?

Wentworth gave a small laugh. "I'm sure you know the reason, Your Grace. She doesn't have a strong attachment to this world. Precisely because she has memories of her past life, the world she's living in now feels almost like a dream to her."

Reggie understood what he was saying. After all, Kiara didn't have anyone to teach her about the world around her when she was young. She'd relied on her memories of her past-life family to make her way through this life.

Nobody had ever seen her as anything but a tool; thus, the much gentler world of her past life felt more like the "real" world to her. It was subconscious—a defense mechanism borne of all the cruelty she'd endured. Otherwise, she never would have been able to cut her ties to her family here, no matter how awful they were. She hated being alone, after all.

It was after she'd become a spellcaster—just like in her memories—that she'd stopped shying away from hurting herself. Even if she died, she figured it was all just part of a story, and perhaps she even held the faint hope that she might wake back up in her original world.

The only way to know whether that was truly the case was to ask her. Still,

Reggie doubted that his speculation was far from the truth, and Wentworth would probably agree with that assessment.

“If nothing else, I wish there were a way to stop her from being so reckless.”

“I do have one suggestion. You should let her protect you.”

“Why?”

“The reason she became so determined to fight on the front lines was so that she could protect you... and because you told her not to do that.”

“But I’m not the only one she wants to protect. What about you?”

She’d tried to protect Wentworth, too. That was the entire reason she’d been taken captive.

And yet, Wentworth shook his head. “You were what started it. But either way, if she doesn’t come back alive...”

“I don’t think we have to worry about that. They won’t hurt Kiara.” Reggie had determined as much after hearing the truth about Salekhard. “I heard a few things about Kiara from Gina, you see.”

Since Wentworth had seen King Isaac with his own two eyes, Reggie decided to divulge everything he knew to hear the knight’s thoughts on it. As they were talking, a strange feeling washed over him.

This was the first time he’d had such an honest, in-depth talk about Kiara with Wentworth. The thought of that made him truly glad.

Chapter 2: The Captive Spellcaster

I felt as though I were floating through a pool of water—more like a clump of seaweed than a fish. Water flowed past me as I swayed to and fro, and I saw all sorts of things reflected in its depths.

I saw the mountains by the ocean I'd seen with my past-life family when I was in elementary school. Dad had always loved the mountains. He hadn't been a good swimmer, though, so he'd refused to come out from under our beach umbrella like some kind of girl. I'd gotten Mom to play me with instead.

I missed them so much. Would I ever be able to see them again? Probably not. For every wave of sadness that washed over me, part of me hoped that when I opened my eyes, I'd wake back up in that other world.

If I could do it all over, I wouldn't have made so much trouble for Mom. I would've told Dad I loved him more.

If you could do it all over. Suddenly, I felt a strange sense of déjà vu, like someone had said those words to me before. When was it?

What flitted across my mind, much like a fish darting past, was a pair of pale blue eyes staring into mine. A much larger hand clasping my own, fingers entwined. Hadn't I found the warmth of his body almost frightening at first? I remembered him setting me down on his lap time after time, as if I were a wary kitten he was trying to placate.

From the way you're hanging onto me, it's clear how fond you are of me... yet you still refuse to tell me anything? he said as I clung to his neck, but I stubbornly kept my mouth shut.

No matter how much I wanted to help him, once I was forced into submission, I would have no means to resist. No matter how much I wanted him to help me, there was nothing he could do against a lifelong curse.

You don't want me to worry, hm?

I nodded, and he smiled in understanding. No matter how much he

sympathized with my plight, however, that alone wouldn't be enough to get me out of this dead end. I imagine he was thinking the same thing.

That was probably why he said, *If there's no way out, perhaps we should both...*

At that moment, I felt my body abruptly rising to the surface. Anxiety washed over me, like the roots I'd spread over the bottom of the ocean had been hacked away.

"If some mangy mutt can do it, so can I!" yelled a familiar voice.

"The wound closed up, at least," remarked another man. This voice I didn't recognize.

"Should we wake her up?" came a powerful rumble.

That sent someone else into a panic. "I just warned you not to be rough, you damned brute!"

"I know, I know! I'll be gentle about it!"

"I'm not sure that's the issue here... Oh, she's still running a fever."

Once I'd just barely broken the surface, I started to gradually sink down once more. *If I reach the bottom, maybe I'll fall into another sweet dream*, I thought.

"Hey, Kiara. If you don't wake up, I'm going to break this doll of yours."

Was that meant to be a threat? The thought of it made my heart ache. I didn't want him broken. But how was I supposed to get out of here? No matter how hard I tried to flail, I might as well have been seaweed. There was nothing I could do but sink.

"Or perhaps I'll chase down that knight of yours and kill him."

No, stop it! I screamed in my head. Yet it amounted to nothing; I couldn't even speak.

Who was the knight he was talking about, anyway? Somehow I knew he was someone very important to me, but I couldn't remember his name.

"Alright, then. I didn't want to do this, but you leave me no choice."

"Do you have some sort of plan in mind?"

“What princess wouldn’t want to be awakened by a prince’s kiss?” the man replied, brimming with confidence.

“Hello? You’re a king.”

“*Must* you get hung up on the details?” The impatient tone of his voice was a little daunting.

“You know, that’s actually not a bad idea,” interjected the croak of an old man. “You don’t need to bother with the kiss, though; touching her with your finger ought to do the trick.”

“Seriously?” came the dubious response, but soon I felt something gently tracing over my skin. An odd feeling settled over me, like I could finally recognize arms, legs, and a head as part of the seaweed I was.

But where had the ticklish sensation graced me? What flashed across my mind in that moment was the face of the person who had touched my lips, and how for a fleeting moment, our eyes had met, our faces nearly close enough for our lips to meet...

“Hngh... Hnnngh...”

I still couldn’t get my voice out, but my hands moved nonetheless. I stretched out my arms as hard as I could to shove him away, hitting something dead-on.

“Ack!” someone cried out. The sting of my hands brought my mind into focus.

“Goodness, she really hated that,” the boyish voice from before murmured in complete earnestness.

“Who would’ve guessed *that* would do the trick? Mmheehee!” The next voice I heard was Master Horace’s. He was laughing his irritating, bizarre cackle.

“*You’re* the one who suggested I do it! So, did it work? Is she awake?” The protest had come from... Isaac? Yes, it was Isaac and Master Horace who were talking.

“Her mana’s stabilized now. Let her rest for a bit and she’ll wake up eventually. Just don’t let that viscount near her.”

“I know that. Perhaps I have no room to talk here, but based on his reaction when I told him I’d captured Kiara, I could tell he had unspeakable plans for her.

What in the world drove him to such obsession? He was practically panting as he told me to hand her over if she was still alive, his eyes flashing... What happened between her and the viscount, anyway?"

"My disciple here ran off when she was supposed to get married to him."

"Eugh! *I'd* have run away, too!" Isaac responded with genuine disgust. Moments later, someone's hand brushed against my forehead. "Hurry and wake up, Kiara."

Despite his whispered urgings—perhaps because I knew now that Master Horace was safe enough to be casually chatting with Isaac—my consciousness faded once more, swept away with a wave of relief.



I didn't know how much time had passed after that. When I woke, I found myself chilled to the bone.

"It's freezing!"

When I coiled the blankets tighter around me, I noticed something hard and cold pressed against my cheek. *Whatever it is, it's cold as ice! But wait... is it just me, or have my chills finally stopped?* I opened my eyes, hoping to find out what was going on.

"I see you're finally awake, my little disciple."

I was looking straight into the face of a brown clay doll. That snapped me out of my trance in an instant.

"Master... Hrk!" Trying to talk had sent me into a coughing fit. My throat was dry as the Sahara.

"You've hardly had anything to eat or drink for three days, so it's no wonder you're thirsty. Don't push yourself to talk just yet."

Someone else spoke up from behind him. "Would you like some water? I hope you can sit up now."

"Yes, please," was all I managed to get out. As the boy helped me to sit up, I stared at him and blinked.

His golden hair looked familiar. Wasn't this slightly baby-faced boy the same guy Isaac had called "Mikhail"? Dressed in his lord-in-waiting garb, he propped my limp body up and let me have some water.

I sipped from the cup he held up for me. If I could've, I would've drained it all in one gulp; seeing as Mikhail was assisting me, though, I had no choice but to adjust my pace to the angle he tilted the glass at, swallowing it down little by little. The water tasted so good, though. While it wasn't particularly cool, the sensation of it passing down my throat and settling in my stomach was incredibly refreshing.

When he was done letting me drink, Mikhail had me lie down again. He continued to wait on me hand and foot, asking me if there was something I'd like to eat.

"Um... Who are you, exactly?" I asked. I knew he was a retainer of Isaac's, but I had no idea what his actual station was.

"Did I forget to introduce myself? My apologies. I'm King Isaac's lord-in-waiting, Mikhail. Now, if you'll excuse me for just a moment," he said, then left the room.

As I watched him go, I finally took the opportunity to glance around the room I was staying in. Perhaps they had commandeered a manor close to the battlefield. The cozy, white-walled room was rather large, and the door Mikhail had just used was firmly built; still, this clearly wasn't the home of any nobleman.

I noticed the faint smell of smoke, too.

"Are we somewhere inside Liadna, Master Horace?"

"That's right. It's been three days now."

I was surprised that I'd slept that long, but at the same time, amazed that a three-day coma was the worst consequence I'd suffered. Frankly, I'd been convinced I was going to die.

Now that I'd made it out alive, however, that left me in Salekhard's hands. Considering Isaac had assigned his own lord-in-waiting to look after me, he clearly wasn't planning to treat me badly... or at least, that was what I hoped.

“But if things stay like this...”

I’d told Isaac I would join his side. That meant fighting against Farzia.

Whether or not he’d picked up on my musings, Master Horace shared a few words of encouragement. “Just rest. You still aren’t doing too hot. If you’re planning to make a run for it, you better be sure you’re ready to *run*. Heeheehee! For now, push yourself through by imagining the dumb looks on their faces when they realize you gave them the slip.”

I nodded before giving a curious tilt of my head. “That’s some pretty practical advice.”

“I’m an expert escape artist, I’ll have you know. Prisons, mines, you name it—I’ve broken out of all sorts of places. If you’re really my disciple, you can pull it off, too.”

“Wait, prisons?”

Why was he locked up in the first place? I wondered, but Master Horace was quick to offer an explanation.

“This mentor of yours used to be a slave, you see.”

His sudden confession took me by surprise. Master Horace had never mentioned anything of the sort before. The obvious explanation was that he hadn’t wanted to talk about it, so why was he telling me now?

“From the moment I was born in a country northeast of Salekhard, I was already a slave. All I ever wanted was freedom. Time after time, I tried to escape; even after it nearly got me killed, I still ran. Right after I’d met a spellcaster who took me on as her disciple, someone who had every intention of dragging me back found me. That’s when I took my all-or-nothing gamble, begging her to turn me into a spellcaster right there and then... and I just so happened to draw a lucky straw.”

So that was how he’d become a spellcaster. I always *had* thought it strange: if Master Horace wanted to live badly enough to become a clay figurine to do it, why would he choose to become a spellcaster when that was so likely to kill him? Now it all made sense. Once he was a spellcaster, he wouldn’t have to remain a slave. Master Horace had put his life on the scales against his freedom.

“I wanted to live a life unfettered. I wanted to see the places I wanted to see and say whatever I wanted to say. Eventually, I packed up my things and moved, determined not to let a little back pain do me in... and before I knew it, I’d become a withered old man.”

He heaved a sigh.

“So you see... now that I’ve lived out an extra round of my life, I can die happy. I hadn’t seen much of Farzia before all this. Now that I’ve seen all sorts of sights and watched over my merry disciple’s crazy escapades, I no longer have any lingering attachments to this world. So the decision is entirely in your hands—whether *this* is where you want your last stand to be, that is.”

“Oh, Master Horace...”

If I died, Master Horace’s soul would automatically depart this plane of existence, meaning he would finally die for real. This was his way of telling me it was okay to make that choice. He’d even gone out of his way to tell me he’d have no regrets, so that I didn’t have to ask it of him myself.

“I really can’t get anything past you.”

“Oho! You’re just realizing that *now*? It’s not hard to imagine the thoughts going through a sixteen-year-old girl’s head. Now c’mon, if you’re back in action, hurry up and fix me!”

“AHHH! You’re broken!”

Now that he had turned the other way, I could see a crack running all the way down his back. *Yikes, I think there’s even a tiny chunk of him missing!*

“How did this happen?! Did Isaac drop you?!”

“No, see... Remember the time those mutts helped you out by sucking up some of your mana?”

I did recall that. By snuggling up to me, Lila had drained some of my magic away, stabilizing the mana that raged violently through my body.

“We’ve got a magical connection, you and me, so I thought I could try the same kind of thing... until I suddenly felt a draft around my back.”

“Don’t do that again! You’re going to break yourself before I even have the

chance to die!”

Whew, that gave me a scare, I thought as I rushed to patch him up. Meanwhile, Master Horace just cackled like usual.

That was when Isaac stepped into the room without so much as a knock. “Oh? It’s good to see you doing so well.”

The sight of him stabbing Cain flashed across my mind, and I squared my shoulders. Considering he’d just kept me alive, I doubted he would kill me right away, but apprehension welled up inside of me nonetheless.

How are prisoners of war usually treated, again? He did make it sound like he was going to abuse me to keep me in line. As long as I behave, he won’t whip me or anything, will he?

The fact that I’d once considered him a friend made his about-face sting all the more. Frightened, I hugged Master Horace tighter to my chest.

“Relax. I made sure he wasn’t going to hurt you,” Master Horace whispered.

While I was puzzling out what he meant by that, Isaac briskly snatched the doll out of my hands. “You’re in charge of him, Mikhail.”

Isaac casually tossed Master Horace over to Mikhail, who had entered the room along with him. The boy scrambled to catch him.

“Tch! Treat your hostages a little more hospitably, will you?” the doll in question griped.

“There you have it, Kiara. To ensure you don’t go anywhere, I’ll be keeping that master of yours captive.”

“What?!”

Is that what Master Horace meant?!

“Try anything funny and I’ll destroy him on the spot. I suggest you behave.”

I gave a silent nod. Master Horace was no sturdier than a tough piece of pottery. If anyone took an axe to him, he’d easily break, and there was a good chance the soul trapped inside would fly off into the ether.

Whenever I find a chance, I need to reinforce Master Horace’s defenses, I

quietly determined. Meanwhile, Isaac set a hand near my pillow and brought his face close to mine. His other hand grabbed my chin, causing me to flinch.

“You seem awfully scared, Kiara. Didn’t you tell me you were strong when we first met?”

He had been so kind to me back then. Yet *now* all he ever did was taunt me with that mocking look on his face. Was this the real Isaac all along?

Still, rather than intimidating me, his behavior was just ticking me off. There was no reason to menace me like this when I couldn’t fight back.

“With the condition I’m in, I can’t cast a single spell right now. But if you keep egging me on like this, I can fire off enough magic to bring *myself* down.”

“Oh? Well, judging by your reaction to seeing that knight stabbed in front of you, you *do* seem liable to drop dead if handled too roughly.”

The fingers gripping my chin slid away to brush my cheek.

“If you think you can outsmart me, however, I’ll have to think up a trick to put you in your place. There are plenty of ways to rob you of the will to resist. Do you want to hear one?”

“No,” I answered without hesitation. Any ideas Isaac would come up with while playing the part of the king weren’t going to be pleasant.

“Now, now. Don’t be like that.” Isaac looked even more amused. “Here’s something that should subdue you the moment you hear it: who do you think changed you into those clothes?”

“What?!”

I was currently dressed in a soft, hemp nightgown I’d never seen before. I assumed it had been borrowed from a townswoman’s wardrobe. A moment later, however, I finally noticed the missing piece of the puzzle, and I instinctively turned my head toward Mikhail—not that I would feel great about *him* doing it, either. However, he just shook his head with a pitying look.

What?! Does that mean Isaac saw me naked?! No way!

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, tears welling up in my eyes. Isaac burst out laughing, turning his head to the side.

Perhaps because he'd noticed I was about to cry, Isaac's next words came out gentler, like he was trying to pacify me. "There, there. Get well soon. I spared your life under the condition that you'd aid Salekhard, so I expect you to head into battle at least once."

"If you want to put me to work, make sure you keep Lord Credias away from me," I demanded firmly, seeing as it was a matter of grave importance. The viscount's presence was a threat to my life and livelihood. Whether I managed to escape or not, if Isaac couldn't uphold that condition, I would be powerless.

Isaac nodded. "I'm doing what I can. For now, I'm keeping you somewhere far enough away from him that he shouldn't be able to track you down."

"That's not good enough. Spellcasters can sense where their fellow mages are within a range of up to a hundred mers."

"Gah! Are you serious?! That means there's nowhere to hide!" Isaac looked genuinely shocked, which surprised me in turn. Since he was allied with Lord Credias, I'd assumed he would have known that.

Isaac scratched at his head, screwing his face into a frown. "I suppose there's no choice but to keep you by my side, then. We should get you out of here as soon as possible. Mikhail, make arrangements to head out."

"Yes, sire," Mikhail responded.

With a grave look on his face, Isaac added, "If the worst should happen, listen to me, and do as I say whether you like it or not. Whatever it is, it'll be to keep you out of Lord Bullfrog's hands, so deal with it."

I nodded. It was right then, however, that we caught wind of a commotion downstairs.

"Go see who it is, Mikhail. Give me the doll. I'll keep him hidden just in case."

"Here, catch."

"Hey, quit throwing me around!"

As soon as Isaac gave him the order, Mikhail tossed Master Horace over to him. Without even checking to see if he'd caught the doll, he then opened the door to peek outside. "Stay quiet," Isaac instructed before sliding Master

Horace under the bed.

“It’s the very viscount in question, sire. He’s on his way up,” Mikhail announced, shutting the door once more.

I shrank in on myself. His timing gave me the creeps—it was like he’d waited for the very moment I woke up to make an appearance—and I hated the thought of seeing him when I didn’t have the strength to fight back. I wouldn’t be able to get away if he tried any funny business.

Before I knew it, Isaac had climbed onto the bed, wrapping me up in a blanket and settling down so that he held me in his arms. I froze—a knee-jerk reaction to being restrained by a man who had recently tried to kill me.

“It’s as I just told you: if you don’t want me to hand you over to him, be a good girl.”

Was he planning to protect me? Before I could ask him, someone opened the door.

“Who goes there?! You’re supposed to knock before entering!” Mikhail protested, putting on a convincing show of surprise.

A total of ten men had just barged into our room—Lord Credias and a bunch of Llewynian soldiers in black capes. There were a few Salekhardian soldiers who had followed them up here, as well.

Mikhail blocked Lord Credias at the doorway. The room was big enough that I was a fair distance away from him, yet I could still tell that the viscount’s eyes were bloodshot. Those froggish eyes were wide as saucers, locked right on me. A chill ran down my spine.

Isaac still had me in his arms, however, and he wasn’t letting go. I couldn’t tell whether he was shielding me or just keeping me from running away, which didn’t help my anxiety.

He regarded the intruder in an easygoing tone. “My, now this is a sudden visit, Lord Credias. Do you have some business with me?”

“That girl you have there was once intended to be my bride. I’m here to bring her back with me.”

The redhead sneered, turning to look at the viscount. “Oh? Is bigamy legal in Farzia? As I understood it, you’re already married.”

The viscount got married?! To whom? The poor lady. Wait, did he marry someone just to turn her into a spellcaster? Does that mean there’s a new spellcaster on the queen’s side?

“She’s the one I was betrothed to before my current wife—but she jilted me at the altar, you see. I’m going to have her make it up to me. That aside, her adoptive father asked that I bring her home to him if I were to find her,” Lord Credias responded matter-of-factly, without so much as cracking a smile. “Besides, a spellcaster can prove quite the nuisance. It’s better that she be placed under my control, seeing as I have my ways to handle her. You won’t be able to keep her in line, Your Majesty. The moment she recovers, she’ll strike back against you, waiting for the perfect opportunity to take your life.”

The viscount’s gaze remained fixed on me the entire time he was talking.

“No need to worry. She’s promised to obey me.”

“You can’t trust her word. It’ll be too late once you’re already hurt.”

“Have you so little faith in me? What must I do to prove it to you?”

Now Lord Credias was finally starting to grow impatient. His face twisted ever so slightly into a scowl. “I’ll believe it when I see her submit to you. But I doubt —”

Isaac cut the viscount off. “Just stand there and watch.” Then, after whispering to me to bear with it... he reached out to touch my clothes.

Wait, what’s he going to do?! I wanted to fight back, but considering I hadn’t gotten out of bed for several days, my body was sluggish. In the meantime, Isaac kept me restrained with one arm, undoing two or three of the buttons beneath the scoop neckline of my nightgown.

I finally got my arms to move. Just as I was about to slap Isaac on instinct, I caught a glimpse of my hand and realized: I was still wearing the ring Reggie had given me. Isaac hadn’t taken it from me.

Reggie had told me it was a talisman, I remembered.

If I hit Isaac now, I certainly wouldn't come off as obedient. Lord Credias would take that as the perfect opportunity to cart me away and make me fight against Farzia like in the RPG, and in the end, perhaps I would die at Alan's hands.

Reggie didn't want me to die. If I were in his position, I wouldn't want me to get killed that way; I'd want to see me survive no matter the cost. In which case, I would just have to let this slide.

I just had to hold out a little bit longer. As much as Isaac frightened me, I was better off with him than Lord Credias. Based on the way the viscount was looking at me, *he* wouldn't settle for just an act. Besides, Isaac had said he would protect me. My only option was to believe him.

After some hesitation on my part, Isaac said, loud enough so everyone there could hear, "Behave. You promised, remember?"

He caught the hand I'd just raised by the wrist, flipping me around so my back was facing Lord Credias and my face was tucked against Isaac's shoulder.

I wanted to struggle against him, but I knew I'd be better off if I didn't. While I was trying to make up my mind, Isaac laid my shoulders bare. The realization that I was showing skin in front of a group of strangers made real tears start to spill from my eyes.

No! I screamed in my head, only to hear Isaac whisper, "Sorry." Next thing I knew, he was biting down on my neck. I feared he was going to kill me, like a wolf tearing into me with his teeth. Although it only hurt a little, I was terrified enough to make a noise of protest. Isaac caressed my back all the while, and each stroke only further fueled my fear.

I didn't know what to do. All I could do was cling to Isaac and wait for it to end.

"See? She didn't put up a fight. If you tried to do the same thing, I wager she'd struggle 'til her dying breath." Isaac taunted him with a chuckle. "Now that I have your understanding, I ask that you take your leave. I'd like to have some fun with her, and I'm not one for exhibitionism. Mikhail, show our guests the way out."

I couldn't see anything with my back turned to him, but Lord Credias failed to utter another word before he was ushered out of the room by Mikhail and the Salekhardian soldiers. I heard several footsteps fade into the distance, followed by the click of the door closing.

Isaac promptly straightened out my clothes, picking up the blanket that had fallen to the floor and wrapping it back around me until it covered me up to my neck.

"Come now, don't cry. I *am* sorry. It was just to get him to walk away; I won't be doing it again. He stormed out with a look of shock on his face, just as I'd predicted."

Despite his apology, my tears wouldn't stop falling. Isaac heaved a sigh, reaching out to wipe my eyes dry. I squeezed my eyes shut, frightened by the touch.

"Do you find me so abhorrent?"

"I've never thought you were... *abhorrent*."

I'd never wanted to hate him. He was the same man who had helped me out in my moment of need, after all. But a line had been crossed. This was too much for me to take.

"But I hate when you act this cruelly. I hate that you tried to kill Sir Cain, and that you're fighting against Évrard and Reggie." Once I'd gotten started, I couldn't put on the brakes, and my complaints came tumbling out one after another. "I hate that you lied to me. Why did you strike up a conversation with me if you were an enemy? Why were you so nice to me? You gave me sweets, you stood up for me... and now I have to *fight* you? You're invading Farzia to protect your brother and your country? Why do you have to do that?! And why did you just...?"

Everything after that was lost in my sobs, and I ran out of words to use. Deep down in my heart, all I wanted was to punch Isaac in the face.

Even after listening to me scream that I hated him over and over, Isaac didn't so much as wince.

"Let me tell you why I struck up a conversation with you: I'd had the good

fortune to stumble upon the spellcaster, and it seemed like the perfect chance to abscond with you.” As soon as I was done with my rant, Isaac began responding to my protests one by one. “I wasn’t about to force a crying woman to come along with me, however. Besides, no matter how impressive your magic is, I figured there were ways to beat it, and someone just happened to come along to pick you up.”

During each pause in his explanation, he clapped me on the back. At first, it made me think back to what had just happened, and I tensed up. Gradually, however, the way he was comforting me like a child—combined with the blanket coiled tightly around me like a shield—helped me to calm down.

“Since you mentioned my brother, I assume you heard everything from Gina—why I’m aiding Llewyn’s invasion, that is. I want to protect my country. If I cared about my own salvation, I wouldn’t have resorted to these methods. Not that I thought this up in the first place, mind you. Mikhail came up with this plan, and I decided to get on board with it. Lastly,” Isaac added, “it was because I feel enough for you to want to help you when you’re crying, I suppose.”

When he said “feel,” did he mean it was friendship he felt? Sympathy? I couldn’t bring myself to ask. If he said yes, I’d start to wonder if I could consider him a friend again, even now that he’d betrayed me.

“Who is that ‘Cain’ to you, anyway? Your lover?”

“No, he’s like a brother to me.”

“Right, you *did* say something to that effect back then. Then ‘Reggie’ must be... Prince Reginald? Is *he* your sweetheart?”

“He’s my *keeper*, thank you,” I responded, wondering where all of this was coming from.

Isaac looked amused. “So you call him by a nickname, hm? He must be very special to you.”

For some reason, the word “special” brought a flush to my cheeks. Driven by an impulse I didn’t quite understand myself, I started slapping Isaac’s shoulder over and over. “Isaac, you jerk! Just shut up!”

“Ow, ow, ow! Hey, you just scratched me!”

In contrast to earlier, Isaac did nothing to stop me. He let me beat up on him until I'd gotten my petty counterattack out of my system, bursting into tears once more. Why was he just letting me hit him? If it was because he felt bad for me, that kindness of his was just infuriating.

Once my fit of rage was finally over, Isaac hugged me again, like he was soothing a tantrum-throwing child. "Despise me all you like. I care more about my country than I do about you. But at the very least, I'll make sure that viscount doesn't take you away. If it has to happen, I want you to be the one to bring about my end," he said, brushing my bangs with his fingers.

What is he talking about? I wondered, but seeing as I'd only just woken up from a mana-fatigue-induced slumber, all that rampaging had me completely spent. My consciousness gradually started to fade, lured away by the caress of his hand.

Evidently, I fell asleep after that. When I next came to, I noticed that Isaac wasn't there. It was Mikhail who had shaken me awake.

"Wake up!"

When I opened my eyes, there was Mikhail. The light in the room was getting dim—probably a sign that it was around dusk.

"We need to take you somewhere safer. It would be difficult to move you in your sleep, so I need you to get up if you can."

I nodded, recalling our discussion about moving me elsewhere before Lord Credias could raid the place. No matter how much I detested Isaac, I was better off with him than the viscount, so I had no choice but to stick with him.

After three days stuck in bed, I hardly had any strength left in my body. Having foreseen that I might have trouble walking, Mikhail had brought along a well-built soldier, who wrapped me up in my blanket before scooping me up.

Knowing that he was a Salekhardian, it frightened me to have his hands on me. I shrunk in on myself, only for the soldier to tell me to grab hold of his neck. I didn't want him to drop me, so I did as he'd instructed.

"Um, where's Master Horace?" I asked, confused as to why he wasn't coming with us.

“We already sent him over to the place we’ll be staying.”

He’d already been moved to the safehouse, apparently. Relief washed over me, and then we were on the move.

Once we’d left the room, I saw a short corridor and a wooden staircase. The stairs led to a small foyer. Following a cursory check of our surroundings, we headed outside.

It seemed the place we’d been staying was a private residence, a bit on the large side.

“His Majesty is waiting for us in the town mayor’s manor. Let’s go.”

Perhaps in hopes of keeping me hidden, we took zigzagging paths up until we emerged out onto a larger street. If our pursuers had been tracking us down through normal means, that probably would’ve been the best way to throw them.

Unfortunately, that backfired. Along the way, a band of soldiers showed up to block our path.

However, Mikhail had already read that far ahead. “There they are.”

At Mikhail’s command, the squad transporting me split up into two groups. One stayed to deal with the men standing before us, while the other took me and fled down a side street.

Before long we had emerged out onto a wider road, where a group of soldiers in the green capes of Salekhard was waiting for us. It was a back-up unit Mikhail had arranged just in case. When the lord-in-waiting gave a wave of his hand, the men came running over to us.

It was right then, however, that I saw a gale of green strike them from the side. Trees, grass, and flowers all grew toward the soldiers at dreadful speeds, mowing them down.

“He brought out defective spellcasters for this?!” With a click of his tongue, Mikhail pointed us down another street... only for us to find that vines had started growing through the alleyways.

“Capture that girl.”

A soldier with plants sprouting out of his limbs stepped forth as though summoned by that voice, manipulating the nearby greenery. He sent the soldiers who came slashing at him with their swords flying back. From the corner of my eye, I saw Mikhail collapsed on the ground, a vine coiled around him. The soldier carrying me likewise took a fall, unable to withstand the magical assault.

A vine twined around me, dragging me away from the soldier. Once I'd been pulled over to where the hulking defective spellcaster was, the last person I'd ever wanted to see gathered me up in his arms.

All I could do was gulp. Feeling his hands on my back and legs sickened me. The smell of camphor drifted from his clothes, driving home the fact that he was holding me close.

"Worry not; I won't drop you. Heheh. There's no telling what you'll do if you touch the cobblestone, after all. You there! Take her away."

Lord Credias flashed a twisted smile right up close to my face, then passed me off to another soldier. Leaving me wrapped up in my blanket, the man threw me over his shoulder like a piece of cargo and walked off.

Now that I was out of Lord Credias' arms, the wheels in my head finally started to turn again. What was I to do? The viscount knew I was an earth spellcaster. The reason this soldier wasn't wearing any armor was surely because he knew I could use metal in my spells. If he was being that cautious, there was a good chance he had removed anything I could use from wherever we were headed—and powerless as I was, magic was my one and only hope of escaping.

"Lady Kiara!" I heard someone call my name from afar.

Trapped in the soldier's arms, I couldn't look back to see who it was. Still, I recognized the voice as Mikhail's.

If he could shout, that meant he was still alive, but there was no telling how badly he'd been hurt. Unfortunately, there was little I could do about that now. I was carried off into the distance, and with several soldiers flanking him, Lord Credias followed close behind.

Before long, we'd arrived at a shed in a cottage garden, the rush of a river audible in the distance. The surrounding area was made up of nothing but houses and their annexes, a cozy little community where military men were unlikely to be lurking. Thorn-laden vines crept over the ground outside the shed, obscuring half of the building in green.

I was taken inside. Immediately after setting me down on the floor, the soldier who had been carrying me left the shed... so that only Lord Credias and I remained.

"Oh, you truly are the spitting image of my darling Annamarie!" he said as he knelt down next to me, reaching out to strip me of my blanket. I resisted, clutching it as tightly as I could. "Hmph. I see you inherited her obstinacy. I'd expect no less from a relative of hers."

"A what?"

Evidently, my resemblance to this "Annamarie" character Lord Credias was so hung up on was genetic. I'd been told I looked just like my mother before, so she was likely from that side of the family. Had *that* been the reason for this creep's obsession with me all along?

"Now, I'd best discipline you before anyone can get in our way. You'll lose the will to resist soon enough," Lord Credias declared, lazily brushing a hand over my cheek. I felt sick to my stomach.

"Don't touch me, you pedo!"

He was a pedophile alright, no question about it. I was taken in by Lord Patriciél when I was only ten years old, and it was around the same time that I'd first met the viscount. The thought that he'd been counting off the years until I was old enough to be married sent chills down my spine. Worse still, unlike with Isaac, *this* wasn't an act. I was in serious trouble here.

I struggled against him with all my might. When I raised my leg to kick him, however, he bore his weight down upon me, pinning it underneath him. Next, I tried to punch him, only to have him grab me by the wrist. In spite of how much the taste of him disgusted me, I bit down on his hand.

"You refuse to behave, I see."

He struck me right across the face. My head spun, and for a fleeting moment, I blacked out entirely. The next thing I knew, my mouth was filled with the taste of iron; perhaps one of my teeth had torn through the inside of my cheek.

While I lay there stunned, the viscount's hands snaked over my body—stroking my arms, my shoulders, my neck—until they finally trailed down to my chest. It was revolting. And yet, the slap had left me too petrified to so much as scream.

“You should have just given in from the start. Ah, how long I've waited for this moment! As payback, why don't I take my sweet time killing all those who snatched you away from me—the prince and his retainers alike—right before your very eyes? Heheh!”

That threat threw me into a rage.

“Every last spellcaster lives in the palm of my hand. It seems you have a few monsters on your side, but with help of my defective spellcasters, I—”

The moment he buried his face in the crook of my neck, I tried to knock him over with a hard slap.

“Still have that much willpower left, do you?”

It was enough to make him grimace, but too bad for him—*that* was just a feint!

I transformed the ring I wore on my other hand—the ring Reggie had given me—into a long, gigantic needle. After thrusting it forward with a mighty roar, I felt the impact as it pierced Lord Credias through the arm.

“AHHH!” the viscount shrieked, falling on his behind as he jerked away from me. Overtaken by rage, he fought to suppress my mana.

“What a *shrew*! The insolence of you!” Despite his grumblings, relief washed over him when I couldn't manage anything more than collapsing on my back. A smile rose to his face once more.

Now that Reggie's ring had dissolved into sand, I had no means left to resist. If this was what it was going to come to, I wanted to bring Lord Credias down with me, at the very least. Unfortunately, if I tried to pull that off in my current

condition, I was bound to simply turn into sand and die.

I'm sorry, I thought. The apology was meant for all the people who had been so kind to me. For Cain, who had risked his life to protect me. For Master Horace, who had told me he'd be willing to die alongside me.

And for Reggie, too.

I wanted to see him one last time. I wanted him to hold me close, stroke my head, and tell me everything would be okay. I knew I had no right to think of him as family, so why did he remain so dear to me all the same?

Thinking back on all that would only cause my resolve to waver, so I shut off my feelings, focusing on casting a spell on Lord Credias. If I could heal people, it followed that I should be able to break them down, too.

It was then, however, that I sensed a shift in the atmosphere. A moment later, one of the walls of the shed was engulfed in flame. A blast of hot air swept through the room as the fire spread to the floor.

"What terrible timing! This is Ada's doing, isn't it?!"

Lord Credias was close enough to the wall that his clothes came close to catching fire, and he rushed out of the shed in a panic. When he flung the door open, he found Ada waiting on the other side.

The second he laid eyes on her, he screamed, "What do you think you're doing, wench?!"

"It's all *her* fault that the prince never looked my way! Why wouldn't I hate her?! Stop dragging this out and just kill her already!"

"You imbecile!"

Ada shrieked. My heart ached as I watched her get kicked around by the viscount. Unfortunately, I no longer had the strength to stand up for her. All I could do was turn my head to the side, witnessing the scene with eyes wide open. As Ada bore the pain, the two of us made eye contact. She looked at me with a pleading gaze, tears spilling from her turquoise eyes.

I couldn't find a trace of hatred there.

"Oh, Miss Ada," I murmured as Lord Credias brought down his foot upon her

once more.

“Hurry up and put out the fire! You’re going to kill my Annamarie!”

“I can’t... put out my own flames... You know that...”

“Dammit! Someone, anybody! Go fetch some water!”

Ada passed out soon after responding to his demand. However, that short exchange was all it took to convey that her words belied her true feelings.

“You endured all that just for me... I’m so sorry.”

It was all thanks to her that I had managed to escape Lord Credias’ clutches.

Before long, flames had overtaken the doorway, blocking her figure from view. It was all I could do not to cry out under the stifling heat in the air; still, if my death would send Lord Credias into despair, what more could I ask for? It was a shame that I hadn’t managed to take him down with me, but this was good enough—or so I was thinking, when the heat abruptly vanished.

What hazily came into view were flowers of pale pink and green. As gorgeous as they were, they weren’t quite extravagant enough to be roses... and they, too, had thorns. It seemed that, all of a sudden, I’d found myself encircled in a thorny bramble.

It was these vines that had protected me from the flames and heat. No sooner had I processed that than I felt something prick my fingertip.

“Ouch!” I cried out. I made a hasty attempt to pull my hand back, only for the vine to snake around my finger, refusing to let me go.

After a moment of panic, I noticed that it had become much easier to breathe. Filled with strength anew, I felt the rage of mana within me begin to subside. It felt very similar to the way Master Horace had helped me out when I first made my spellcaster’s contract.

What’s going on? was my first thought. However, after drawing a connection from my contract, the contract stone, and the thorn that had just pricked me, a certain person came to mind.

“The Thorn... Princess?”

The vine coiled around my finger withered away, as if feigning ignorance to my question. The single pale pink flower before me had no answer to give. Still, I could somehow sense that I was being closely watched.

Did the Thorn Princess really have power over the thorns in a place so far away? If so, perhaps the reason she had offered me a contract stone to use way back when was so she could help me out if anything were to happen.

Had the Thorn Princess consumed part of the same contract stone she gave to me, then? Otherwise, she wouldn't have had any power over me. Perhaps she couldn't form a contract as someone's mentor for some reason, so she couldn't be the one to make me into a spellcaster herself.

Couldn't she have been a little more forthcoming about all this? Maybe she's lived so long that explanations just seem tedious.

A wave of nostalgia swept over me as I thought back on the events, and tears welled up in my eyes.

Of course, that didn't answer the question of why she cared about saving me at all. Besides, how had she known I was destined to become a spellcaster in the first place? Did she have the power to see the future? Did she possess a second kind of magic in addition to wielding her thorns?

It was then that I heard someone call out to me. "Hey! Get a hold of yourself!"

What reached my ears along with a rush of cool air was Isaac's voice.



"You've made it this far. I won't let you die here," the girl murmured, clutching a thorny bramble in one hand.

Her flesh tore, blood trickling out from the wound. A few drops fell into the spring, where the Thorn Princess had waded up to her knees, dissolving into the water. The rest was soaked up by the vine of thorns twined around a dark red boulder.

The Thorn Princess kept her eyes shut for some time. Eventually, she allowed herself to relax, hanging onto the rock beside her as she sat down in the pool.

Her long, silver locks fanned out atop the water.

“Efia... This time, I’ll be sure to pull it off. Will you lend me just a little bit more of your strength?” the Thorn Princess whispered like a prayer, clinging to the giant red stone within the spring.



Isaac had come running to save me. He’d managed to get there just before the shed went down in flames, and thanks to the barrier of thorns, I’d made it out without any burns. Paying no heed to Lord Credias’ protests, he took me and left.

As a result of the Thorn Princess’ interference, perhaps, I’d made an impressive physical recovery, but the exhaustion and malnutrition were taking their toll on me. Once my injuries were treated, I had something to eat and then laid down in bed.

Despite all the trauma I’d just been through, rather than feeling distressed, going head-to-head with Lord Credias had only left me thirsty for revenge. I didn’t quite understand it myself.

While I hadn’t been able to wield my magic at will, I’d discovered that as long as I had sufficient willpower and stamina, I could still put up something of a fight. The way I’d managed to get him to let his guard down and deliberately hold back was something I planned to exploit for all it was worth.

If I succeeded, it would mean murdering the viscount. Every time I’d killed someone in battle up until now, I’d always felt remorse. The guilt of it got to me; after all, I was killing people just so that my loved ones and I could live. Even after all that had happened between us, it pained me to imagine the deaths of Isaac or Mikhail.

And yet, when it came to the viscount, all I could think about was how much I wanted to take him down. Never had I imagined that I would hate someone so much that I wanted to wipe him off the face of the earth. There had been plenty of people in my life I didn’t care for, but I’d always just wished that they would go somewhere far away from me, or that they would pass over me like a storm.

As long as *he* was around, I would never be able to live in peace. Worse yet, I wouldn't be able to protect my friends. Considering I still didn't know whether Cain had made it out alright, the thought of losing Reggie on top of that terrified me. Lord Credias had threatened to take my most precious people away from me, and I absolutely loathed him for it.

Was this how Cain had felt after losing his family? He'd simply never known who was directly responsible for murdering them, and thus been forced to make the entire nation of Llewyne into the object of his grudge.

I'd never once asked him to let go of his hatred. Seeing him trapped by the past had only made me desperate to help him out somehow. Now that I finally understood how he felt, I was truly glad I'd never denied him his feelings.

There was Ada to consider, too. Seeing as she had hurt Felix and killed Lord Azure, perhaps I ought to have hated her. But *she* was someone we never would've had to fight if she hadn't been dragged into all this. It was all Lord Credias' fault that she had been turned into a spellcaster and forced to obey the queen. Watching her get beaten by the viscount, unable to defend herself, had felt almost like watching a version of myself who hadn't run away, making it all the harder to bear.

In the "what if I'd never escaped" scenarios I often dreamed of, I'd always wished for someone to save me. Surely Ada wanted to run away, too.

Plus, *she* was the one who had called for Isaac, apparently.

"The girl came to me before Mikhail could. She informed me you'd been kidnapped and demanded I do something about it," Isaac explained, sitting in a chair right beside my bed. "She told me where you were, tipped me off that Lord Bullfrog couldn't do anything without his defective spellcasters, and bolted. It took me some time to gather enough manpower, but thanks to her tip, I made it before you ended up as a pile of ash."

Just as Ada had said, there hadn't been much Lord Credias could do for himself when faced with the knights and soldiers of Salekhard. Even his own subordinates had refused to lay a hand on a king.

"What happened to Miss Ada?"

“She’s the viscount’s wife, it seems. Sorry, but there was nothing I could do on that front.”

Oh, so that’s *why*, I thought as everything finally clicked into place. It explained why Ada had saved me. It explained why she was fighting on Llewyn’s side. It even made sense why she’d grown so attached to Reggie.

She’d wanted him to rescue her from her predicament. Then, when she saw that I was about to meet a similar fate, she’d taken pity on me. Of course, if she’d made it obvious that she was out to save me, she would’ve been putting herself in danger; thus, she’d lied and pretended it was about her grudge.

“I’ve lodged an official complaint with Llewyn’s Lord Erling, demanding he never let that bullfrog anywhere near Salekhard’s forces. Regardless, there’s no telling what could happen if we let our guard down.”

Then, there came a knock on the door.

“I’ve brought your meals.” Mikhail entered the room, a little unsteady on his feet. Yesterday, there had been cuts all over his face and hands from the defective spellcaster’s attack, but those seemed to have healed now. Only the bruises on his legs had yet to fade away.

My cheek still hurt where it had been struck. The swelling had gone down, but I had to place a cold, wet cloth on it from time to time. The medicine of this world made gashes quicker to heal than anything else, really.

Mikhail sat down in the chair, switching spots with Isaac, who left to go eat at a table across the room. Once I’d cleared my plate, Mikhail and Isaac traded places once more.

As soon as he’d taken a seat, a look of concern crossed over Isaac’s face.

“This is pretty serious,” he said, glancing down at the fingers curled in his shirt. Before he’d even had time to hold out a hand for me, I’d caught him by the sleeve.

“Erm... I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I could hardly expect you to keep it all together after you were nearly deflowered.”

I'd felt pretty composed when Lord Credias was trying to force himself on me, but that had been a trick of the mind. I'd just been too focused on how much I hated him to think about anything else. Once I'd gotten away from the flames and had a moment to collect myself, I found myself terrified of being separated from Isaac, a familiar face, or Mikhail, who had been taking such good care of me. I knew *they* wouldn't do anything awful to me, at least.

Despite my attempts to make myself get over it, I'd reached out to grab his sleeve before I could stop myself. Mikhail had let me hold on to him whenever he was sitting there, too. When it was Isaac's turn, however, I couldn't even wait long enough for him to offer a hand.

"I'm sure I bear some of the blame for this myself," Isaac muttered, referring to how he'd stabbed Cain right before my eyes and kidnapped me to boot.

"There's no need for you to be here *all* the time, Your Majesty. Lady Kiara isn't going to burst into tears the second you leave her side, you know."

Considering that *had* been my mental state not too long ago, I awkwardly averted my gaze. Now I was really glad I hadn't raised a big fuss.

"I all but said she was my woman, remember? It would look suspicious if I didn't stay with her."

When he was lodging his complaint with the Llewynians, he'd claimed as much to justify keeping me to himself.

Mikhail heaved a deep sigh. After gazing at me for a few long moments, he said, "If our aim is to be cautious, I suppose it *is* for the best that she remains with you. But what are you planning to do if an emergency arises, Your Highness?"

"That's 'Your Majesty' to you."

"I know, I know. Your Majesty."

Isaac rose to his feet. "We'd better help her get over it, then," he said as he strode right up to me.

"Huh? What do you have in mind?" Mikhail asked, perplexed.

I sucked in a breath as Isaac got close, and that was all the time it took for him

to scoop me up into his arms.

“Huh?”

“We’re going for a stroll up to the roof to help her digest. If we don’t run into any trouble along the way, that should be proof that she’s safe here. The only man she has to watch out for is Lord Credias himself. After that, she’ll be able to handle being away from us for a bit, don’t you think?”

Once he’d stepped out of the room, Isaac set me down and made me walk on my own two feet. He kept hold of my hand, but that didn’t stop me from feeling vulnerable each time we passed by another soldier. When he felt me squeeze his hand, Isaac whispered, “So long as you’re with the king, they’ll be as well behaved as a pack of sheepdogs. No need to be so nervous.”

“Sheepdogs?”

As much as I appreciated the reassurance, I wasn’t feeling *scared* so much as helpless. Besides, there wasn’t much I could do about a knee-jerk reaction.

After a bit of fretting, I tried imagining the blond, short-haired knight who had just struck up a conversation with Isaac as a dog. The man had a sharp gaze and an air of diligence about him. The shape of his face bore the strongest resemblance to a German shepherd.

That was when the man in question glanced over at me, scowling. *Shoot, did he figure out I was imagining him as a dog? Look, I’m sorry, okay?!*

I started freaking out, only for Isaac to say, “Don’t stare at her, Vasily; you know you have a naturally menacing look in your eyes. See, you’ve scared the poor thing.”

“Pardon me, but I don’t believe there’s anything wrong with my eyes. I heard you were stuck to her side like glue, so I was considering whether we ought to keep a woman with similar looks in our army—to serve as a leash to keep you from wandering off, that is.”

What does he mean, “wandering off”? Oh wait, that’s right. Isaac came to Cassia all alone for some reason. He was prowling around Fort Inion by himself, too. I’m sure that qualifies as “wandering off” to his poor men.

I felt sorry for this poor German shepherd named Vasily. Nonetheless, I had to clear up the misunderstanding here. “He’s taking me around with him for the same reason one might hold on extra tight to something they nearly had stolen, I’m pretty sure.”

Vasily grunted his acknowledgment. “I see. I’ll keep that in mind, Lady Spellcaster. For now, let’s just chalk it up to a matter of security,” he replied, then took his leave.

Now that there was no one else around, I posed a question to Isaac. “If you’re supposed to be the king, how come you always go out on your own? Couldn’t you send other people instead?”

Isaac didn’t look me in the eye. After a pause long enough for me to tell that he was struggling to come up with an answer, he finally opened his mouth and said, “I want to see those places for myself. That’s why.”

Why had he hesitated over such a simple reply?

“It’s not common practice for kings and princes to just wander off, is it? I would’ve figured you’d be swarming with escorts whenever you stepped outside.”

Come to think of it, he’d mentioned something along those lines when we first met. If he’d been a prince all along, it was no wonder he’d lived such a sheltered life.

“I’m the second prince, so I was afforded a bit more flexibility than my brother.”

“Reggie never does that. He’s always sure to bring a bodyguard when he goes out, and he never blows them off or anything.”

“That prince of yours sounds like a stuffy fellow. Far too straitlaced, I’d say.”

“Upstanding is what he is! He’s always careful not to make trouble for the people around him!”

“Quick to defend him, I see. What, do you have a thing for him?”

I clamped my mouth shut. If he’d just asked if we were together, it would’ve been easy to tell him no, just like I had when Emmeline and Lucille grilled me

about it. But whether I had a thing for him was an entirely different question.

“He’s my good friend.” My best bet was to give as succinct an answer as I could.

“When a man and a woman are close, romance almost always comes into the picture somewhere down the line. Even supposing it’s one-sided.”

“He’s my keeper!”

“Yes, you *did* say that earlier.”

With that, Isaac headed up the stairs of the manor, stopping to talk to the knights and soldiers he met along the way. He offered little more than a simple greeting to most of the soldiers, but he had a strange conversation with one of his knights.

“Are you sure you should be walking around with the spellcaster, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, so don’t worry about it. I’ve decided to leave my fate in her hands, you see. In the meantime, I need you to reach out to Salekhard and have them send over a task force.”

“You’re going to bring your brother to tears again.”

“I think that was the one and only time we’ll see him quite *that* sentimental. Either way, it should make things easier on him going forward.”

Isaac saw the knight off with a smile and a “Good day,” but something about the exchange didn’t sit right with me. A strange sense of unease grew deep in my chest.

“What did you mean by ‘leaving your fate in my hands,’ Isaac?”

“A spellcaster makes for a powerful asset. What’s more, Farzia doesn’t have a replacement for you. It’s no surprise that I’d stake everything on your performance, is it?”

Yet here I was plotting to escape from the Salekhardian army as soon as I had the chance. Did he seriously think I was just going to obey him forever? Besides, if all he cared about was putting me to work as a spellcaster, there was no need for him to be so concerned over my mental health. Was this some form of

atonement for nearly killing Cain, who I'd told him was like a brother to me? I found that hard to believe. Did he just feel sorry for me, then?

"Farzia still has the frostfoxes, though."

"You'd compare yourself to a monster? Please. It would be much easier to slay those pups than to face a spellcaster. Then again, I suppose one of them *did* grow a few sizes. Will it prove more difficult to fight like that?"

Just like Master Horace, Isaac referred to the foxes as "dogs." Did everyone from Salekhard see them that way? Also...

"What do you mean, it grew a few sizes?"

What is he talking about?

"I don't know either, which is why I asked. It wasn't your doing, I take it?"

I shook my head. I had zero recollection of that. "I didn't even know monsters could make themselves bigger in the first place."

"I saw a frostfox the size of a stallion with my own two eyes, so I have to assume that's the case."

I had no idea which frostfox he was talking about, but whichever one it was, it had apparently grown as big as a horse. What in the world had happened there?

Is everything okay, Gina? I wondered, which brought Isaac's brother to mind again.

He was the man Gina had loved. The knight just now had mentioned that he might cry; was the implication that he would be driven to tears by all the trouble Isaac was making for him? Or was it that he would be worried about Isaac pushing himself too hard?

"You aren't on bad terms with your brother, right?"

"No, but we pretend to be for appearance's sake."

Once we'd made it to the top of the stairs, Isaac opened the door and we went out onto the roof. One section of the stone building's roof had been made into a balcony, while the rest of it was a typical triangular design. Since this was

supposedly the mayor's manor, this platform had likely been built as a watchtower to be used in an emergency.

Isaac strode over to the center of the empty balcony, then said, "Gina told you everything, didn't she? That I have the blood of the Llewynian royal family flowing through my veins. And how much trouble that's made for Salekhard."

I hesitated. "Yeah."

There was no one else around now, but Isaac still hadn't let go of my hand. In hushed tones, he went on, "I've been something of a pest for a long time now. I always had to play the part of the useless second prince to keep Llewyrne from meddling with our royal family, and my brother had to take on the role of the first prince who took me to task. I'd expected my father to work things out while we still had the wool pulled over everyone's eyes... but that didn't turn out as I'd hoped."

He sighed. "If my brother took a Llewynian princess as his bride, assuming the war with Farzia dragged on long enough, Salekhard would eventually be forced to join the fray. Unfortunately, my father had long since grown tired of making an effort. Part of him had already given up. If that were the case, I decided, then I would take up the role of ringleader myself. Still, I couldn't think of a good enough plan to protect our country."

That was when Isaac had just happened to stumble upon Mikhail.

"Mikhail was my brother's lord-in-waiting at the time; I caught him in the castle gardens, muttering something rather unsettling to himself. We couldn't refuse the marriage proposal because of our debt to Llewyrne, but if I forced my way onto the throne and imprisoned my brother, I could turn them down. As a trade-off, we would be forced to fight in the war, but we could just lose to Farzia on purpose somewhere along the way. Even if we were to be annexed by Farzia, your country has no history of turning the citizens of defeated nations into slaves. It would leave us better off than a Llewynian invasion, at least."

That *was* pretty unsettling.

"I thought it was a fairly clever idea; thus, I recruited him and put the plan into action. And so, to tie up all the loose ends... I asked my father to die for the cause."

The original king of Salekhard, in other words.

“Right. I heard you killed your father.”

“It was actually suicide. Insisting that he couldn’t put *everything* on me, he drank poison of his own accord. I’d taken issue with his shilly-shallying in the past... but in his very last moments, he was an upstanding father.”

Isaac explained it all very matter-of-factly. When I looked up at him, I didn’t see his profile twisted in anguish, either. I assumed he’d already worked past his pain.

“My brother saw it happen, too. He agreed to lock himself up; after all, that was what my father had suggested he do. However, that was the first time I saw him cry since he’d come of age. He hated that he was laying all the responsibility on me.”

The plan meant casting Isaac into disgrace. Perhaps the guilt of that had gotten to him.

“Salekhard needs at least one victory against Farzia. That’s why I had Mikhail craft a plan centered around defeating you for our last battle. If I could pluck you out of the viscount’s hands afterward, surely we’d be able to pull out a win against Farzia; not to mention that getting our hands on a spellcaster would put some pressure on Llewyne, too.”

“Wait, what? So taking me captive wasn’t just a stroke of luck?”

“It was no coincidence. My plan had been to capture the spellcaster Kiara from the start. I never intended to kill you; however, I couldn’t make my intentions apparent to those around me. There’s no telling if one of my men is in correspondence with Llewyne. Mikhail and I haven’t told our plan to anyone but a few of the people closest to us.” With a chuckle, he added, “I suppose you’re included in that category.”

His laugh sounded so carefree that it was hard to believe he was discussing something like murder. This was the same man who had tried to kill Cain for his goals, yet in spite of that, I felt my anger toward him withering away. Was it because everything he’d done had been to protect his home?

“Did you tell me all that because I already knew the gist of it from Gina?”

“More or less. If she trusted you enough to tell you, I figured there was no reason to keep secrets. Besides, I need a win against Farzia, and I plan to use you as leverage to improve Salekhard’s position once the war is over. I’m probably better off telling you what’s going on if I want to keep you from acting out.”

My eyes went wide as saucers. “You mean you’re planning to send me home?”

If he wanted to give Salekhard an advantage in negotiations, that meant he’d have to send me back to Farzia.

“What, you don’t want me to? Come now, I’m sure Gina must have told you that Salekhard plans to lose when the time is right.”

“She did, but still...”

“I intend to use you as a bargaining chip after we lose. If you’re a battered mess by then, however, that will only add to the reparations we owe. On that note, we need to be prepared for Lord Bullfrog’s next strike.”

I was relieved to hear that he had no plans to kill me. I finally understood why he’d had to hurt Cain, too. Considering he’d told me all this somewhere no one else could overhear, it was safe to say he wasn’t lying... or that’s what I was banking on, at least.

Still, I couldn’t just go along with Isaac’s plan. If I went on to clash with the Farzian army, there was no telling how much damage Reggie’s troops might suffer for it.

Fortunately, I’d learned more about Lord Credias’ powers thanks to Ada’s interference. But even if he couldn’t cast any offensive magic, he could still make defective spellcasters by the dozen. If I wasn’t around to stop him, he was going to cost us a huge amount of casualties. I really couldn’t wait until the war with Salekhard was over.

“Not good enough for you?” Isaac asked. He could probably tell from the face I was making. “You’re a strange one, you know that? You’d really risk your life for a mere friend? I could see it between fellow men, perhaps, but you’re a girl. Surely you know the reason why there are so few women on the battlefield.

Who would want to risk being subjected to something worse than combat?”

“I’m a spellcaster, though.”

“You’re a stubborn one. Well then, why don’t I show you that you’re not as strong as you think you are?”

“What do you mean?”

Isaac finally let go of my hand, only to slide an arm around my back, pulling me into an embrace. Panicked, I tried to wrench myself out of his grip, but I couldn’t get my arms to budge—and he was holding me one-handed, too.

“See, look at that; you can’t even push me away. I’m not as defenseless as that viscount, I assume?”

It wasn’t long before he’d caught my chin with his free hand, forcing me to look up at him. As I stared into Isaac’s face, so close to mine, I narrowed my eyes and glared at him.

“Do you surrender?”

“No.”

If *this* was enough to make me back down, I would have stopped fighting in the war the moment I grew scared to kill.

“Interesting. You told me everyone around you was overprotective, but I’m starting to understand where they’re coming from. It takes more than the usual means of persuasion to make you give in.”

Wasn’t he trying to menace me here? What was he going on about now?

“None of my friends would ever try anything funny with me, so I don’t have to worry.”

“Oh?” Isaac’s eyes narrowed into slits. “That’s no fun. How about I put you back on your guard?”

He brought his face closer to mine. When I tried to take a step back, I was reminded that he still had my chin in his grip—and by the time I realized that, he had already placed a kiss on my cheek.

I internally breathed a sigh of relief, glad that he’d settled for my cheek. I was

strangely unfazed; perhaps because I knew that was better than what the viscount would've done to me, or perhaps because I'd gotten used to that kind of thing a long time ago.

"Don't mess with me, Isaac."

"Oh, does it take more than a cheek kiss to make you bat an eye? You're used to this, I see. Who usually does this to you? That knight of yours? Or is it that prince you're so very familiar with?"

"So what if it is? They're both like family to me."

My answer sounded suspiciously like an excuse, and Isaac looked exasperated. "An imitation family isn't going to last forever, you know. There's a chance he'll go on to make a *real* family with someone else, meaning he'll have people who will always come before you. Once that happens, the fake family will get left behind."

The fake family. I was overcome with loneliness at the words.

I already knew that. Everyone had family who mattered more to them than I did. I'd just pretended not to realize it for so long.

After that long speech, Isaac finally stopped talking. He let go of my chin, brushing his fingers across my cheek instead. At first I wondered why, but it wasn't long before I learned the answer: the chill of the breeze against my cheeks made me realize I was crying.

I couldn't make it stop, though. What he'd said had hit too close to home.

I wanted my family to stay with me. I wanted a place to go home to. Perhaps I felt that way because of the past-life memories I had; I knew the joy of having a family, so the thought of having *nothing* was terrifying, unnerving.

But in the end, our "family" was just an imitation. Reggie had brought me to that realization a long time ago.

When Reggie, who valued my freedom above all else, had refused my protection, I'd felt a dread of losing the person who was like family to me, the one who understood me best of all—as well as a fear that he'd turned his back on me. I'd started wondering what I'd have to do to stay by his side. Perhaps

the reason I'd jumped to making myself useful through fighting was because the way my stepmother had treated me like a servant, plus the way my real father had never stood up for me, had stayed with me all this time. I figured that if I went to work, it would keep him from tossing me aside. If making myself useful might allow me to stay by his side, I was desperate to tag along.

Of course, I couldn't say any of that out loud. *I'm lonely. I'm scared. Say that you'll always need me.* What if he thought I was too clingy? If he didn't even want me around as a friend anymore, I would lose my place at his side.

"It's okay to despise me, you know," said the very man who had brought me to tears, peering steadily into my face.

"Why?"

Why would he say something so cruel? I wished he'd just left it alone. If I'd stayed blissfully ignorant, I could have kept moving forward, no matter how anxious I was—at least until the war was finally over.

"You're better off despising me. Otherwise, you're just going to get hurt."

"What do you mean, despising you?"

Isaac's gray eyes seemed a touch gentler than usual. If he wanted me to hate him, why would he look at me like that? The moment after the thought had crossed my mind, however, he pulled me close and covered my mouth with his own. The rough texture of his lips made it feel all the more real.

After a few seconds, I snapped back to my senses. I tried to pull away, but he was holding both my head and my arms in place. Meanwhile, I felt something... off? I knew this was wrong somehow, but no matter how much I wanted Isaac to stop, he wouldn't. My moans of protest were all swallowed up in the kiss.

When I realized I couldn't get away, I panicked, flashing back to when the viscount had pinned me to the ground. I hated not being able to fight back. It was terrifying. Unable to get out of his grip, my mounting anger needed somewhere to go... and so I stomped down on Isaac's foot as hard as I could.

"OW!"

It was too bad I was wearing slippers. I wished I could've done that in stilettos

pointy enough to leave a hole in his foot.

When Isaac pulled back, his face was twisted in pain. As refreshing a sight as it was, I was more concerned with wiping my mouth at the moment.

“Let go! I hate you when you do this stuff!”

I fought to get out of his grasp, and he let me go, likely figuring I wasn’t about to do anything drastic. The first thing I did was put a hand on the stone floor.

“Nope, we can’t have that,” Isaac cut in, lifting me up into his arms. “You know, I don’t mind if you hate me, but you really ought to *despise* me.”

“What are you talking about?! I already do!”

He was the one who had tried to kill Cain. I still hadn’t forgiven him for that. It was just that he’d protected me from Lord Credias and nursed me back to health... so there was a part of me that had started thinking the war was the real thing to blame here.

But by now, it was obvious that he was trying to get me to hold a personal grudge.

Isaac laughed, amused. “Well, good.”

As I was carried off, eventually I ran out of strength to keep struggling. By the time I’d made it back to my room, I was completely tuckered out. When Mikhail saw me chewing on my lip in frustration, his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“What?! Just what did you do to make her cry?!” Mikhail berated his king.

Isaac responded dispassionately, “Everything went according to plan. If I could just bring her along, I wouldn’t have to bother with any of this. I’ll talk to you about our next move later.”

The perplexed look dropped from Mikhail’s face. “I see. Very well.”

“Then I leave the rest to you.”

With that, Isaac briskly took his leave. After Mikhail had checked to be sure that I wasn’t afraid to be alone anymore, he likewise left to take care of some business.

I had no idea what was going on anymore. What was Isaac after, going so far

just to make me despise him? What was the point of pissing me off? All it did was make my desire to escape that much stronger.

“What are you thinking?” I wondered aloud.

Frustrated, I punched the bed. With that out of my system, I collapsed onto my back.

Although my mana had stabilized, I was still low on stamina. No matter how angry I got, that was the one thing I couldn’t bounce back from.

My blood boiled as I rubbed the back of my hand against my mouth over and over. I could still feel his lips on mine. Each time I remembered that he’d kissed me, tears nearly welled up in my eyes. If I didn’t count the time with Reggie, that had been my first kiss—and that *really* pissed me off.

Yet for some reason, I still couldn’t bring myself to despise Isaac. Was it because—despite having hurt someone I cared about—he’d helped me out the first time we met? Was I just confused? Or was it because I felt like I understood his circumstances?

“I’ve had enough of this.”

I didn’t even understand what I was thinking anymore. All I wanted was to run off into the distance. The only reason I didn’t was because if I left Isaac’s side, I feared that I’d be caught by the viscount instead.

While I lay there seething over my powerlessness, Isaac truly didn’t seem bothered by what he’d done to me. Wary of any more surprises from the viscount, he came to see me one more time come nightfall.

After sneering at my blatant show of distrust, he conversed with a knight who had come to him with a report. The desperate plea that punctuated it caught my interest.

“Your lord-in-waiting has let a cursed doll loose in the corridors, and now none of us can come anywhere near this floor! Might you ask him to stop? Ominous rumors are spreading among the troops—apparently, if you lay eyes on the demonic doll in the middle of the night, you’ll be cursed to flounder on the battlefield.”

A cursed doll? Is he talking about Master Horace? What is he doing in the hallways?

I was happy to hear that Master Horace was apparently doing just fine, but I hadn't the foggiest idea what he was up to.

Picking up on my curiosity, Isaac smugly prompted, "Want to know what he's talking about? I believe *he* should be wandering this way any moment now. Head out into the corridor and take a look."

As much as I hated to take orders from Isaac, I wanted to see how Master Horace was doing for myself, so I poked my head out into the hallway.

The long, narrow corridor was dim, lit only by a single candlestick right in the center, and what little orange light there was flickered unsteadily. There was something almost eerie about it... though really, the same could be said of almost *all* corridors in this world.

I spotted Mikhail crouching at the very end of the hall.

"Off you go!" he said. Master Horace left Mikhail's hands, rattling and clacking as he tottered away.



I saw a soldier heading up the stairs at that exact moment, but the second he heard those noises, he turned tail and rushed back down the steps.

What ARE you up to, Master Horace?

Eventually, my mentor caught sight of my head sticking out from the doorway and raised his hand with a *clack*. “Hey there, little disciple!”

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, you know how it goes. If I don’t go for a little walk before bed, I won’t replenish enough mana to keep this ol’ body of mine moving. Eeeheehee!”

Since when did he operate like some kind of clockwork toy? I didn’t point out his lie, as I was sure Master Horace had his reasons for doing this—though I had no idea what they actually were.

It occurred to me that I could just ask him myself, but right as I stepped out into the corridor, a certain someone wrapped an arm around my waist, lifted me up, and shut the door in my face.

“What?! Stop that!”

Isaac dragged me all the way back into the room and dumped me on top of the bed.

“Remember, he *is* a hostage. I can’t have you getting too close to him.”

That explained why he had pulled me back, but it didn’t explain why he was keeping hold of my wrists as he towered over me. Having both hands restrained brought to mind what had happened that afternoon, and I found myself forgetting to breathe for a moment. I was afraid that if I so much as stirred, it would only provoke Isaac further.

After a long stretch of silence, Isaac said, “I suggest you do as I say. Don’t expect me to tolerate any insubordination; if you don’t behave, I’ll tie you up and lock you away so you can’t fight back. After that fiasco with the viscount, I could easily claim that you’re feeling too unwell to fight in the next battle and keep you holed up here instead. Of course, if you’d *prefer* to sit here gnashing your teeth until I bring you someone’s head, you’re free to do as you like.”

I couldn’t even manage a nod. Isaac must have interpreted my silence as

acceptance, seeing as he released his grip on me and left the room.

The moment he determined that I wasn't being cooperative enough, he was bound to follow through on his threats. Not being in a position to do *anything* while Farzia was under attack was the worst scenario I could imagine. Thus, I had no choice but to endure.

Five days passed as I waited patiently for the right moment, never once striking back against my captors. Finally, on the day the autumn breeze turned frigid, an attack was carried out on the Farzian troops' current stronghold—Fort Liadna.

Interlude: Watching Him Leave

Four days had gone by since Kiara had been taken captive by Salekhard. While Reggie seemed his usual self as far as appearances went, Alan could tell that he was growing more unbalanced with each passing day. He regarded Alan and everyone else around him with a bland, gentle smile, and he never showed signs of unrest on the surface. However, he spent more and more moments lost in thought. Every so often, he would stare out the window with his face set in a grim frown.

When smoke had risen from the direction of Liadna the other day, which Reggie had observed from the main tower with a look of intensity, Alan had grown nervous. He'd had the sinking feeling that Reggie was ready to take off at any moment.

Neither of them had any idea what had become of Kiara. At the very least, based on Wentworth's account and the intel Gina had provided them, the king of Salekhard seemed unlikely to treat her poorly. That said, Lord Credias was among the Llewynian troops. If he tried anything, it was hard to say whether an ordinary human stood any chance against his magic.

At the moment, Reggie was once again staring silently out at Liadna. Reluctant to leave him by himself, Alan stood alongside him, gazing down at the scenery below. Now that the Llewynians had withdrawn from the area, the Farzians had called for a fresh shipment of supplies, which explained the carriages rattling down the road toward the fort.

That got Alan thinking about Reggie's decision to retreat to the fort. Fort Liadna was closer to Delphion than the town was. Staying there would give them an advantage when it came to acquiring supplies and soldiers alike. Reggie had managed to account for all that on the spur of the moment. What's more, the fact that he had yet to march his troops any farther south was a sign that he intended to recapture Liadna and rescue Kiara in the process.

"I'll bet you anything Kiara's alright." That was Alan's way of saying, *I know we*

have no choice but to bide our time and wait, but don't let it eat away at you.

“Kiara used far too much magic for her own good, and I doubt the king of Salekhard can do much to help her on that front. The only one we can count on for that is Lord Credias, but who knows what he'll take from her in exchange.”

That appeared to be Reggie's greatest concern of all—probably due to the time Kiara had fainted after healing him, her fingertips nearly turning to sand from overusing her magic.

“She's pretty tough. This is the same woman who tried every trick in the book to apprehend a spellcaster when you weren't around, remember? Wentworth told me she was able to turn her fingers back to normal with her own powers, too. There's little she couldn't manage on her own.”

“But Kiara is... too detached.” Reggie brushed his hand over an arrow slit, only to clench it into a fist. “That's what Wentworth said. She can remain as innocent as she is because no matter how much she suffers, no matter how sad she gets, she believes everything that happens in this world is just part of a story.”

“Wentworth said that?”

If the same knight who was always by Kiara's side thought as much, it had to be true.

“I suspected the same, but I didn't want to acknowledge it. If she thinks this world is all just a dream, it could very well mean she believes that if she dies, she'll go home to the real world she remembers so fondly.”

“Come now, that can't be *all* she thinks this is. Kiara's not as stupid as she acts. I doubt she truly believes her whole life is just a dream.”

And yet, Reggie felt little attachment to the world himself. Since he knew what it was like to be ready to give everything up and depart this mortal coil at any moment, he was all the more concerned that she might actually act on it.

Even so, he cracked a smile at Alan's remark. “You're the most ruthless of us all, Alan. Nobody else would carry on calling her 'stupid' to her face.”

“Well, she *is* stupid. Bleeding heart that she is, she'd do anything to help people—even become a spellcaster. She's always overthinking things despite

her lack of brains, only to launch herself into some bizarre scheme.”

That only made Reggie’s grin widen. Alan was relieved to see such a bright expression on his friend’s face, if only for a brief moment.

When they came down from the main tower, the frostfox Lila was there waiting for them—still the size of a horse for some reason. Ever since Llewyne’s and Salekhard’s soldiers had retreated, eliminating the need to constantly stand watch outside the fort, Lila had gotten in the habit of showing up wherever Reggie went.

“I’d never gotten the sense that she was particularly attached to me before, but I think I know the reason for the change of heart.”

“You do?”

“The foxes took well to Kiara, remember? Assuming they were drawn to her mana, well, I’m the only person around carrying traces of that same magic.”

Alan knew why: it went back to the prince’s near-death experience in Évrard. A fragment of the contract stone used to make spellcasters had been injected into his body then. Every once in a while, it would wreak havoc on the mana flowing through Reggie’s body, causing him to fall ill.

Reggie took Lila with him and headed for the fort gate. A few of the carriages he’d seen earlier had just arrived. The baron of Delphion’s daughter, Emmeline, was inspecting the luggage.

She strode briskly around in a military uniform. The way her outfit just barely revealed the lines of her legs—combined with the hint of her nape peeking out from under her high ponytail—gave her an even more alluring aura than when she’d worn a dress. As soon as any man met her cold gaze, however, he’d forget about everything else in an instant.

When Emmeline spotted Reggie, she bowed and informed him, “The resources you requested have arrived safely.”

Alan wondered what she could be referring to, only to find the two carriages fully loaded with cages of giant... mice? Their bodies were much rounder than your typical rodent’s, so the resemblance wasn’t actually that strong. Their soft, brown fur and round eyes certainly qualified as cute... or perhaps they *could*

have on a smaller animal.

“What are these?”

“They’re terramice, Alan.”

“Why did you bring *these*...?” Alan trailed off as something occurred to him. *I see. He’s going to use them to rescue Kiara.*

He’d heard an account of terramice flocking to Kiara, an earth wielder, hoping to squirrel her away with their copper ore. So long as Kiara could use her magic, the mice could surely suss out where she was, knocking down all the enemy soldiers in their path to get their paws on her.

Reggie said to Emmeline, “A few of them might die. Is that alright with you?”

“At the end of the day, terramice are monsters. Mere pests. While I *am* somewhat fond of them, I only used them as a barricade of sorts, knowing they were liable to turn on me at any moment.”

“Regardless, it’s all thanks to you that we could gather this many of them. I’m most grateful for your help.”

Emmeline flashed him a rueful smile. “Don’t worry, Your Grace. I’m invested in rescuing Miss Kiara myself, not to mention that she’s an essential part of our army. I’ll start off by having them dig a hole, just as we discussed.”

The two had already worked out their plans in advance, it seemed. As he watched the terramice dig a hole just outside the fort, Alan listened as they explained their strategy.

That might actually work, was what he thought at the end of it.

After that, Reggie got to work picking out a team for the Kiara rescue mission. Reggie’s knights, who had encountered the terramice once before and were thus familiar with their idiosyncrasies, were at the top of the list. Emmeline, their owner, would join the force as well. She had the most thorough knowledge of the beasts.

Alan was just relieved to see that Reggie hadn’t put himself on the retrieval team. It wouldn’t be until the battle had begun that he would find out he’d miscalculated.



A golem that bore a striking resemblance to Kiara's mentor had shown up on Salekhard's side. That told them both that Kiara was with their troops, and that she had made enough of a recovery to wield her magic.

Most likely, Salekhard had ordered Kiara to attack Farzia in exchange for her own safety. Alan figured that a fair amount of casualties would be unavoidable, only to be shocked by the golem's next move. It barreled straight into the Llewynian troops, sending their soldiers flying.

Once he'd promptly ordered an all-out assault on the Llewynians, Reggie dismounted his horse with a laugh, then went to join up with the team charging in with the terramice.

The knight who had been handed the reins to Reggie's horse looked resigned, but Alan wasn't ready to let this slide so easily.

"It seems Kiara is safe and sound, so I might as well pick her up early. I leave the rest to you, Alan."

"This was your plan from the start, wasn't it?! I bet you conspired with your own knights and left everyone else out of the loop!"

"You know me too well, Alan. Look, I realize I'm being selfish. I *am* the best man for the job... but above all else, I simply want to go," Reggie declared, staring Alan right in the eyes.

Alan knew why Reggie was the perfect choice for the assault team. Still, he was a prince.

"There's a chance I may be taken captive if I go. If that does happen, I'll do my best not to burden you... so don't *you* bother trying to rescue me, either."

For the first time, Alan finally understood Kiara's despair.

This was his closest cousin. Reggie outranked him, sure, and Alan acted accordingly when the situation called for it. However, Reggie had never kept Alan at arm's length in the ways that mattered.

From an early age, Alan had known full well that he came across as the more childish of the pair. Reggie already had a proper knowledge and understanding

of far more things than he did. But rather than putting on airs, the prince—who never had the opportunity to play with children his own age—went along with the games and pranks Alan taught him. He didn't know the first thing about that sort of mischief, so he was eager to learn whatever he could. Getting scolded together afterward only strengthened their feelings of camaraderie.

The way he handled the aftermath was rather adult, so it was still hard to consider Reggie particularly “childish”—and it seemed Wentworth worried about that, too—but Alan had been no less pleased with it. He was proud that he had something to teach that brilliant cousin of his.

While Reggie worked to gain that which he lacked, Alan likewise strove to catch up to the prince. He wanted the two of them to stand on equal footing.

Who *wouldn't* be shocked to hear “I might die, but don't bother saving me” from someone like that?

Kiara must have been the same way. After hearing that from the person she trusted and depended on the most in the whole world, of course she'd grow desperate.

Reggie, you fool, Alan fumed.

“I'm starting to understand how Kiara feels. How can you think I'd be fine letting you die? Why would you toss away your life so readily? You're going to grow up to be our king! If you know that, why would you so flagrantly disregard your own safety?!”

Wearing a despondent look so rarely seen on his face, Reggie replied, “Kiara is irreplaceable to me. Nothing could ever be more important. No matter how many times I think it over, my answer is always the same. If that makes me unfit for the throne, then I don't want to be king.”

When Reggie declared that he would abandon the throne for Kiara, Alan was struck speechless. Answered with silence, Reggie went on, “You're the reason that I was able to experience a normal childhood, Alan. It's all because of you that I grew up to be only *slightly* twisted. I'd hate it if I missed my chance to tell you that, so I'm thanking you now.”

“Damn you, Reggie! I don't want you to *thank* me! I want you to let me help

you!”

“You and Kiara are a lot alike, you know.”

“What?!”

Is this the time to be saying that? Alan thought, the wind briefly taken out of his sails. A moment later, his anger finally boiled over. “In spite of what you’re saying, you have *some* intention of becoming king, don’t you? Otherwise, you wouldn’t have led our army this far. But king or not, it isn’t wise to write off anything and everything holding you back. Make use of that stupidly sharp mind of yours and don’t just cut all your losses—find a way to get everything you want!”

Reggie stared back at Alan, dumbfounded, until he finally burst out giggling. “You really are something special, Alan. I love you.”

“Egads, man! Have you lost your mind?”

“I don’t think I ever had it to begin with,” Reggie responded through fits of laughter, looking truly refreshed. “But I’m feeling quite alright. Well then, I’m entrusting everything to you.”

That remark held a double meaning: “everything” included what would happen next if he didn’t come back, as well as the country itself if it lost its prince. What a terrifying man Alan was dealing with. Still, he had no intention of tamely sending Reggie off to his death.

“Leave it to me,” Alan replied with steeled resolve, watching as Reggie slipped down into one of the holes dug by the terramice.

Chapter 3: A Place to Call Home

I could see Fort Liadna from atop a small hill. Perhaps the fort itself was too small to fight from; the Farzians had taken up position outside its walls. The figures lined up under the blue banner of Farzia were too small to tell apart from where I stood.

Reggie had to be somewhere among them. Whether Cain was alive or not, he was probably in no shape to head into battle, and I certainly hoped he wouldn't be pushing himself that hard. Had Alan and Emmeline been hurt in the previous battle? Were Jerome and Lord Enister alright? I was in no position to find out, no matter how badly I wanted to know.

On the other hand, I was a little relieved that none of *them* would be able to tell that I was the one sharing Isaac's horse, either.

I'd been brought into battle, just as planned. My hands were tied together with a rope in case I tried anything funny. The Salekhardians were being extra cautious; if they'd put me in handcuffs, I could have simply transformed the metal and turned it into a weapon, and if I was free to touch whatever I wanted, there was no telling when I might use my magic to attack. That wasn't the only measure they'd taken to keep me from escaping, either.

My clothes were a good example. I'd been thrown over someone's shoulder and carried away before I could even change out of my pajamas. I was wearing a green Salekhardian cape over the nightgown, but most girls would be way too embarrassed to walk around looking like this. Plus, I was wearing slippers. Unlike the ones I'd worn in my past life, they didn't have sturdy soles. Only a single layer of soft leather lined the bottom, so it would hurt too much to run over the pebble-strewn ground.

Truth be told, however, neither of those issues seemed particularly debilitating to me. In my past life, I'd gone on trips to the convenience store in the same sweatsuit I'd worn as pajamas. If you used that as a baseline, this wasn't all that embarrassing, considering I was wearing a cape over it... or at

least, that's what I could keep telling myself. Depending on how you looked at it, the shoes worked to my advantage, too.

Of course, I couldn't let on what I was truly thinking. I hung my head, wrapping the cape tightly around myself as if to hide my body. For the moment, Isaac appeared to be under the mistaken impression that I was ashamed.

"Do you see that, Kiara? If possible, I want you to use that golem of yours to cut off Farzia's left flank. That should bring the Llewynians to a halt as well, and so long as you hold back, I doubt Farzia will suffer too many casualties as a result." Isaac had ordered me to bring out my golem. If I didn't have to be the one to suggest it myself, that was going to make this a whole lot easier.

"I'll need to borrow Master Horace, then. I can't do it without him. Also, I try to save my magic for after the battle has begun."

"Oh? Well, we *do* have you tied up. I suppose that's fine." Isaac readily assented. He *did* cast me a searching look, however, so it was safe to say he was still on his guard.

After that, all there was to do was wait.

Isaac gave the order to launch the attack. Both sides fired off a stream of arrows. In the meantime, the Llewynians had a separate unit of theirs march forward. Not only was this a wide-open field, but the ground from here to the fort was on a slope, so I had a clear view of the entire battlefield.

I clutched the cloak even tighter around myself. My hands were shaking. The thought that Farzians might be dying while I was just sitting here was terrifying. Still, I had to wait for the right moment.

I'd always watched our battles unfold with the aerial map from the RPG in mind. I'd jotted down everything I knew in a diagram, showing it to Reggie so I could get his feedback. Moreover, while there was still plenty I didn't understand, I'd learned a thing or two about battle strategy.

One was that you should aim for the moment when you can seize the greatest victory—and that sometimes you need to wait for that opportunity to come.

I jumped into action once Salekhard went on the move, not long after Llewyn had.

“Hand me Master Horace.”

“Hm? Hey, Mikhail!”

Once he was done relaying a message to his runner, Isaac called out to Mikhail next to him. After helping me down from his horse, he handed the end of the rope around my wrists to another knight.

“I don’t want her trampling any of my soldiers. Once you’ve taken her a good distance away from here, tell the rest of the men to back off. Mikhail, hand her the doll.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“She told me she needs him for the magic to work. If she *does* try to run, well, she isn’t going to make it very far.”

Following Isaac’s instructions, Mikhail handed me Master Horace, slipping him into my arms so I could hold him with my hands still tied together.

“If she puts up a fight, just knock her out, even if you have to hit her to do it. That should break whatever spell she casts. Got it?” Isaac ordered the knight, before turning his attention back to the battle.

I studied Isaac’s profile intently for a couple seconds. After that, the knight led me away by the rope, guiding me toward the rear.

Meanwhile, I whispered, “Master Horace, I have a favor to ask of you. Do you think you could pilot a giant version of yourself? You managed to pull it off when we practiced it before, right?”

My mana was constantly flowing into Master Horace; thus, we’d done some experiments to see if Master Horace could use *his* magic to control my golems. We’d only used miniature versions to test it out, but aside from some more minute maneuvers, it had worked like a charm.

Master Horace chuckled. “Sure thing. How about you mold it in my image, too? Eeeheehee! I went to the trouble of advertising myself as a cursed doll and all. I’ve got all the pieces in place to give ’em a fright.”

“Advertise...? Oh, that. There’s no need to *menace* them, though.”

At first, I didn’t see the point of scaring the Salekhardians, but hearing Master

Horace's true aim changed my mind.

"Considering they've helped you out once, I figure it wouldn't be too good for your mental health to kill them."

"Yeah, you're right. I love you, Master Horace."

I couldn't help rubbing my face against the top of his coarse, clay head.

"Hah! I'm not the kind of geezer who gets tickled to hear 'I love you, Daddy!' but I guess I can accept that as payment for now. I'll collect my *real* reward later. That means you have to make sure not to die here. Leave all the steering to me, and once you've reached your limit, don't bother keeping it going anymore. Keep me buried in the soil somewhere and I should be fine. Just make sure you ask someone to dig me out later."

"Got it."

Once he was done talking smack, Master Horace requested I set him down by way of flapping his arms and legs. The Salekhardian knight stared at us as though he was witnessing some uncanny spectacle.

The knight ushered all the other soldiers away from the area. After setting Master Horace down, I placed my hands on the ground and cast my magic.

What slowly rose from the earth was a golem, Master Horace settled snugly in a hollow atop its head. I designed it to look a little like a Japanese clay figurine. The Salekhardian soldiers gave me a wide berth, shaking in their boots.

When I pointed to the left, Master Horace cackled and extended one of the golem's arms toward me. He then plucked the Salekhardian knight holding my rope off the ground, tossed him a good distance away, and finally charged toward the Llewynian troops.

Surprised by the sudden attack from one of their own, the Salekhardian soldiers froze with shocked cries, while screams rang out from the Llewynians.

"Whoops! Growing so big got my senses all messed up!" Master Horace boomed, staggering as he charged forward.

The Llewynians halted their march in the face of Master Horace's assault.

Meanwhile, I felt myself struck with a feebleness reminiscent of anemia.

“Ugh...”

It was Lord Credias. His forces were only about a hundred mers away from us, so I’d figured I would be well within range of his mana control. The moment he’d seen my golem, he must have gone to work clamping down on my powers.

Still, I just had to tough it out if I wanted to achieve my goal. I needed Master Horace to attack the Llewynians in order to give Farzia as much of an advantage as I possibly could.

Salekhard hoped to whittle away at Llewyn’s forces themselves, so it wasn’t as though they wouldn’t benefit from this. Even if I was going to be leaving them a mess to deal with, I was too mad at Isaac to care.

Let him suffer a little, I thought bitterly.

Unfortunately, the viscount decided to take advantage of the chaos to attack me. A soldier-turned-defective spellcaster came lumbering toward us, whipping up a gale in his wake.

“I guess he doesn’t care about keeping me alive anymore.”

I had assumed he’d try to take me alive, but it looked like he had every intention of killing me. After our encounter the other day, perhaps he had re-classified me as someone he wanted dead. Of course, I wasn’t going to go down that easily.

“If you don’t want to die, get out of the way!” I yelled at the surrounding Salekhardians.

Gritting my teeth, I disturbed the mana sleeping in the soil around me all at once. The ground swelled and billowed, drawing a thick line as it rushed toward the Llewynians. The defective spellcaster, shambling forward like a zombie, was swiftly swallowed up. Although he blew away some of the soil with his wind, he failed to avoid all of it, leaving him buried up to his ankles in earth.

I piled on another wave of earth, sweeping away another defective spellcaster—this one a mass of flames—as he came running up from behind the other. That was the end of their rampage, so the pair had likely run out of magic.

The nearby soldiers were falling over themselves to escape the bulging

patches of dirt. Given how much I'd been jumbling the earth, the area around us had turned into a cluster of boulders and solidified waves of soil. Unable to stand any longer, I leaned against an earthen wall I'd erected nearby and did my best to hold out. I couldn't afford to fall just yet. Besides, I was feeling a good deal more robust than I had back when I was captured by Isaac.

When I looked around, I saw that the Llewynian soldiers were screaming, currently under attack by my golem. The Farzian troops were also in the process of launching a concentrated attack on Llewyrne's forces. Their enemy had clearly lost the will to fight, and Reggie's men weren't the type to pass up that opportunity. The goal was to take care of that half of the enemy forces while Salekhard was still stunned by this turn of events.

Since I had just used a huge spell to bury the defective spellcasters, it had gotten much harder to keep Master Horace's golem going. When I looked off in the distance, I saw it had toppled over sideways, a dense column of smoke rising from its body.

Even as I focused all my efforts on keeping the golem from falling apart, I remained vigilant—just in case Lord Credias was planning to strike again. Given the current state of my golem, he was bound to assume my power had grown weaker and head this way. I was going to give him a bloodbath for his efforts.

I had to wait for the right moment. Considering the viscount couldn't cast any magic of his own, I knew I could handle him somehow or another. Still, I wasn't exactly in good shape. *He* had to come to *me*. And he had to come soon... or else I was going to run out of strength to fight.

"Stop right there, Kiara!"

That was when someone tugged me back by the arm, forcing me to crumple down on the spot. When I looked up, I saw Isaac fixing me with a savage glare. Given that Salekhard's captive spellcaster had just struck down allied troops, he had to be worried about how that was going to reflect on him, so he'd rushed over to put me in check. Considering he was the king and all, I'd thought I was going to have a little more time before he came running over in person.

"Call off that golem of yours."

"I'm not the one controlling it anymore. Master Horace is moving it around on

his own.”

His grip on my arm brought back memories of the kiss he’d forced on me, not to mention the way he’d kept me restrained. Nevertheless, I half-bluffed in hopes that he wouldn’t notice my legs trembling. It was true that Master Horace was the one controlling it, but I was still the one keeping it going.

“Would your answer change if Lord Credias stormed over demanding custody of you? After what you’ve just done, I won’t be in a position to refuse his request.”

“I’m going to take the viscount down right here and now. That doesn’t seem like too bad a deal for Salekhard, either.”

Isaac frowned. If I could just get rid of Lord Credias, it would put Farzia at an advantage. They’d be more than able to force Salekhard and Llewyrne back even without my help.

“Will I have to *make* you stop?”

No matter how hard he tried to intimidate me, I wasn’t the same powerless girl I’d been a few days ago. The fear I felt only rekindled my will to fight.

I clenched my gut, staring Isaac straight in the eyes. “Sorry, but I can’t back down. In fact, I’m about to make you *my* prisoner, Isaac. I will never, ever let myself become Reggie’s enemy.”

Since I was wearing slippers, I was able to kick off my shoes easily. Now it didn’t matter that my hands were tied; as long as I could touch the earth, I could use magic just fine without my copper ore or my blood.

A cage made of earth sprang from the ground to trap Isaac inside. Unfortunately, his sharp instincts allowed him to dodge my attack. My next move was to raise the soil around me and put more distance between the two of us, but it wasn’t long before Isaac had caught up to me. He even nimbly darted around all the pitfalls I made in hopes of tripping him up. Perhaps he could tell I wasn’t pulling my punches, however, as he briefly came to a stop where he stood.

Facing him head-on was just as terrifying as I’d thought it would be. I barely had any experience fighting one-on-one; plus, Isaac was a darn good fighter. Did

a king really need to be this skilled at combat? Since conflicts were so frequent in this world, maybe fighting ability was an essential quality in a leader.

I was worried about what would happen if someone swooped in to back Isaac up, but not a single Salekhardian soldier took a step from the wide perimeter they'd formed around us. Isaac must have ordered them not to interfere. Considering how hard it would have been to stave them all off at once, it was a good thing, too.

On the other hand, it gave me the sense that Isaac was affording me special treatment. If anyone else had heard the way I'd thrown down the gauntlet just now, they probably would have killed me on the spot. Isaac was giving me a second chance by making sure no one else could hear me.

"Don't make me shut you up for good."

Isaac drew his sword from its sheath. He was ready to put a stop to my rebellion even if it meant hurting me.

I gritted my teeth. If I wanted to pose any serious threat to Isaac, I needed to be ready to strike him down, not take him captive.

But I didn't despise him enough. Some part of me just couldn't. There was no way I could bring myself to kill him. That was why I'd tried to find a non-lethal way to stop him... but so much for that.

Worst of all, if I focused too much energy on *him*, I wouldn't have the strength left to fight the viscount. Just as I started to lose my nerve...

"Eep!"

Something soft and heavy rammed right into me. Whatever it was didn't send me flying, either; it carried me away in its tiny little paws. Together we went tumbling down over the giant bumps of soil.

"Eeeeeek!"

This wasn't part of my plan! What the heck is going on?!

While my head was still spinning, I finally found myself disentangled from that oddly familiar form. The pressure from Lord Credias had already left me considerably weakened, so this had really done a number on me. I was about

two seconds from puking my guts out. Since my control was cut off now, it was probably safe to say that Master Horace's golem had fallen to pieces elsewhere.

There was no time to check and see if I was right, though. I had no idea what was going on, but at least I'd managed to put some distance between myself and Isaac. I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. Ready to make my escape, I stood up, panting like I'd just run a marathon—and that was when I identified exactly what had crashed into me.

The creatures, their looks reminiscent of giant hamsters, gave a shrill squeak. It was a group of terramice.

"What? Is this your habitat?"

I started to wonder if there was a terramouse nest nearby, but there was no way. Otherwise, they would have popped out when I was driving my golem around Fort Liadna the other day.

I knew the terramice weren't going to do me any harm. Thus, when one scooped me up again in its fluffy paws, I didn't bother trying to wrest free. This was probably going to make me a little sick, but it was definitely faster than running on my own two feet. I'd just have to suck it up.

Unfortunately, our escape was short-lived. With a shriek, the terramouse tumbled to the ground. I was hauled up out of its paws, only to be restrained from behind.

The terramouse had collapsed in a pool of its own blood. I nearly averted my eyes on instinct. Its friends were staring in my direction, taking a defensive posture and baring their fangs.

From the looks of it, I'd been carried all the way to a grove behind the rest of the troops. There wasn't a Salekhardian soldier in sight.

"What *are* these things?"

This was clearly the first time Isaac—the man restraining me from behind, as it turned out—had laid eyes on a terramouse. Despite his bewilderment, he brandished his sword at the mice, adjusting his stance.

Right then, an arrow whizzed by with a flute-like whistle, grazing one of

Isaac's feet. The terramice sprang into motion as if on cue.

Isaac staved off his attackers, cutting down mice as the entire horde pounced on him. I sucked in a breath, stunned as I watched red blood splatter across soft, tan fur.

Still, even Isaac couldn't quite dodge a blow from behind, and his body pitched forward with the impact. Seeing as he was holding on to me, I lurched along with him. Despite that, however, he managed to block the sword strike that followed the terramouse's attack, his face twisting in delight.

"Farzia doesn't fight fair, I see!"

"I believe that's what they call 'tactics.' To ascribe your own shortcomings to poor sportsmanship is unbecoming, King of Salekhard."

The one Isaac had clashed swords with was a man with long, silver hair—Reggie.

"Reggie!"

I was both overjoyed that he had come for me and, at the same time, distressed that he had thrown himself into such danger. He rarely ever jumped into the fray like this. He was the prince and, now that the king had passed away, the only direct descendant of the royal family. Though he still fought, his protection came before anything else.

And yet, those blue eyes, their gaze sharp enough to bore straight through Isaac, and that silky, silver hair were undoubtedly Reggie's. This was no illusion.

My mind wandered to Cain next, considering he was usually the first to show up in a situation like this. I bit down on my lip, wondering what had become of him.

Salekhardian soldiers came rushing over, hoping to insert themselves into the kings' standoff. However, a rain of arrows swiftly blocked their path. A familiar face cut his way through as the men faltered.

"Sir Groul!"

The rest of Reggie's knights were there, too. *Does that mean they had all consented to accompany Reggie here? Why would they agree to such a reckless*

plan?

Either way, their team was few in number. Knights and soldiers alike formed a protective ring around Reggie, but there weren't that many to speak of. It was hard watching Reggie fight with his back to the wall. Forcing him into a situation like this was the last thing I'd wanted.

Isaac and Reggie's duel was still going. I panicked and tried to cast a spell, desperate to protect Reggie somehow, but the moment Isaac noticed me trying to use my magic, he knocked Reggie's sword to the side and lifted me up in his other arm. As soon as he pressed the tip of his sword to my neck, Reggie came to a halt, his expression going carefully blank.

"Is this girl so important to you, Your Highness?"

"Kiara is a fragile girl. You ought to be taking her somewhere safe, don't you think? I see you've been affording your precious spellcaster rather crass treatment, King of Salekhard. I don't appreciate you making her run around without shoes, and I *certainly* don't appreciate you giving her bruises."

Reggie's comment reminded me: *Shoot! I needed to touch the soil to cast my magic, so I took off my shoes, and now my feet are covered in mud... The bruises must be from when the terramouse and I toppled over.*

What really mattered here was that I was exposing my legs to a huge group of men, even if it was just my calves. Having attention drawn to it was mortifying.

"If she'd simply behaved, she could have gotten out of this without a mark on her, yet she insisted on acting the shrew. I *did* save her from her ex-fiancé, I'll have you know. Though make no mistake, I helped myself to a reward for my efforts."

"EXCUSE me?!"

How dare he! The ex-fiancé thing is true, but what do you mean, "reward"?!

All the protests I wanted to make jumbled together, and it was hard to find the right words in such a tense situation, so in the end, I resorted to calling him names. "Isaac, you creep! You big, fat JERK!"

"Can it." I felt the cold steel of his blade against my neck. "You know, if she's

just going to get in my way, I have no particular need to spare this girl's life."

Isaac fixed Reggie with a piercing stare. He was all but saying that he wouldn't mind killing me. Did he really mean it? I couldn't glean anything from his profile.

Then again, Isaac had shown that when he was playing the part of the king, he was perfectly willing to kill Cain on the spot. Recalling that incident struck fear into my heart, and I found myself trembling.

Reggie attempted to strike a bargain. "If I throw my sword aside, will you let Kiara go?"

"If you're willing to become my hostage in her stead, then certainly, we can make that trade."

"Your Grace!" His knights moved to stop him.

The offer to lay down his sword had nearly brought me to tears.

I need to do something, but I can't use my magic like this. Given the shape I'm in right now, I'd have a hard time so much as transmuting Isaac's sword. Wait, hold on a second... That's actually a great idea!

Without a moment's hesitation, I made a grab for the blade of his sword. As I tightened my grip, my skin tore, blood trickling down my hand.

"What do you think you're doing, Kia—guh!"

Surprised, Isaac tried to yank his sword away from me, and that was when I aimed a kick at his chin. There was a good chance I had just flashed someone my thighs with that move, but this wasn't the time to be worried about that.

When I felt Isaac's hold on me loosen, I twisted myself out of his arm and dropped to the ground. *Ouch*. Groaning in pain all the while, I used my magic to warp Isaac's sword, which now dripped with my blood.

"Ugh! Damned harpy!"

"I happen to be frail and unarmed, so anything goes, if you ask me!" I shot back, finding it harder and harder to breathe.

Meanwhile, Reggie wasted no time cutting his way forward. Isaac recoiled from the close-range thrust, and soon, arrows came flying. The soldiers of

Salekhard hadn't just been sitting back and watching this unfold, of course. Their assault on Reggie's knights was in full swing.

I tried to get as far away as I could. I was out of breath and so shaky on my feet I felt like I was running a fever, but if I didn't run, I was just going to get in everyone's way.

Suddenly, I felt someone wrap their arms around me. I shrank in on myself, terrified that it was Isaac. And yet, despite the urgency in the embrace, there was an odd sort of courtesy to it that I recognized. When he pulled me closer, the scent that tickled my nostrils filled me with a sense of nostalgia and the warmth of the sun.

"Kiara."

It was Reggie, no doubt about it. The moment I came to that realization, all the tension bled from my body, tears pricking my eyes.

"Hold on just a little bit longer," he said, adjusting his arm around my shoulders and brandishing his sword.

He struck down an incoming block of ice. When I glanced behind me, I saw that in addition to the Salekhardian soldiers, another defective spellcaster was heading our way.

"Look out, Your Grace!"

"Don't worry about us! I'm going to focus on retreating!"

While Reggie shouted back and forth with Groul, we were assailed by a magical blizzard. We were engulfed in a flurry of white powder and wind, so fierce that I couldn't see ahead of me. Considering I was wearing nothing but a nightgown, I thought I was going to freeze to death.

The snowstorm had turned the fight into a free-for-all. Several Salekhardian soldiers popped out from within the white gale, only to be cut down by Reggie's blade.

An arrow zipped by from somewhere outside the blizzard, not to be outdone by the speed of the winds, and shot Reggie's current adversary straight through. It must have been a fellow Farzian assisting our retreat.

I was suddenly reminded that I couldn't leave this place behind just yet. I pleaded with Reggie, "Um, I'm sorry! Master Horace was riding that golem you saw earlier. If we just leave him there, well..."

Once Salekhard took him into their possession, I'd never see him again. With that much distance between the two of us, there was a good chance the magic spell on him would break.

"Alright. I think I can manage something there." Reggie stopped the knight that was leading the way to tell him, "I'll be fine. Let's use this snowstorm for all its worth and turn the defective spellcaster on Salekhard. That said, it seems that Kiara's mentor is with the golem that just collapsed. Alan should be closest, so send him orders to take the doll into custody."

At Reggie's command, the knight nodded and disappeared back into the blizzard.

Then, he requested of me, "Can I call upon just a little bit more of your magic?"

"Sure."

He clearly had something in mind. Without the slightest bit of skepticism, I set the earth around us into motion.

In the same moment, a terramouse rushed in and scooped the pair of us into its paws. Two more mice flocked around us, shoving and guiding us in a certain direction.

Oh, I get it. The entrance to their nest must be this way. No matter how hard it was to see, surely a monster would know which way led to its own den. It explained how Reggie and his crew had popped up out of nowhere, too; they'd used the terramice's tunnels to get here.

The moment we went on the move, I could have sworn I heard someone murmur: "I hope you find happiness, Kiara."

I was pretty sure it was Isaac's voice. Why would he be saying that now, of all times? Or had I just imagined it? It left me with all sorts of questions, but I had no chance to ask a single one.

As snow blew into my face, I closed my eyes and clung to Reggie. It wasn't long before I suddenly felt myself floating through the air, which earned a loud shriek from me.

"Eek!"

The drop had taken me by surprise, but seeing as Reggie had broken my fall, I came out of it unscathed.

We were inside the terramice's nest now. The cave was dark, but given that we'd just escaped from a blizzard, the air felt pleasantly warm.

Once Reggie had sheathed his sword, he swept me up into his arms once more and proceeded through the nest. The tunnel was pitch black, with only the terramice sandwiching us from both sides to serve as our guides. I wasn't worried, though; Reggie would never do anything bad to me. I knew he was only here to protect me.

What I *was* concerned about was the distance we'd traveled. It seemed like an awful long way to walk while carrying someone, but Reggie didn't so much as complain.

"Put me down, Reggie. I can walk."

"I don't think so. You're barefoot, remember? Besides, I want to hold you close right now."

The darkness around us only made the line that much more flustering to hear. The words resonated with me something fierce.

I couldn't bring myself to argue back, and soon, we had emerged from the gloomy soil. We'd come out under a small cliff next to a river. I could see the water rushing by, washing clean the large rocks dotting the stream. The spot where Reggie and the terramice were standing was a riverbank of tiny, round pebbles.

There, Reggie finally set me down. The stones felt cool against the bare skin of my feet.

"So this is where we ended up," he murmured.

I gave a curious tilt of my head. "You didn't know where the tunnel went?"

“Well, the terramice built three different exits. Where we would end up was entirely up to the ones guiding us. Either way, it’s safe to say we’ve made it a good distance from the battlefield of Liadna. The rest of the team should be making their way to the other exits as we speak. Now, hold out your hands.”

At his prompting, I stuck out my hands, which were still bound together. He cut the rope with his sword. It was a huge relief to finally be untied. I rubbed at my wrists, the marks the rope had left behind tingling on my skin.

Reggie went on to treat my injuries. Perhaps he’d anticipated that we would end up separated from everyone else from the start; he was carrying a salve on his person. He wrapped bandages around both the rope burns and the gash Isaac’s sword had left on my palm.

Was it really safe to be taking it so easy, though? I was on pins and needles, worried that the enemy might discover the terramice’s tunnels any second now.

“Don’t we need to worry about the enemy following us?”

“Lady Emmeline is in charge of closing the holes. Apparently she knows a way to get the terramice to plug them up.”

That’s their owner, alright.

“A few of the poor things got caught in the crossfire,” I lamented. No matter how much time they’d spent ramming into me, it was hard to watch such adorable creatures get slaughtered.

“We knew that was inevitable, so don’t *you* worry about it. Lady Emmeline said that was alright with her, and once she’d brought them to the fort, nothing was going to stop them from rushing into enemy forces the second you cast your magic. But forget about all that...” Reggie trailed off as soon as he’d finished tying the bandages around my hand, only to pull me into a hug. “I’m just glad you’re alright.”

My eyes started to water. Truth be told, I hadn’t expected anyone to come for me. I didn’t think it was right to hope for that; after all, there was a good chance it would just get someone hurt. After a long struggle, I’d finally come to terms with taking lives in war, but if nothing else, I didn’t want any harm to come to the people most important to me. That was why I’d relegated my own escape

to the back burner. Instead, I'd tried to focus on helping Farzia win and taking down Lord Credias while I was at it. Getting rid of *him* was bound to make the battle an easier fight for our forces.

And yet... here Reggie was. I was over the moon that he'd been concerned for me, and just knowing that he still needed me around was enough to warm my heart. I was so overjoyed, so relieved, that I couldn't stop the tears from flowing.

"Don't cry, Kiara." Reggie rubbed my back soothingly. The familiar touch of his hand only made me wail harder. "I'm sorry for putting you through all that. I wish I could have rescued you sooner."

As much as I wanted to tell him to stop apologizing, I couldn't get the words out through my sobs. It wasn't Reggie's fault at all. *I* was the one who had insisted on joining the war effort.

Though I couldn't get a reply out, all that crying calmed me down a little, and my tears eventually subsided. I still couldn't bring myself to lift my face, so I just thunked my forehead against Reggie's chest and stayed there.

As he stroked my hair, Reggie said, "I'd like to see your face sometime soon."

"No way. It's a mess from crying." I shot him down immediately. If it were Isaac, I would've been happy to put him off with the sight of it, but I didn't want Reggie to see me like this.

"I don't care about that. You always look cute to me."

"What?"

The compliment was such a direct hit that it took me by surprise. Meanwhile, Reggie lifted my right hand in his.

"Did he take your ring?"

He could tell that I wasn't wearing it at a glance. He brushed his fingers over mine, as though he were lamenting the accessory's absence.

Struck with an emotion I didn't quite understand—something more than simple embarrassment—I floundered and explained, "Erm, actually... I used it to stab the viscount."

“So he did something that merited stabbing?” he asked back, and I realized I’d let more slip than I should have.

Kiara, you dummy! Why would you tell him that?! It’s just going to make him worried!

“Don’t worry! Miss Ada saved me, and Isaac made sure he couldn’t come anywhere near me after that!”

“Which means he did something that warranted that kind of response. What happened?”

“Erk! Well... since I’m a spellcaster, he insisted that *he* should be in charge of me and took me away.”

“So he used that as a pretense, then got intimate enough with you that you had to stab him?”

I knew I couldn’t contradict him much longer, so I tried to ditch the subject altogether. I was too ashamed to tell him I was nearly assaulted.

“O-Okay, enough questions!”

If I said that and peeled myself away from him, I figured that Reggie would choose to let it go before I really started digging my heels in. Thus, I took a step back... but I couldn’t bring myself to release my gentle grip on his hand. I was scared to let go of him. Almost as though he’d sensed that, Reggie laid his other hand over mine, enveloping it completely.

“You don’t mind holding hands with me, Kiara?” he asked quietly. I wasn’t sure what to do here, but I nodded all the same. “You didn’t mind me hugging you, either?”

“Not at all. It was nice and warm,” I responded.

Reggie gave a small smile. “Then don’t run, okay?”

I got the feeling that he’d said something similar once before. As I tried to recall when it was, I answered, “I’d never run from you, Reggie.” He promptly wrapped his arms around me, lifting me up off the ground.

He sat down on a nearby rock, still cradling me in his arms, then lifted my right hand and placed a kiss on the finger that no longer bore his ring.

“Does that bother you?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

I figured that was his way of telling me he wasn’t angry, even though I’d ruined his ring. Nonetheless, I felt a pang in my chest. I got the sense that he really wished I were still wearing it. Still, did he have to kiss my finger just to check that the ring was really gone? Weren’t you supposed to save that sort of thing for someone you have feelings for?

I couldn’t ask him that, though—I was too afraid. Besides, I knew that hand-kissing was a gesture of courtesy among aristocrats.

But just as I was thinking that, Reggie mumbled, “What about this?”

I lifted my face at the question, only for Reggie’s lips to brush against my cheek. It only lasted a second, but a sweet sensation took root in my heart. It felt nothing like when Isaac had done the same thing. Sensing that the reason for that was about to fall into place, I gazed steadily back into Reggie’s eyes.

“I know that you let yourself be captured to keep Wentworth safe, but I spent the whole time worrying about you. It *is* thanks to your gambit that he came back alive, however.”

Assured that Cain was alive and well at long last, I let out a sigh of relief. *Good, so Cain made it back safe.*

Reggie smiled, using his fingers to gently dry my dampened cheeks. “If I could have taken your place, I would have. I’m not confident that I’ll be able to let you out of my sight ever again. That’s how much you mean to me, Kiara.”

Just as my crying had finally stopped, that declaration of his made tears well up in my eyes all over again.

“I’m sorry to make you worry, Reggie. But don’t pull any more crazy stunts, okay? I can take care of myself, and I’d hate it more than anything if you got hurt or killed.”

“I’m afraid we’ll never see eye to eye when it comes to this.”

I was being completely honest with him, yet he just dismissed me with a rueful smile.

He's awful, I thought, only to hear him murmur, "I won't back down on this one. No one is more important to me than you. I love you, Kiara."

I love you.

I gasped, as though he'd just pierced me through the heart with those words. As if he had been waiting for that moment, Reggie brought his face close to mine... and placed a kiss on my lips this time.



The thought of moving away didn't even cross my mind. As soon as I registered the soft sensation gracing my lips, my face heated up like it was on fire. Spurred on to imitate the gesture, a shiver ran down my spine. It was a feeling akin to taking a plunge.

Unlike with Isaac, I wasn't scared. In fact, I was perplexed to find myself wanting more.

Meanwhile, I was finally starting to understand what Isaac had been trying to tell me. Why would I risk my own life to save Reggie, heading into battle despite knowing the danger that awaited me? Perhaps the reason he had forced a kiss on me while urging me to despise him was to show me the difference between him and Reggie—to make me understand the difference between a man I loved and a man I didn't.

Oh, I see now. I love him.

The words settled deep in my heart.

I was sure I had from the moment I'd met him. When we'd first encountered each other, when I was all alone with no one on my side, it would have been totally reasonable for him to doubt my story. Yet he'd still trusted me.

Still, I hadn't believed there was a chance he'd ever fall for me. He was an RPG prince, for God's sake! Even when he did things that pushed the boundaries of mere camaraderie, I always wrote it off as him teasing me. If I convinced myself it was a joke, at least I wouldn't damage our idyllic friendship. Even now, part of me wondered if this was all some trick of my mind.

His lips left mine. The yearning that followed drove home that what I'd felt was real.

Reggie said, "I'm not going to apologize this time. I was scared of putting you off, so I've held back from this for a while now. But being separated from you—and being unable to do a thing about it—made me realize how much I'd hate leaving my feelings unsaid. So I've decided to tell you everything."

"E-Everything?"

"I love you, and that's why I didn't want you to fight. All I truly wanted was to

lock you away somewhere, to keep you safe and secluded. I didn't care if I died, so long as you lived. I tried to make you understand that, but I could never seem to get my point across. Before long, you started keeping Wentworth by your side, so I assumed you'd chosen to put him first. I decided to keep my distance before it became too painful to bear."

"What? Sir Cain?" I blinked, surprised to hear his name pop up all of a sudden.

"Can you blame me for thinking that? You didn't protest when he embraced you."

Is he talking about what happened at Delphion Castle?

"I got the feeling that Sir Cain needed someone to depend on, that's all."

In that particular moment, I'd been under the impression that Cain couldn't put his late family behind him and needed someone to take their place. If he was lonely and sad, I thought I could offer him a shoulder to cry on—though perhaps not literally, since men don't like to cry. He'd confessed his love for me then, but I couldn't bring myself to respond to his feelings head-on. Something about it hadn't sat right with me.

I couldn't delude myself about what the issue was anymore. Isaac had made sure of that. He was supposed to be my enemy, yet here I was struck by his kindness.

"Regardless, I've decided to stop holding back." Reggie smiled, content.

"Perhaps you might find this a nuisance, or perhaps the knowledge might feel like a burden, but I wanted to get everything off my chest. I'd hate it if I never had the chance to say it, after all. Still... does any of this bother you?"

My answer should have been obvious. I'd just been playing dumb this whole time. "No, your feelings don't bother me at all. But... are you sure you really like *me*?"

Will you really, truly love me?

I was afraid I might wake up to find this was all just a dream.

At some point, I'd reached out to clutch the collar of Reggie's cape, and he placed his hand atop mine—which was enough to reassure me that the reason

for my hesitation had come across. That sense of mutual understanding warmed my heart.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I’m just a little scared.”

It should have been well established by now that this was reality, yet I was still scared to take the plunge and put my feelings into words. Even I wasn’t sure what I was so afraid of.

“I think I know why you feel that way—so I’ll do my best to make myself understood until the fear finally goes away. I’m willing to wait for as long as it takes.”

Reggie didn’t pressure me to give him an answer. Was it because he already knew I was leaning his way?

“I love you, Kiara.”

Basking in those gentle words, I let my eyes drift shut.

As nice as it would have been for the scene to change the moment I closed my eyes, things didn’t work that way in reality. Until someone arrived to pick us up, I had to sit with Reggie by the edge of the river.

It was super awkward.

I mean, come on! He’d just confessed to me! Worse still, I was currently withholding my answer because I was too chicken to come out with it.

As soon as I’d realized I was in love, it had suddenly become a lot harder to figure out the appropriate boundaries to keep. I would have felt bad leaning too hard on him and indulging in his affections. After all, I was the one who had relegated our relationship to one of friends or family because I was scared to be abandoned. But was it okay to just act the same way I always had? Would it bother him, considering he’d just confessed his feelings for me?

Oh, but still, I didn’t refuse the kiss.

His embrace was so comforting that it had always been hard for me to push him away. It turned out that *wasn’t* just because I felt safe in my guardian’s arms.

Waking up to my feelings had made me a whole lot more self-conscious, but I didn't want to move away from him, so I just stayed put.

After a while, Reggie finally said, "Are you cold?"

I was lightly dressed, so I *was* feeling a little chilly. Summer was long over now. Still, snuggling up to Reggie kept me warm.

"Not really."

In spite of my answer, he asked, "Could you stand up for a second?"

That gave me a start. "Oh, I'm sorry! I must be heavy!"

Keeping something heavy in his lap for so long had to be bad for his circulation. I recalled putting my dad's legs to sleep after sitting on his lap for a long time during my past life. I jumped off of Reggie in a hurry.

"Not at all; you're light as a feather. I'll bet anything you fell into a deep sleep soon after you were captured and haven't had a proper meal to eat. I'm fairly sure you've lost weight."

"What? How did you know I was laid up?"

"You used far more magic than your standard fare just before you were captured. You saved Felix, fought the viscount and his defective spellcasters, and then healed Wentworth on top of that, right? I was awfully worried about you."

"I know. Sorry."

There wasn't anything else I could have done. No matter how many times it happened, I'd always choose to fight, and I'd always heal the two of them. Still, anything I could have said would have sounded like an excuse, so I apologized instead.

"By the way, there's something I wanted to ask you." He changed the subject. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"The Salekhardians figured that your typical girl wouldn't run off in a nightgown."

"They knew that binding your hands wouldn't be enough to stop you, I see."

His voice dropped an octave. “Don’t move, Kiara.”

First, he took the green cape I was wearing and wound it even more tightly around me. It wasn’t quite long enough to reach all the way down to my feet, however. Reggie didn’t seem to like that one bit, but nevertheless, he took me into his arms and sat down once again. Apparently, he’d asked me to stand up just so he could do that.

“I hate to think of you walking around showing off your legs. In all honesty, I don’t like seeing you in that green either, but it wouldn’t do if you caught a cold. I’ll have to bear with it for now.” He heaved a sigh.

“But, uh... I already flashed a bunch of people my legs during the battle.”

The white gown I was wearing as pajamas only reached my calves. I’d been carried under someone’s arm at one point, which meant my legs had been on full public display. I was *trying* to tell him that it wasn’t worth worrying about, but if I’m being totally honest here, that was a big mistake on my part.

“I think you’d do best not to remind me of that. It makes me want to erase the memories of all my knights.”

“Um, yes, sir.”

Reggie’s eyes were like ice. It was enough to even scare *me*.

Still, after declaring that he was going to tell me everything, it seemed that Reggie had gotten a little better about saying what he was really thinking. It was kind of nice when I thought about it, but that didn’t make the look on his face any less terrifying.

In the meantime, someone finally came to pick us up.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Grace.”

The man who showed up spearheading a group of twenty or so men was Dior, a knight of the royal guard. Reggie left me to sit by myself and wandered a short distance away to greet them. The team had brought along a spare horse, and seeing as he’d made it out of the battle unscathed, Reggie opted to ride it back to the fort.

Before mounting it, he asked Dior, “Did you bring a blanket of some kind, by

chance?”

“We did bring the canvas for a stretcher in case someone got hurt.”

“Perfect. I’ll be using that.”

As soon as the cloth was in his hands, Reggie went to work bundling me up. He wrapped it snugly around my body, covering me from the top of my head to the very tips of my toes. By the time he was done, I couldn’t move a muscle. I felt like a gift all packed up and ready to be shipped.

Reggie carried me all the way back to the fort in luggage mode.

After taking one look at us when we arrived, Alan steeled himself and asked in a truly pained tone, “Reggie... was Kiara too badly mauled to even look at?”

“Why, from the way she was casting her magic, I’d assumed she *must* be hale and hearty,” Emmeline lamented.

Their misunderstanding threw me into a tizzy. *I’m alive, guys!*

“What nonsense are you two spouting? She’s clearly alive and kicking,” Master Horace cut in.

Oh, good, Master Horace got home safe! Looks like someone managed to salvage him. I’ll have to thank them later.

One man among the crowd was more composed than the rest. “I’d wager His Highness just doesn’t want anyone to see her. I heard she was dressed a touch inappropriately.”

“That’s quite enough out of you, Wentworth,” Reggie responded, his voice dropping a pitch. “Who told you that? Groul? Could someone go summon him for me?”

Meanwhile, I was preoccupied with more pressing matters. “Sir Cain? Sir Cain, is that you?!”

I wanted to see his face. I’d heard that he was all in one piece, and I could hear his voice loud and clear, but I couldn’t truly relax until I saw him alive and well with my own two eyes. After all, he’d been on death’s door the last time I’d seen him, unconscious and smeared in blood.

Had his wounds healed? Had he suffered any lasting damage? I was so desperate to know that I tried to wriggle free, but the blanket was wrapped so tightly around me that I couldn't move my arms. To make matters worse, Reggie wasn't lifting a finger to help me. As if there was anything shameful about showing my *face*!

Out of options, I started banging my head furiously, eliciting cries of concern.

"Kiara?!"

"Is she possessed?"

"You look like a giant caterpillar, kid. Talk about creepy."

Finally, my face finally popped out of its bindings.

"Are you alright, Sir Cain?!"

Now that night had fallen, bonfires had been lit around the fort. Illuminated by the strong, crimson light, there stood Cain—right alongside Alan, who was staring at me incredulously.

"I'm doing just fine," he answered, gazing up at me where I sat upon Reggie's horse. I couldn't spot a scratch on him. "And I have you to thank for that. I'm glad to finally have the chance to express my gratitude."

"Even then, it was only just yesterday that he managed to get out of bed. Go get some rest, my good man; you nearly died!" said Alan, who was holding Master Horace. Cain smiled ruefully, as if the remark had hit a sore spot. "Lady Emmeline, would you mind helping Kiara out? Do you have any clothes she could borrow, perchance?"

Emmeline, who was standing on Alan's other side, nodded. "We didn't lose all that much of our cargo in the last battle, so I should have a spare outfit on hand. Let's move her inside. Someone call a soldier to—"

The moment I heard that last bit, I curled in on myself, terrified by the thought of a stranger carrying me anywhere. I knew I was among friendly forces now, but after everything I'd been through, the idea of someone touching me while I was rendered immobile filled me with dread.

Reggie held me out for Cain to take, still swaddled like a bagworm. "She was

dressed minimally to keep her from escaping. No shoes, either.”

“Oh, so *that’s* why she came back looking like this. I understand perfectly now.” Cain took me off Reggie’s hands, satisfied with the explanation for my cocoon.

“I mean, I *did* have shoes; I just took them off because they’d get in the way of casting my magic.” I instinctively rushed to make excuses, only for Reggie to flick me on the forehead.

“I realize it was an emergency, but it was a rather risqué look, Kiara.”

“*Risqué?!?*”

“It was quite infuriating to witness other men staring at the tips of your toes, I’ll have you know,” Reggie added, in what could only be described as kicking me while I was down; however, he quickly laughed it off with a wave of his hand. “Well then, I leave you two to handle the rest. Alan, I’d like a post-battle report.”

Reggie dismounted his horse, then strode off alongside Alan. I felt the tiniest pang of loneliness at his unceremonious departure. He’d absconded with Master Horace, too. More pressing, however, was the matter of thanking Cain and Emmeline now that we’d finally been reunited.

“Thank you for lending us your terramice, Miss Emmeline. I’m sorry we lost a few of them in the process.”

“Come now, you needn’t worry about *that*,” Emmeline replied with a breezy laugh, looking dignified in her military uniform. “At the end of the day, they’re monsters; I told His Highness as much when he tried to apologize, too. Besides, I’m sure the ones I left at home will swell their ranks in no time. Feed them too much and they can double their numbers in just three months.”

Sounds like they multiply like rabbits... or, well, like mice.

“For a start, let’s get you a change of clothes. Excuse me, you there! Summon the mercenary named Gina to my room, would you? Tell her the spellcaster has returned,” Emmeline ordered a nearby Delphion soldier before leading us away.

Cain declined to free me from my cocoon, so he had to carry me all the way

there. My head was the one part of me sticking out, which drew hushed commentary from the soldiers we passed inside the fort.

“Is that the spellcaster?!”

“They managed to rescue her, then?” A beat. “They’re not keeping her restrained, are they?”

“Do you think she changed jobs to ‘bagworm’?”

Emmeline and Cain giggled as they overheard the conversation. Despite my mixed feelings on the matter, a smile broke out across my face at the sight of it. For a while there, I’d been afraid we would never share a laugh over something so silly ever again.

Perhaps that was why I found tears welling up in my eyes. Reuniting with Reggie had turned me into a real crybaby, it seemed.

Cain adjusted his hold on me, moving his hand from my shoulder to wipe my eyes dry. “You’re alright now. Everyone is here with you. Why, even Felix was raring to head into battle, to the point that he refused to listen to orders. He was so insistent that Sir Groul had to tie him down.”

Groul was a “brute force” sort of fellow, apparently.

“Sir Felix hasn’t fully recovered yet?”

“Medicine did the trick for me, seeing as the worst of my injuries were gashes. Felix suffered burns, so he hasn’t been quite as lucky.”

“I should go check on him later.”

“I imagine you must be exhausted, so I suggest you leave that for another day. If you push yourself too hard, you’re going to pass out.”

It had been so long since I’d last been scolded by Cain that even his nagging brought me joy.

Before long, Emmeline had brought us to an unoccupied room. This being a fort and all, there was nothing inside but a simple bed, a rustic chair, and a table. Frankly, the fact that there was anything in it at all probably put it ahead of the pack. Judging by the bedding that had been laid out, she had readied it for me in hopes that today’s rescue mission would be successful.

“Wow! Thank you so much, Miss Emmeline!”

My first instinct was to wrap her up in a hug, but unfortunately, I was still a human bagworm. I asked Cain to set me down on the floor. Just as I was about to fling myself at Emmeline, she left to go get my change of clothes ready, so I was instead stuck waiting there with my knight.

There had been no telling if and when I would be coming back, after all. My feet were a dirty mess, so she probably had to go fetch us some water, too. I felt bad making her go out of her way for me, but given that I was still too jumpy to wander around myself, I took her up on her kindness.

The longer I stood still, the more difficult it became to stay on my feet while swathed in a blanket. I tried unraveling it so I could regain my balance, but Reggie must have wrapped it pretty darn tight since I was struggling to get it off on my own.

“Hey, Sir Cain? Could you get this blanket off for me? It’s starting to get pretty uncomfortable.”

“Oh, *this* is why you aren’t having any luck. He tied it off in a knot.”

“But why?!”

Evidently, the difficulty I was having in getting it off was intentional; Reggie had tied off the ends of the cloth in a knot.

Why, was he worried I’d try to struggle loose? That’s just silly, though!

Despite the question marks floating around in my head, I finally escaped the coils of blanket—though I kept it draped around my shoulders. It was soon revealed that Reggie had tied off the cape underneath, too. If we unraveled *that*, I’d be left in nothing but a nightgown, so I let it be. Cain, meanwhile, burst out laughing at the sight.

“Stop laughing, Sir Cain! I know it looks funny, but I shouldn’t take the rest of it off!”

“No, no, it has nothing to do with the delightful way you’re dressed. It’s simply that His Highness is so transparent,” he explained, pulling the blanket around me to shield the sight from view, tying the ends into a knot under my

neck.

“Transparent? How so?”

“More than ‘risqué,’ I’d wager you looked a bit alluring.”

“I looked WHAT?!”

That was the first time in my life I’d ever heard that word associated with *me*. Did he have me confused for someone else?

Of course, that called to mind how Cain had admitted his love for me. He’d implored me not to fall for anyone else—or else he might lose his place as my “older sibling.” Once he realized I was in love with Reggie, would he stop being my brother? It was a little unnerving to think about how Cain might react, and I found myself suddenly tensing up.

It was in that moment that he brushed his fingers over my cheek, which only served to give me a start. He promptly withdrew his hand, peering into my face.

“Back outside the fort, you went pale when you thought a soldier might have to touch you.”

Wait, did I really?

“Are you afraid of me?” he asked.

“Uh, no, it’s not like that...”

Too many things had come flooding back to me, that was all. Cain may have confessed his feelings for me, and he made a habit of touching me out of the blue, but I knew he would never force himself on me. After everything I’d been through, I was just more skittish than usual.

Cain said, “Would you mind if I hugged you? I’d like to prove to myself one more time that you’re really here, safe and sound.”

He, too, must have spent my time as a captive worried sick for me. I didn’t think it would be right to turn him down, and I hadn’t minded him carrying me all this way anyway, so I went ahead and nodded.

Cain folded me up in the blanket, gently holding me in his arms. He went on to stroke my hair as though I were a child, so my moment’s worth of tension

melted away in no time. It couldn't have lasted longer than ten seconds. When Cain pulled back, he sounded like the pieces of a puzzle had fallen into place for him. "I can more or less guess what happened."

"Hm?" I gave a quizzical tilt of my head.

That was when Emmeline showed up with Gina in tow. In their arms were bedsheets, a tub full of hot water, a washcloth, and a change of clothes, among other things.

Wow, I didn't expect her to go out of her way to get hot water. She must have known I'd be covered in dirt from running all over the battlefield.

"Even on a good day, wielding earth magic usually leaves me nice and dusty," I mumbled to myself.

The look on Gina's face was a touch menacing. "You're focusing on the wrong thing, Kiara! There was a good chance you wouldn't make it out of there in one piece! Nobody did anything to you, did they? You don't have to pretend like everything's fine. I don't want you holding anything in," she said, reaching out to hug me from over my cloak of blanket.

There was an inherent femininity to her physique and her scent that no amount of training could erase, and something about it made me feel at ease. Almost as if a switch inside me had flipped, tears started spilling from my eyes.

"Hey, what happened?!" As soon as she saw I was crying, she cradled my head in her arms and told Cain, "Thanks for all your help. I'll come fill you in later, so would you mind stepping out for now?"

"Very well." With a terse farewell, Cain left the room.

Shoot, I might have given Cain the wrong idea. I had a hairy encounter, sure, but nothing actually happened to me. I don't want him thinking this is all his fault.

I rushed to set the story straight. "Nothing that bad happened in the end, Gina. Miss Ada made sure of that."

I told Gina and Emmeline about how Lord Credias had tried to take advantage of me while I was Salekhard's prisoner, only for Ada to show up and save me.

Both girls visibly relaxed, relieved by the news.

“Good. I didn’t know what I’d do if you came home a wreck in both mind and body. I even made arrangements for your convalescence in Delphion, in case it came to that.”

“You *were* in enemy territory and all. It may have been Salekhard that captured you, but given what a vulnerable position the country is in, I figured they wouldn’t have grounds to refuse if Llewyne demanded they hand you over. I was seriously worried something awful had happened to you! I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks for worrying about me. I was formally in the king of Salekhard’s custody, but the viscount was just too obsessed with me to care.”

I gave the pair a rough overview of the past few days as I unequipped my barrier of blankets and changed into my new clothes.

Well... most of it, anyway. There were a few parts I didn’t want to mention—like how Isaac had bitten down on my neck to give the viscount the slip. I glossed over that bit. Still, the full story of what *Credias* had done to me came out later. The girls urged me to have dinner if I had the strength to eat, then drew the details out of me as we sat around a small table eating soup and bread.

“Miss Ada did that? Perhaps it was because she saw so much of you and Sir Felix. I heard that she ran away the moment she laid eyes on you in Liadna, too,” Emmeline reflected.

Gina looked conflicted. “But she killed Lord Azure, remember? If we’re talking personal relationships, he and his men went to a lot of trouble for her.” She furrowed her brow, trying to puzzle out what had made the difference.

Emmeline murmured, “When it came to Miss Kiara, I assume she felt some degree of empathy as a fellow spellcaster. As for Sir Felix... perhaps it was love?”

“Love?” I parroted.

“But didn’t she have a thing for His Highness?” Gina countered.

“This is just my own speculation,” Emmeline replied, “but despite her initial infatuation with His Highness, once she realized he had zero interest in her, perhaps she turned her affections to the man who had actually shown her consideration.”

In other words, it was because—as the one tasked with handling her in Reggie’s stead—Felix had spent the most time with her.

“But if things stay the way they are... we’re going to have to fight against Miss Ada eventually.”

Enemy or not, she was the one who had come to my rescue. Hearing me sympathize with her struggles after Reggie’s rejection had left her speechless; thus, I was pretty sure she wasn’t on Llewyn’s side of her own free will. If you added in the fact that she was Lord Credias’ wife, there was a good chance that she’d been turned into a spellcaster and forced to obey him.

“One wrong step and I could’ve ended up just like her.”

“What do you mean?” Gina asked, cocking her head to one side.

I went ahead and explained myself. I didn’t mention the reincarnation bit, of course, but I told her that I’d fled from my engagement to Lord Credias, and that Ada had become his wife in my stead.

Emmeline’s expression grew darker the longer my story went on. I finished by telling her, “I think Miss Ada was forced to do what she did.”

“Still... considering she killed Lord Azure, do you think His Highness would grant her clemency? Antagonizing the Azurans within our army would only hinder our fight against Llewyn.”

“You have a point there.”

The House of Azure was full of ardent loyalists of the royal family; hence they had provided pivotal support to Reggie. If he came to the defense of the woman who had killed their marquis, it would only weaken his standing with them.

“In any case, you ought to get some rest for now, Miss Kiara. I’ll leave the water at your bedside.”

“We’ll be back to check on you tomorrow, ‘kay?”

After a long stretch of silence, the two ladies quickly tidied up the room, then made to take their leave.

“Hold on, Gina! I don’t want to leave Sir Cain with the wrong idea, so could you tell him, um... that it wasn’t as much of a catastrophe as it could have been?” I was so flustered that I landed on an awfully strange way of phrasing it, but Gina just laughed.

“Alright, I’ll make sure he knows. I’ll give His Highness an idea of what happened, too, so don’t worry.”

“Thank you.”

I watched them go, stopping to breathe once they’d shut the door. Now that the lively pair had taken their leave, silence fell over the room once more.

Soon, I felt a knot of loneliness in my stomach. I’d been rescued. Everyone else was alive and well, too. So why didn’t any of it feel real yet? Not only was I nice and full, but I’d just had a good, long chat with Emmeline and Gina, so I ought to have been feeling more relaxed by now.

No... that wasn’t enough. I didn’t want them to go just yet. I may be home now, but I still have so much leftover anxiety. I needed them here just a little longer—to remind me that all the scary things that happened are in the past now.

I couldn’t expect them to baby me like that, though. Considering we were on the heels of a battle, they each had their own jobs to do. They couldn’t spend all their time taking care of me.

Hoping to take my mind off the solitude, I decided to hit the hay early. I rolled into bed, burrowing under the covers. Unfortunately, I couldn’t quite seem to fall asleep.

Come to think of it, Master Horace hasn’t come back yet. Is he planning to stay with Alan for a while?

Just as I was thinking that, I heard a knock on the door. I opened up, fully expecting to see Gina or Emmeline standing there.

“Master Horace!”

Instead, I found Reggie holding Master Horace in his arms.

“So you’ve rejoined the ranks of humanity after that stint as an uncanny bagworm, eh? Woohoo!”

“I’m so glad to see you! You aren’t broken this time, are you?” I rushed right up to Reggie, plucking Master Horace out of his hands and hugging him against my chest.

“C’mon, I wouldn’t fall apart *that* easily.”

“My, you’re even happier to see him than me,” Reggie remarked. “I’m almost jealous.”

I rushed to make excuses. “Wait, it’s not like that! I knew Master Horace was alright and all, but there was no time to talk to him earlier, so I just got a little excited!”

“Yes, I suppose you and I had a rather involved conversation already. That wasn’t quite enough to sate *me*, however.” Reggie reached for my face—to brush his hand over my cheek, I assumed, only for him to plant a quick kiss on it instead.

“Wha...?”

A gust of wind gushed out of Master Horace.

“Mmheehee! That tickles, that tickles!”

“Oh no! Sorry, Master Horace!”

Reggie laughed in the face of my fluster, then took his leave with a single word of farewell. Only Master Horace and I remained behind.

“Uhh, err...” After what Reggie had just pulled right in front of him, I found myself grappling to come up with an excuse.

“Mmheehee! No need to explain yourself. I’ve known you have the hots for that prince for ages now.” Master Horace threw up his hands as if to say, *Kids these days!*

“What?” My eyes went wide as saucers. “Since when?”

“From the very start, more or less. He came on pretty strong, and you never

once shot him down. It wasn't hard to guess." He must have been thinking of the whole foot-kissing incident in Évrard.

"Was it that obvious to everyone else, too?"

"Hard to say. Unless you've got business that needs taking care of, you don't hang around him all that much. Still, whoever knew really *knew*. You never sought help no matter how hard the prince flirted with you, but the second that knight started teasing you, you picked up new guardians to hide behind. I'll bet you anything that's when the mercenaries figured it out, too."

"'Picked up'...? Well, I guess you're right. I did get Gina and Girsch to bail me out."

When Cain started broadcasting his feelings for me by touching me more and more casually, I had gotten so worked up about it that I'd run to the mercenaries for advice, and ultimately, Girsch had to ask him to back off for me. By contrast, I hadn't gone to anyone for help when Reggie was putting his hands on my bare feet.

Thinking back on it, touching my shoulder was a heck of a lot more reasonable than my naked toes—and yet that was all it had taken to send me into a panic. I realized now that if it had been *Reggie* who had done that... I probably wouldn't have been so desperate to put a stop to it.

"To tell you the truth, I didn't realize it myself until earlier today."

"Mmheehee! I figured you were subconsciously trying to push it out of your mind."

Everything came down to a fear of Reggie leaving my side. Perhaps that was the reason I was hesitant to respond to his feelings even now.

"But y'know, I never did imagine that I'd be turned into a doll and forced to watch a young couple flirt right in front of my face! He's pretty bold about it, too," he grumbled under his breath.

I was so embarrassed I wanted to fall right through the floor. In a way, it sort of *was* like flirting right in front of my own dad.

"You know, I really do think of you like a father."

“Well, magic *is* thicker than blood. If you think of it that way, then sure, I might as well be your old man.”

“Thanks, Master Horace. I’ll treasure you always.”

“That sounded almost like a proposal! Except *you’re* the one who’s going to go off and get married, and *I’m* the one who’s going to stick around and sponge off of you for the rest of your life.”

“M-Married?!”

The first person to pop into my head was Reggie. Unable to pinpoint why a sense of apprehension accompanied the thought, I bit down on my lip.

Interlude: What I Can Do for Her

After all the meetings for the day had wrapped up, Reginald discussed his plan moving forward with Groul.

“Don’t you think we should be doing more than this, Groul?” he asked the knight sitting across from him.

The prince’s lord-in-waiting had set out tea for the two of them, and Groul paused just as he was about to bring his cup to his mouth. “I suppose I do have my misgivings.”

“It’s true that we forced the enemy to retreat. Just as Gina’s intel would suggest, Salekhard had no interest in dragging the battle out and withdrew their troops early, and Llewyrne had no choice but to follow suit once Kiara had whittled down their numbers. However, I believe Llewyrne only turned tail and fled due to two miscalculations on their part.”

Reginald paused, holding up two fingers.

“One was assuming they had an easy fight ahead of them because Farzia was down a spellcaster. Not once did they imagine that Kiara would turn on Llewyrne while she was still a captive of Salekhard’s. Perhaps your average girl would have kept her head down and stayed in line, but this is Kiara we’re talking about.”

When he witnessed her golem stand up and plunge straight into enemy lines, Reginald had burst out laughing. There had been a good chance she was pushing herself too hard—but it had been an inspiring sight to see. It meant she hadn’t given up yet.

“I have to agree with that assessment,” Groul conceded. When the knight first heard that she had picked a fight with the king of Salekhard as she sicced her golem on Llewyrne, he had been absolutely speechless.

“The second was that Lord Credias was more obsessed with Kiara than they’d bargained for. He was throwing around his defective spellcasters without a care

for anything but attacking her.”

“True. Lord Alan said he didn’t get the chance to clash with a single defective.”

Alan had been well prepared for the inevitability, but it turned out there was no need to have Gina on hand to deal with them. Salekhard, meanwhile, had been so terrified by the new golem’s design that setting the oversized Lila on them was all it took to make them retreat.

“That made it much easier to recover Sir Horace, of course. The enemy was afraid to come anywhere near a golem thrashing its limbs about. However, now that Kiara is back with us, we can’t count on them letting their guard down again. What’s more, we’ve run into one more problem.”

“Yes. We lost a great many of our forces in the battle before this one.”

The total number of casualties—dead or injured—from the last two battles combined was about 3,500. Given how dangerous it was to be incapacitated within enemy territory, all the wounded soldiers and corpses had been sent back to Delphion posthaste. Considering the enemy could just gather up their soldiers scattered throughout Trisphede, it was going to be difficult to pull out a win with sheer numbers.

“Is Dior around? I need him to send this out by messenger bird.”

“I see. You want to call upon *them*.”

As soon as Reginald held out the letter he’d written, Groul figured out what he was up to.

“I’ve talked it over with Alan. He has a good sense for war, and he agreed with me on this one. Once everything is set in stone, I’ll inform the other generals as well.”

“I see. Right away, sire.” Once he’d taken the letter out of the prince’s hands, Groul gave a puzzled tilt of his head. “Then what else do you think we should be doing?”

“Bring too many defective spellcasters into the fray and we won’t have any means to deal with them. As long as Lord Credias is around, there’s a limit to

how much Kiara can handle herself.”

Groul agreed with that assessment. So long as the viscount was around, Kiara’s options would be limited, meaning she couldn’t replicate her overwhelming displays of power from Clonfert and Sorwen. Meanwhile, the enemy had unlimited defective spellcasters at their disposal, leaving Farzia at a disadvantage in terms of numbers. Ordinary soldiers couldn’t be expected to take them out, so Farzian forces would dwindle as they expended their knights in vain. Even supposing they made it through the next clash, marching on the capital was going to be a struggle.

“Still, we can’t spend too much time in Trisphede.”

If they deferred the attack until spring, the lack of farmhands would hinder the next year’s harvest. Plus, if the war dragged on too long, the economy of the downtrodden territories would deteriorate even further. The circulation of goods was already quite stagnant due to Llewynian interference.

When it was first decided that they would head out on an expedition, Reggie had drawn up a rough plan in his head. He realized now that Kiara’s presence had made him a little too optimistic. Her magic was just that powerful.

In all the wars up to this point, magic had never been used with such frequency. When sorcery did come into play, it would usually amount to maybe one large-scale spell per battle.

If they didn’t want to lose that advantage, Reginald knew they had to rush this war to a conclusion.

“It would be best to finish this by the end of the year,” Groul agreed.

“Yes. At the very latest, I’d like to settle this by the start of winter.”

Unfortunately, they still had to deal with Kilrea, the territory west of Delphion that had been occupied by Llewyne, and the province of Patriciél, which had taken over the royal domain. Even after removing those two territories from the equation, the Llewynian army would be lying in wait for them in Sestina.

Reginald didn’t want Kiara working too much harder, either. Despite the brave front she’d put up the previous day, she had to have been anxious. Considering how much time she’d spent alone with no one around to back her

up, it was only natural.

In truth, Reginald had wanted to stay by her side. He simply wasn't sure if he'd be able to hold himself back. When he kissed her right after rescuing her, he'd been oddly relieved that she hadn't run away. It had made him genuinely believe that she returned his feelings. As a result, he found himself wanting to ask more and more of her. He wanted to see how much she would let him get away with.

Kiara's outfit had been to blame, too. It wasn't see-through or anything like that, but seeing her in something different from her usual fare had made her seem all the more attractive. It was to keep her from running, sure, but what *had* the king of Salekhard been thinking? Knowing that he was previously acquainted with Kiara made Reginald want to berate the man; he really should have known it would take more than that to make her back down.

No matter how hard he'd tried not to look, it hadn't made the tips of Kiara's little white toes go away. Despite his efforts to avert his gaze, he hadn't wanted to let go of Kiara either, leaving him in a predicament of his own creation.

"If we're rushing this, that's all the more reason not to wear Kiara down."

The moment he said that, there came a knock on the door. Reginald's lord-in-waiting, Colin, rushed over from his seat in the corner of the room to answer it. The name he gave was that of the knight who had left Reginald's side a while back.

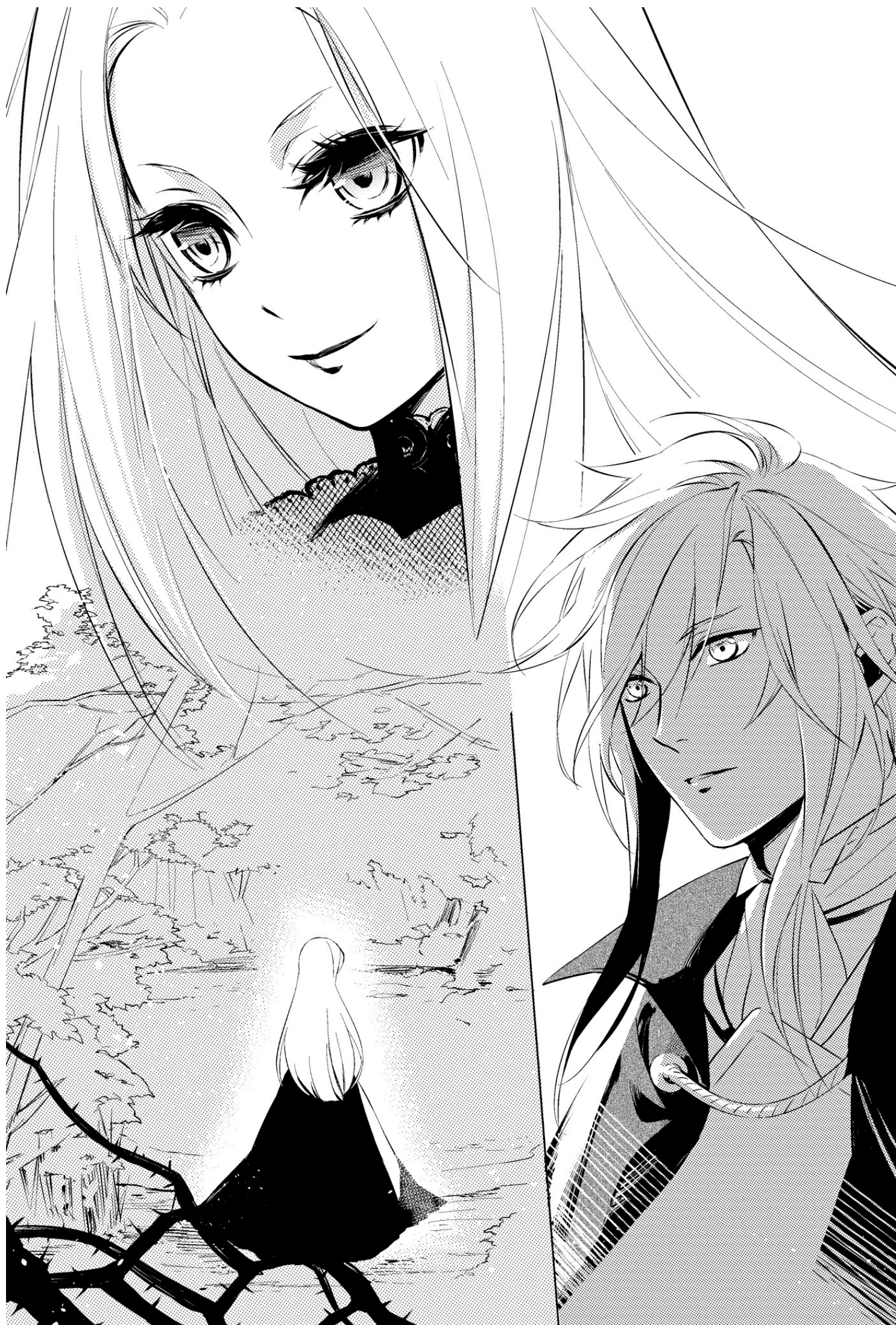
After ushering him in to listen to his report, Reginald promptly took Groul with him and left the room. He was headed for an area just behind the fort. The girl had designated a small pond enshrouded in trees.

Although Reginald was in a hurry, Groul insisted that he bring along at least a dozen cavalymen if he was going to be leaving the fort. The knight's concerns were justified; seeing as they were just coming off a battle, there was a good chance Llewynian soldiers were lurking about. Thus, Reginald chose to wait. Ultimately, they managed to grab a handful of soldiers on standby, so he didn't end up having to wait that long.

Upon arriving at his destination, Reginald had the cavalry wait far enough away that they couldn't hear him. He would be taking Groul and only Groul

along with him. That had been another instruction of hers.

Even in the middle of the day, it was dim inside the grove. Right underneath where the canopy of leaves tapered off, there was a pond surrounded by thorny vines bedecked with a trailing stream of pale pink flowers. Standing just before the pond was a girl with long, silver hair. Dressed the part of a traveler, she was wearing a hooded cloak of a dull, tawny hue over her black dress.



As one might expect from a girl said to have eternal life, she hadn't aged a day since Reginald had first met her two years ago.

"It's been quite a while, Thorn Princess. I didn't expect you to come meet me in person."

Frankly speaking, this had taken Reginald by surprise. According to what he'd heard, the Thorn Princess never stepped foot outside her forest. Even in the "potential future" Kiara knew, you couldn't recruit her as an ally until you fetched her a certain item from the royal domain.

Reginald hadn't found anything for her, of course—yet still she had taken the initiative to come all this way. She had come all by herself, informing the knight who had brought her Reggie's letter of the date and time she would meet him and nothing more.

When Reginald took a step forward, a smile rose to the Thorn Princess' face. The wisdom in her expression was at odds with her youthful countenance. "I thought it might help Farzia moving forward, so I came to answer your question in person." She giggled. "I must say, it's quite fascinating what's become of you."

"You can tell just by looking?"

"Hmm. Perhaps I'm the only one who could tell from over your clothes. The shards of the contract stone stand out quite clearly on the surface."

Reginald had written the Thorn Princess to inquire about the bits of contract stone that had seeped into his body through his arrow wound. If spitting sparks every now and then was all he had to worry about, it would be nothing worse than a spot of discomfort. Unfortunately, his frequently ailing health was bound to get in the way of what he had to do.

When Horace learned of what was happening to him, he had recommended that Reginald seek a second opinion from another spellcaster. There was no guarantee that they would know anything themselves, but it was worth a shot.

"I heard it was Kiara who did that for you. You didn't bring her along?"

Reggie placed a hand over the scar on his shoulder. "I don't want her to

worry.”

At that, the Thorn Princess smiled wistfully. The reaction struck Reggie as curious, but he had more important questions to ask.

“By the way, is there any way to weaken the influence of one’s mentor?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Kiara ingested part of a different contract stone before she became a spellcaster. It’s given an enemy spellcaster, Lord Credias, undue control over her.”

“Hmm... That’s a tough one. Whoever took in a larger amount of the stone will inevitably be the one who holds all the power. If you hope to combat that, the only option is for Kiara to ingest an even greater portion of the exact same contract stone. There are other ways to escape his control, I suppose, but they’d prevent her from fighting.”

“What do you mean?”

“If she were to locate a stone larger than a person, ingest a fragment of it, and stick close by, it would become difficult for any other spellcaster to exert influence over her. The stone is a greater source of mana, after all. Unfortunately, you don’t come by one of those quite so easily.”

“It would be risky to walk around carrying it, too,” Reginald muttered, drawing a grin from the Thorn Princess.

Naturally, it would be hard to go into battle carting around a contract stone the size of a person. Even assuming it could be done, it would be rendered useless the moment it was broken or stolen, and it wasn’t going to be easy to keep a giant boulder protected.

“If everything was as it had been in the past, I would have hunted down a sizable contract stone and told Kiara to hold on to it, but here we are.”

“What do you mean, ‘in the past’?” Reginald asked, sensing something strange about her phrasing.

The Thorn Princess, however, acted like she hadn’t heard him, instead holding out two thumb-sized, dark red stones she’d been hiding in her cloak.

“I carry these on me as a lucky charm of sorts, so you might as well have her hold on to one. That said, there’s a good chance it won’t provide anything more than peace of mind. Make sure she knows that.”

As he took the stones off her hands, Reginald gave up on the idea of somehow mitigating the viscount’s control over Kiara. Instead, he chose to look into his alternative approach.

“So? Can my wound be healed?” he asked.

The Thorn Princess gave a firm shake of her head. “No.”

Groul’s shoulders dropped in disappointment. Reginald, on the other hand, had been more or less expecting that response. *I figured as much*, was all he thought.

“Perhaps you’d be better off waiting for Kiara to grow stronger. Her ideas can defy even my own imagination.”

Of course, that was exactly what Reggie was hoping to avoid. Given the toll it was taking on *him*, he was all the more cognizant of how much magic could take out of a person.

Thus, Reginald responded, “In that case, is there a way to use it to my advantage?”

“Your—?!” Groul started to shout from his place a step behind Reginald, but he quickly clamped his mouth shut. Given the number of times the knight had pleaded with him to stop, that reaction was hardly surprising.

The Thorn Princess’ answer was an unexpected one. “There is.”

Considering he’d been about 90% sure she would say otherwise, Reginald’s eyes widened a fraction. “What is it?”

“The stone disrupts your mana. As more and more of it accumulates, that energy then looks for a place to go, ultimately escaping through your fingertips. Your element is lightning, so that just happens to manifest in the form of sparks. What we’re going to do is create a path for it to flow to your fingers of your own free will. I’m afraid we’ll have to wreak havoc upon the mana in your body to do it, however.” The Thorn Princess smiled, her gaze softening. “I’ve been

waiting for you to ask me. It's not something I ought to do against your will, after all. I should caution you, though... Whenever you make use of it, do expect something of a backlash."

"As long as it isn't going to kill me on the spot, I don't care. Or are you saying my number of uses will be limited?"

"No. It all depends on how much you can handle."

That made sense enough to Reginald. Just like Kiara, he would have to determine the limits of exactly how much magic he could use without turning himself into sand.

"Either way, I'm better off having the option than not."

"Alright, then. We don't have much time, so let's settle this quickly. Give me your hand."

Reggie held out his left arm at her command. Her tiny hand curled around his fingers.

"Get ready. This is going to hurt."

As soon as she'd warned him, the Thorn Princess began casting her magic. Reginald could sense it, too. Pain ripped through his left arm, so agonizing that he thought it was being torn apart.

"Ggh!"

Clenching his teeth had managed to keep him from screaming, but he crumpled down to his knees, unable to stay on his feet. Still, he kept his eyes cracked open just enough to see for himself what the Thorn Princess was doing.

Thorns had extended from around her feet, twining themselves around Reginald's arm. As the creeping vines tore into his skin, they eventually found their way to the scar on his shoulder, only to melt into the wound and vanish. A tingle of pain remained.

When he took a proper look, he saw the mark of a vine crawling from his fingertips all the way up under his clothes.

"There. The path is open to you now. Remember, using the power too many times will destroy your body. If possible, you should ask Kiara to help you out,

seeing as she's already supplied you with mana before. That should make the burden easier on you."

"You want me to ask Kiara?"

"Letting Kiara's mana flow through you will allow you to cast powerful spells more efficiently, and it will reduce the strain on your own mana."

If he used stronger spells, would he be able to rival Kiara's own magic? He knew how much Kiara would hate this, though. He'd have to keep it a secret for a little while longer.

"Your magic will flow along the mark I left on you. If you try to send it through any other part of your body, you'll end up fried for your efforts. Be careful."

He nodded at the Thorn Princess' advice.

"Reggie!"

It was then that Kiara spotted him.

Chapter 4: A Thorny Future

It was soon after Felix's burns had healed. As I was cutting across the courtyard of the fort—though technically, there was nothing to be found there but bare soil—I noticed a commotion near the gates.

"Is it an enemy attack, you think?" I asked Cain. Of course, considering he'd been accompanying me the whole day, there was no way for *him* to know any better than I did.

"Let's go take a look," Cain suggested, holding out a hand for me.

I grabbed hold of his sleeve, which had been the intent behind the gesture. Wandering around outside still made me uneasy. If it were Gina or Emmeline with me, I would have clung to them like a barnacle. I couldn't do that with Cain, though, and the two girls were currently busy with other things.

After much internal debate, I had started out by grabbing hold of Cain's cape, much to his consternation. He *had* then suggested we hold hands, but I had to turn him down on that one. It was one thing to do that when I was being carted around like luggage or dragged somewhere, but now that I'd realized I was in love with someone else, holding hands with a guy who liked me just because I was afraid of everyone else seemed pretty tacky. Thus, we'd found a compromise in letting me grab his sleeve instead.

Although this wasn't a particularly big fort, it still took a decent chunk of time to get around. As I padded along toward the source of the bustle, Cain suddenly muttered, "This brings back memories."

"Hm?"

"My brother used to walk around holding on to my sleeve, too." Cain bore a more serene countenance than he usually did when he spoke of his family.

"Perhaps I ought to make His Highness do the same at some point."

The part he'd tacked on at the end was vaguely concerning. *Uh, where did this urge to baby Reggie come from? Don't tell me this is a new form of bullying. Did*

something happen between those two?

As I kept walking, my head tilted in puzzlement, I eventually saw Alan and his knight Chester talking with a group of soldiers near the gates. They spotted us before Cain could call out to them.

“Are you playing the father to her baby duckling, Wentworth?” Chester teased.

There’s a very good reason for this! I wanted to protest, but even that was too embarrassing to say. I kept my mouth shut instead.

“Never mind that. Did our scouting operation turn something up?” Cain asked, ignoring his comment entirely.

“Oh, you’re no fun. We didn’t find any enemies, no. His Highness said he was stepping out for a bit, that’s all.”

“What for? There’s no need for him to go out on patrol.”

Chester beckoned us closer, leading us away from everyone else. Once we’d followed him over, he leaned in and whispered something into Cain’s ear. I overheard something about “thorn” and something about “here.”

That was all I needed to get the gist of what was going on.

The Thorn Princess? The Thorn Princess is here?

Just as I was wondering what a little-boy-loving misanthrope would be doing all the way out here, Master Horace started chortling from where he hung at my waist. “Guess he got her reply.”

“Do you know what’s going on, Master Horace?”

“The prince hasn’t been feeling up to snuff lately, y’see. I didn’t know what to do about it, so I recommended he reach out to someone else for advice. Since you’re already here and all, you ought to tag along and ask some questions yourself.”

“Okay, I will! Sir Cain, let’s go catch up to him!” I urged without missing a beat.

Cain’s face twisted into a scowl. “Really, Sir Horace?”

“Hohoho!” he cackled once more. “I’m not about to keep any secrets from her. Talk her down yourself, if you have to.”

Now that the cat was out of the bag, Cain probably figured there was no longer any point in trying to keep me in the dark. With a sigh, he asked Chester to lend us a couple soldiers. We’d be in trouble if we got ambushed on our way to go find Reggie, after all.

Reggie hadn’t gone that far. In a grove a few minutes’ walk from the fort, I spotted his knights and a few soldiers he must have brought along for the trip. The moment they laid eyes on me, his royal guard made faces that screamed, *Shoot! She found us!*

“Excuse me! Where did His Highness go?”

“He’s over there, Lady Spellcaster.” The knight relented immediately and pointed to a spot further into the woods.

There, I could see Reggie and the Thorn Princess standing before... a pond? A spring? I was surprised to see the princess hadn’t aged a day, only to find myself swiftly distracted by a wave of magic that caused Reggie to fall to his knees.

“What?!”

What was that just now? What did the Thorn Princess do to Reggie?

Despite what had just happened, Reggie’s knights didn’t rush over to his side. He must have ordered them not to approach him under any circumstances. Groul, the only one he’d kept by his side, flapped his arms helplessly, but didn’t move any closer.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t just sit back and watch.

“Reggie!”

I let go of Cain’s sleeve, running over to where Reggie was. When I caught up to him, he glanced back at me with a conflicted smile. “I didn’t think you would find me so quickly.”

I knew it. He kept this a secret from me and Cain on purpose.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

The Thorn Princess was the one to answer. “This concerns the contract stone fragment inside of him. He asked if I could do anything about it. While I don’t know of any way to remove it entirely, I tried something that ought to ease his burden.”

That must have been the explanation for that burst of magic.

“This should reduce the strain on his body, right?”

“As long as he remains on his best behavior, yes.” In other words, he would be in trouble if he didn’t.

Once he’d finally gotten to his feet, Reggie addressed the Thorn Princess, “One more thing, if I may. Why did you agree to help me? This wasn’t a mere whim of yours, I assume. You’re infamous for avoiding human contact, yet you’ve cooperated with Kiara from day one. And you gave her that contract stone because you *knew* she had the aptitude to become a fellow spellcaster, didn’t you?”

The Thorn Princess’ gaze softened, the edges of her mouth quirking up. “It’s impossible to tell who has the aptitude and who doesn’t. However... I *am* the one who changed her fate, for better or for worse.”

That threw me for a loop. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I knew of your destiny, and I chose to tamper with it.”

She tampered with my destiny? But I chose to run away and escape my fate of dying Alan’s enemy before I met her. She had nothing to do with it.

“The time isn’t right to go into all that. I don’t mind giving you a hint, however.” From there, the Thorn Princess launched into what sounded like an old legend. “Once upon a time, a girl with silver hair was born unto a branch of the royal family. Fearful that her pure blood would become diluted, the king decreed that she one day be married into the monarchy.”

I looked over to Reggie, who seemed to be listening to her fluid narration quite intently.

“Yet in the end,” she continued, “the king turned around and bestowed her upon a certain spellcaster as a reward for coming to his aid. Once she had been

made into a spellcaster herself, she came across another lady of the royal family who had met a similar fate. The woman in question had been exiled by the king. Handing her over to the spellcaster had been his way of getting her out of the picture.”

This story must have gone back to the days when Farzian kings did dealings with spellcasters. By the time I had asked Reggie to track down a mage for me, the connection had already been lost to the ages, so perhaps this tale really *had* happened “once upon a time.”

“There’s evidence that spellcasters were employed up through my grandfather’s generation,” Reggie volunteered. “I assume my uncle didn’t know what the kings of the past had promised their spellcasters as compensation, nor did he know the identity of any mages, and thus he was unable to call on them in wartime.”

Now that he’d explained that, a lot of things suddenly made more sense. Still, offering up a child of the royal family as a sacrifice? This was a pretty chilling tale.

“How come only women of the royal family were used as tributes?” I asked.

“This particular sorcerer believed that royalty was more likely to make it as a spellcaster—though in reality, I doubt their odds were any better than that of the common folk. If the king tried to sacrifice someone outside his own family, his deal with the spellcaster would come to light, so he never bothered to correct that assumption,” the Thorn Princess responded, then let out a sigh.

“The girl managed to escape with the help of the lady-turned-spellcaster, though her savior died for her efforts. Of course, the girl at large would have no means to resist her mentor if he got too close. She wandered about, looking for a way to escape his control. At the end of her search, she found an impossibly large contract stone inside a forest. So long as she stayed beside it, she could stave off the spellcaster when he came to the woods looking for her.”

When I heard the word “forest,” my mind went straight to the Thorn Princess.

Is that why she never leaves her woods? Because there’s a giant contract stone somewhere deep inside? But I thought she was supposed to be living in that forest since time immemorial.

While I was thinking it over, the Thorn Princess finally brought her tale to an end. “That’s all I can tell you for now. My time is up.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, but it wasn’t long before I saw exactly what she meant with my own two eyes.

The Thorn Princess began to fade away, the contours of her silver hair melting away bit by bit. The lake behind her gradually came into view past her porcelain skin and the garments she wore.

“You’re going to vanish?!”

Is she going to disappear forever? I turned white as a sheet, which drew a laugh from the Thorn Princess.

“Not quite. I transported myself here for but a short time, that’s all. Oh, right... Allow me to make an excuse for myself before I go. Your prince requested that I grant him the ability to wield the mana of the contract stone trapped inside him, so I did.”

“Thorn Princess!”

Judging by the way Reggie snapped at her, she was telling the truth.

“What? Why would you ask her for that, Reggie?!” I cried out, staring up at him, but he only averted his gaze. In the time I spent looking away, the Thorn Princess’ outline had grown fainter and fainter, until it was as thin as a portrait drawn over sheer silk.

“Talk that out among yourselves, will you? Farewell.”

“Please, Thorn Princess, turn him back to normal!”

“Wha—no, Kiara, don’t!”

I made a desperate grab for whatever part of her I could reach, hoping to hold her back. My fingers slipped through what felt like a thick blanket of fog.

As soon as the Thorn Princess shouted at me to stop, my eyes snapped wide open as memories flooded into me.



The sight of a dimly lit town unfolded before my eyes. It had been wrapped

up in a battle, from the looks of it. I could hear people screaming, and the sound of metal clashing against metal echoed from afar. The stench of blood assailed my nostrils, carried by the wind.

“There should be nothing left to bind you now.”

“It’s too late for that to matter. Even if I gave myself up to Évrard, I’m too heinous a criminal to be pardoned. Just kill me—now, while there’s still time.”

And yet, he refused my plea. “That wouldn’t make His Highness happy. Just think of the lengths he went to for your sake.”

“But even Reggie couldn’t manage to set me free! Besides, now that he’s gone, what am I supposed to live for?!” I shouted back. The black-haired, blue-caped man’s frown deepened just a fraction. Perhaps he felt the same way I did.

I wasn’t able to ponder that for long, however. A moment later, a canine monster—a windwolf—lunged at him from behind.

I couldn’t let this man die. He had been close enough to Reggie to hear about me from him. At the very least, I wanted anyone who remembered me or the prince to live out their lives for the both of us.

Thus, I put my golem into motion. Almost immediately, I was struck with a bout of weakness that made it impossible to keep the magic going.

When I glanced upward, I saw the very man who had collapsed a bloody mess in the street was struggling back to his feet.

I figured I could rain soil down upon him, if nothing else. I’d hoped I could bury the windwolf along with him, but it managed to skirt around the avalanche of earth.

I’d just have to take the hit for him, then. My mind made up, I endeavored to bury myself alongside the monster, but then...



“Kiara?!” a voice called out, and I snapped back to my senses.

For a moment, I had no idea where I was. Around me was a wood of dense green. I was staring out at a pond, with Reggie propping me up from behind.

What was that just now?

It seemed like a continuation of the dream I'd had so many times before—the one where I was Kiara Credias, living out the scenes and sights of the life I could have led. Only this time, I hadn't fallen asleep. As crazy as it seemed to consider... could it be that those daydreams had been the Thorn Princess' memories all along? This was my first time ever touching her, though. Then why had I seen that just now?

It was too late to ask her for an explanation. There was nothing to do but set that aside for now.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine... Sorry about that. I think I got hit with some of the Thorn Princess' magic." I didn't understand what had happened enough to explain it myself, so I swept it under the rug.

"She really did disappear, it seems."

There was no trace of the silver-haired girl standing before the pond. She must have faded away completely.

"I suppose that was another spell of hers."

"Probably. By the way, do you think that story was about her?"

More and more mysteries kept piling up before my very eyes. The Thorn Princess' anecdote alone had left me full of questions. I'd gotten the feeling that she'd kept the tale deliberately vague, too. Was she going to share the full story with us one day?

"Maybe. Though to me, it looked like she didn't want to answer our questions, so she was just buying time with a different topic." That was Reggie's take on the matter, apparently.

"That's a pretty uncharitable interpretation, don't you think?"

Reggie's lips twitched with amusement. "I'd never make such a cynical assumption of *you*, at least. For example, you came because you were worried about me, didn't you?"

"Well... Yeah." It was a little embarrassing to admit when he was asking me

straight out. He looked quite pleased by that answer, however, so I was glad I'd said yes.

"Are you sure *you* aren't trying to distract me from the issue at hand, Reggie? Don't think I've forgotten what the Thorn Princess just said about you wielding the contract stone!"

Reggie responded with a reassuring smile. "Regardless, this isn't the place for an involved conversation. Let's go back to the fort."

He had a point there, so I headed back to the fort with him. Cain, who had been waiting for me nearby, asked me what had happened, but I couldn't go into much detail with so many soldiers around. I told him I'd explain everything later.

When we returned, the first thing we saw was a creature the size of a horse sitting there on its haunches—Lila. I'd heard the rumors, but it looked like she really had blown up into a giant frostfox.

"Whoa," came my awed whisper as I gazed at Lila. She walked right up to me and sniffed at my head, then proceeded to rest her chin atop my shoulder.

Uh, now that she's gotten so big, she's a lot heavier. Still, it tickled my heart that she'd taken such a liking to me. Talk about cute. Before I realized what I was doing, I was petting her on the snout and under the chin. *Yeah, this is the good stuff.*

"Oh, Kiara! Perfect timing!" Gina, who had been standing alongside her faithful fox, likewise came running up to me. "This isn't going to cause any complications for Lila, is it? Can you tell?"

As the fox's owner, she must have had her concerns over the growth spurt—and it was *my* blood that had caused it, according to Master Horace. Lila had shot up right after licking my blood off of Cain's uniform, so that was his best guess. "Your power was too great for her to digest, my little disciple. Eeeheehee!" he'd cackled. Evidently, monsters would turn into giants whenever they absorbed an excess of mana.

"Let me check. Keep still, Lila," I commanded, before feeling out the mana in her body.

Hmm... It doesn't feel like the flow is backed up anywhere, and she doesn't seem to be in any pain, so I think it's fine. She just feels strangely warm, for some reason. When I feel out the circulation of her mana, those waves send ripples all the way back to my own heart. It's enough to put me to sleep.

As tempting as it was to drift off right then and there, I stopped my investigation there before I got myself into trouble.

"I think she'll be fine."

"Really? What a relief." Gina seemed reassured by my report. I was happy to be of whatever help I could. "I wonder if she's ever going to turn back. If she stays like this forever, I won't be able to let her inside when we finally go home. Guess she'll have to be an outdoor pet from now on."

That seemed to be one of Gina's biggest concerns, which was fair. From the sound of it, she and her foxes had always shared a home before now. For the moment, Lila had to set up camp in the fort courtyard.

"If she uses enough magic, she might shrink back down to size," Master Horace said.

Gina gave that some thought. "Maybe we can fix it during the next battle, then."

That passing comment struck me deep. *The next battle*, she'd said. This time around, I would have to bring down the viscount once or for all. What were we going to do about Isaac, though? If only he would hurry up and surrender.

"Say, Kiara?" Gina suddenly prompted. "About Salekhard..."

"I wanted to talk to you about all that, too." After debating what to say, I shuffled close enough to whisper, "It wouldn't be easy to meet with Isaac behind closed doors, would it? Still, if we could get him to surrender sooner rather than later, I think it would save both sides a lot of unnecessary strife."

"Yeah... Good point. I'll think about it." Despite being the one to broach the subject, that was all she had to say before nodding and walking off.

What was that about? It seemed like she had something else to tell me. Did I cut her off? Determined to follow up on that later, I headed into the fort with

Reggie. From there, he took me to his room.

“This next part is confidential, so could I ask you to wait outside?” Reggie said to our attendants. Groul gave a bow and Cain shot him a resigned look just before he shut the door in their faces.

Right as the door was closing, I could have sworn I heard multiple people sighing. *What was that about?* I wondered.

Reggie strode to the center of the room to ask his lord-in-waiting, “Could you fetch us something to drink? Water is fine. This conversation might go on for a while, so take your time. Do three laps around the fort, if you must.”

“Err... Yes, sire,” Colin responded, bewildered, before taking his leave.

Now that we were alone together, Reggie sat down in a chair. The prince’s chambers though these were, it wasn’t much more extravagant than the room I was borrowing. There was a long, unembellished table made of wood, four chairs that looked like they might belong to a commoner, and nothing more.

Seeing as he’d taken a seat, Reggie probably planned to start talking.

I’d asked him “why” earlier, but now that I’d calmed down, it was easy to see why Reggie had gone to such lengths. Circumstances meant that I couldn’t cast my magic at will. On top of that, the enemy’s forces had been inflated by defective spellcasters, and to such a degree that our frostfoxes couldn’t hope to offset it alone. It was no surprise that Reggie had sought out an alternate approach in a desperate bid to keep our casualties to a minimum.

“Can I check what she did?” I asked.

“Go ahead.” Reggie removed his cape and jacket, set them down atop the rustic table, and rolled up his sleeve for me. Crawling up the entire length of his arm was a mark that looked like a dark red vine of thorns. It wasn’t a very pretty sight.

“Ah, so this is what became of me.” Evidently, he’d asked for her help without actually knowing what she’d do to him. Perhaps he’d been too firm in his decision to even consider backing down.

“Does it hurt?”

“It still stings a little.” Reggie was smiling, but he looked pale.

This had all happened because *I* couldn’t do anything useful. Terramice had died and Reggie’s knights had thrown themselves into danger to save me, yet in the end, I hadn’t even managed to shoulder some of Reggie’s burden. Tears began to blur my vision. There was nothing left for me to say, and I felt so pathetic.

Before the teardrops could spill from my eyes, Reggie reached out to wipe them away. “Don’t cry, Kiara. It’s not your fault that I chose this. Doing this was a way to *reduce* the strain on my body.”

“Was it that bad?”

“If sparks flying from my fingers were the worst of my troubles, perhaps I could have let it be. But you see, ever since the powder of the contract stone entered my system, I’ve suffered recurring bouts of fever. This doubled as a means of alleviating those symptoms. According to the Thorn Princess, forging a path through which to expel the mana ought to make it easier on my body.”

“Your mana will flow along this mark, you mean?”

“That’s what she said.”

“Then what did she mean when she said you could wield the magic of the contract stone?”

“Well, if I can concentrate all my mana in one place and discharge it from there, it allows me to pull off a few parlor tricks, as it were.”

I cast Reggie a suspicious glance. If that was all there was to it, he wouldn’t have tried to keep it a secret from me.

“That can’t be all she told you. Otherwise, you would have just told me this right then and there,” I grilled him.

Reggie sighed. “If I let enough time pass, I hoped that you might forget about it... but I suppose things are never quite so easy.” Of *course* that was his plan. “She also taught me how to give my tricks a little extra punch.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t tell me because it’s also dangerous?”

“She said that it all depends on how much I can handle.”

With instructions like that, Reggie was bound to push himself to his utmost limits. That was clearly his plan. Considering this was the same man who had lied about his ailing health for ages, what else could I expect?

“That means it could end up being too much for you, doesn’t it? I’d rather you didn’t take that risk, Reggie.”

I timidly pleaded with him to reconsider, but Reggie responded authoritatively, “I believe the Thorn Princess gave me this option out of necessity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her claim that she had changed your fate struck me as very curious.”

I’d been wondering about that, too. The way I understood it, I’d remembered about my past life and the RPG all on my own, then used that knowledge to escape the future that awaited me. My first meeting with the Thorn Princess had taken place after all that.

But then it occurred to me: if it weren’t for the contract stone the Thorn Princess had given me, I never would have become a spellcaster. Reggie and Lord Évrard both could have ended up dead. Was *that* what she meant by “changing my fate”?

When I voiced my conjecture, Reggie nodded. “Perhaps the Thorn Princess has the ability to see the future.”

“Wait just a second. Supposing she *does* have a spell of clairvoyance... Master Horace told me that most people can only use one type of magic. Two at best. Controlling thorns already counts as one brand of magic. If we assume she has the power to see the future on top of that, how do we explain her disappearing act just now?”

“It may be improbable, but it’s not impossible. *Your* past-life memories aren’t exactly conventional, now are they?”

“I guess you’re right.”

Maybe there *could* be someone out there with three different kinds of magic. I couldn’t deny that logic.

Reggie went on, “The Thorn Princess told me that if you let your mana flow through me, I can wield a power comparable to that of real magic. Of course, it will manifest as my own element, so I won’t be making any golems.”

In other words, he could take my mana and use it to cast lightning magic. Master Horace had conjured up wind magic the same way, so I didn’t doubt that was true. But still...

“I want to do whatever I can. Reclaiming Farzia—and defeating the viscount—will all serve to protect you.”

“You don’t have to sacrifice yourself to do that, though!”

“And what about you?” Reggie asked, reaching out to clasp my hand in both of his. “You’d chip away at your own body to save me. Even if you *can* revert the effects, it always leaves me thinking: I’ve never offered you anything worthy of your sacrifice.”

“That’s not true! You do so much for me!”

I’d never even dreamed of demanding something “worthy” of my sacrifice. All I wanted was for him to *let* me help him.

“You know what Wentworth said? He told me that if I want to keep you from acting recklessly, I ought to let you protect me.”

“What...?”

What is he talking about? I’d lost the plot, but Reggie only offered me a strained smile in return. “If we’re both so insistent on protecting one another, denying the other their opportunity will only create a vicious cycle. But if you *do* want to keep me safe, I ask that you work *with* me.”

That took me by surprise. This was the first time Reggie had ever asked for my full cooperation, and that delighted me. At the same time, working together would increase the odds of Reggie ending up in danger. Filled with apprehension, I found myself struggling to take the plunge.

“You can determine what my limits are. No doubt I’m not the one who can make that call. Besides, don’t you think staying by my side and taking things into your own hands would make this a little easier on your nerves?”

Reggie smiled at me. Unable to come up with an answer right away, I simply hung my head.



About three days later, we received a report from a scouting party that had infiltrated Trisphede. Llewyrne had gone ahead and called for full-scale reinforcements, and negotiations with the occupied zone of the royal domain were growing heated. The new troops were set to depart from the royal domain in about a week.

Salekhard hadn't lost quite as many men, so they had opted not to call for reinforcements. Given their secret plans to throw the fight, there was no need to go out of their way to bolster their forces.

Perhaps the plan was to attack Delphion as soon as the reinforcements arrived by boat. Llewyrne and Salekhard were already moving their forces toward the western Lake Luxia.

Reggie had decided to send his troops to intercept them in hopes of striking down their forces before they had a chance to grow. If we just waited for the enemy to make their move, we would be handing them the opportunity to reinvade Delphion from beside the lake.

Alan and the other generals all agreed with that proposal, and the following day, the Farzian army vacated Fort Liadna. All the wounded soldiers who could be safely shipped off to Delphion already had been, and everyone always packed light on the march, so it didn't take much time at all to get ready.

Thanks to the secret treatments I'd been administering to Felix, he was up and walking around two days before we were set to depart. In fact, he was already raring to head straight into battle.

"I can move without difficulty now, and it's all thanks to you, Lady Spellcaster."

"Really?" I had my concerns, but it was Felix's choice to make. I swallowed down what I wanted to say.

He then said, "I heard that Lady Ada came to your rescue."

“That’s right. It earned her a beating from the viscount, though.”

Recalling the incident was still enough to make me tremble. Ada had done what she could to protect my psyche. Though she’d already called on Isaac by that point, she’d probably assumed he wouldn’t make it in time.

Mikhail had claimed that he’d seen Ada afterward. Given that she’d been walking around on her own two feet, it was safe to assume that she’d gotten off with just a few bruises. I’d been deeply relieved to hear it. I *had* figured that the viscount wouldn’t want to lose such a valuable asset, but I’d been worried about what he might do to take his anger out on her.

Perhaps my dread had shown up on my face. Cain, who was accompanying me around, put a hand on my shoulder.

“I see...” Felix fell deep into thought, closing his eyes for a moment.

Hurting Felix in Liadna had upset Ada badly enough for her to shed tears of regret. Considering she’d had no issue murdering Lord Azure, whom she’d been scheming to double-cross from the get-go, I had to wonder why she couldn’t bring herself to kill Felix.

Similarly, I was curious to know what Felix thought about Ada rescuing me. I wasn’t rude enough to ask him such a personal question, but I did say, “Um, don’t worry about it if you don’t get the chance—but could you try asking Miss Ada to come back to Farzia? I think she may have given up on running away. It’d be nice if you could give her that push.”

What had been running through my head as I ran my mouth was the waking dream I’d had after touching the Thorn Princess.

The “me” in that dream was no different from Ada. In which case, perhaps she too thought there was no point in running away. However, if one of the men she was so taken with—Reggie or Felix—reached out to her, maybe she would start to believe she could escape.

“Only if you see her again, I mean! But could you please consider it?” I dipped my head in a deep bow, which sent Felix into a panic.

“I beg you not to humble yourself for me, Lady Spellcaster!”

“I realize I’m asking a lot, though! Even if you *are* okay with it, if the whole thing goes south, you could end up hurt.”

“That’s nothing for you to concern yourself with. If I *do* decide to go through with it, the responsibility for what happens will rest on my own shoulders. Besides, I haven’t agreed to it one way or the other yet.”

“Come now, Miss Kiara, let’s leave it at that,” Cain urged. “You’re putting him on the spot.”

“Okay.” Suddenly aware of the attention I was drawing to us, I shuffled away from Felix.

Still, I felt like I had to do something more. Perhaps it was because the vision I’d seen after touching the Thorn Princess had been more vivid than any before it. I simply couldn’t seem to get it out of my head.

What was that?

At first, I’d figured that making it to Delphion had put me in the mood to dream of Game-Kiara, considering that was where she first showed up to battle in RPG. Something about that explanation didn’t sound quite right, though. The story just seemed too consistent for a mere dream.

I’d had a dream of meeting Reggie in the royal palace—as well as a dream of spending time with him there, and a dream where I was informed of his death and handed his severed finger, ring and all. Forced to keep fighting as a spellcaster afterward, I’d stood before Alan, who had stared me down with blazing hatred in his eyes, secretly hoping he would kill me. The Thorn Princess had been part of that dream, too.

Weren’t dreams supposed to be a little more disjointed? Was it even possible to see so many seamless continuations of the same scenario?

As much as I wanted to hold Cain’s hand at that moment—and I could’ve just told myself it was a sibling thing, really—it felt too much like a betrayal of Reggie, and I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

I must have spent too much time lost in thought. Cain came to a sudden halt, and seeing as I was holding his sleeve as usual, that snapped me back to my senses. I glanced up, wondering what was the matter, only for him to say,

“Something is bothering you, isn’t it?”

“Erm... It’s not a big deal, really.” My first instinct was to deflect. After all, it was a difficult topic to broach to Cain himself.

After that, he fell silent for a bit. But the moment we arrived at my room and I let go of his sleeve, he grabbed me by the hand. When he saw the way I jolted, he let out a sigh.

“Miss Kiara. I’m going to say this now, because I believe this is better dealt with sooner rather than later.” After leading in with that, he asked, “Would you prefer to keep your distance from me?”

I pursed my lip at the question. He’d seen right through my attempts to avoid him. Since I couldn’t bring myself to say it outright, however, he’d given me an out with the softball phrasing of “preferring to keep my distance.”

Maybe I should have just acted the same way I always had. Still, ever since I’d woken up to my own feelings, I’d started to feel like I was a little too intimate with Cain.

My memories of my time as a captive were still fresh, so I wanted Cain by my side to reassure me and protect me. Given that the two of us weren’t *real* siblings, however, it didn’t feel right holding hands with him anymore.

I deliberated over whether to come out and say that. After losing his family had left such deep scars on his heart, Cain found some comfort in thinking of me as a sister. Would he take this as me deserting him? I knew it might hurt him—that it might make him feel like he’d lost the one thing he could depend on.

And so, it was time to weasel my way out of this conversation. “No, it’s nothing like that. I just saw something strange earlier.”

“What do you mean?”

“I had this weird vision when I touched the Thorn Princess.”

Cain showed interest in the topic, so I went on to tell him about my recurring dreams of serving the queen.

“I think you were the one who tried to convince me to run free.” The man in that dream who had heard about me from Reggie had been Cain. “But when my

golem came crumbling down, you got caught up in it and... well.”

I’d tried to take the hit for him, but he’d pushed me away, only to be buried underneath the rubble himself. Why had he gone to such lengths to keep me alive? None of that had happened to the me here and now, of course, but I felt the crushing guilt all the same.

“I see.”

After hearing my story, Cain wore a thoughtful look on his face. “My biggest question is why touching the Thorn Princess would give you that vision. Any ideas?”

I shook my head.

“Well, the mysteries of a spellcaster are too profound for me to fathom. Rather than getting worked up over it, let’s dismiss it as a hallucination for now. We can ask Sir Horace for his opinion later.” With a sigh of relief, Cain placed a hand atop my head and offered a faint smile. “Regardless, I was afraid that you didn’t want to be around me anymore, now that you’ve made up your mind.”

Made up my mind? Does he mean... deciding who I love?

“It was after His Highness brought you home and out of enemy hands that you began to act somewhat distant toward me.” Placing his free hand up against the wall, Cain peered into my face. “Did he confess his love for you, by chance?”

How does he know that?!

I was so startled that I didn’t even realize I’d tightened my grip on Cain’s hand. Put on the spot, I just sat there with my mouth hanging open until he finally went on, “I talked to His Highness shortly after you were captured. We spoke about how he feels for you... and about how I feel for you.”

Um, WHAT?! What kind of conversation was that?!

This was Reggie we were talking about, so I figured he really had come out with all of it. Cain didn’t seem like the type to back down in that situation, either. This was starting to make me dizzy; I could hardly process that this was happening to me.

Cain, meanwhile, didn't seem the least bit ruffled.

That's strange, I thought. Thinking back on the things he'd said in Delphion, or right before he'd clashed with Isaac, I'd imagined he'd look a little more upset.

"I knew how His Highness felt about you from the start. He never *did* care to hide it. Why, I'm fairly sure the only one who thought it could be anything else was you."

"Hrk..."

Master Horace had pointed that out, too. In retrospect, it was super embarrassing.

"Of course, it's all thanks to you that we had the opportunity to talk it out."

"Who, me?"

Did I do something to trigger a gossip session?

"It was because you put yourself on the line to save my life."

I gave a puzzled tilt of my head. I still wasn't quite following.

"You were just doing what came naturally, weren't you? It made me think about the way it feels to have your family protect you. For the longest time, I'd been left wishing my family had just stayed alive for me. But *you* made me realize that family will always do whatever they can to make sure their kin can carry on." A self-deprecating smile tugged at his lips. "What you said reminded me that Lord Alan and His Highness are both as good as family to me. Once I remembered that I still have two little brothers to protect, my fixation on the family I'd lost began to fade."

I was relieved to hear it. If Cain had found even a smidgen of peace, that was the best outcome I could have asked for.

Unfortunately, I was so caught up in those thoughts that when he leaned forward, I failed to react in time. I didn't even have a chance to gasp. His lips brushed over my cheek, and by the time I'd registered what was happening enough to feel surprise, he had already drawn back.

"Back in Delphion, I was afraid I'd have nothing left if I lost you. But now, no matter what you choose, I can calmly await your answer. Good day." Cain let go

of my hand before briskly taking his leave.

I was stunned. What with the shock of Cain kissing me on the cheek, along with my confusion over why it hadn't bothered me (because we thought of each other as family?), my head was a mess.

“No matter what I choose’?”

I started to wonder: had Cain caught on to my feelings? I doubted he would say something like that if he hadn't. I couldn't be sure, though. Maybe it had just been another part of his whole epiphany. Either way, it'd look strange to go on standing in the middle of the hallway, so I headed into my room. For some reason, my legs felt like jelly, and it took everything I had to get inside and close the door behind me.

“Eeekeekee!”

I was greeted by Master Horace, who had been eavesdropping by the door and was now having a good laugh at my expense.

“You sure do love prying into people's love affairs, huh?” I griped, plopping down in a chair with a sigh. Master Horace came tottering over, making clacking noises as he walked. I picked him up and set him down on the table.

“What I love is seeing people running around like headless chickens! Mmheehee!” He sure seemed to be enjoying himself.

For a fleeting moment, I thought about asking Master Horace for advice. Maybe he could tell me what Cain was thinking. In the end, however, I decided against it. Given how much fun he was already having at our expense, I would've felt bad asking him to speculate on Cain's feelings.

While I sat there hanging my head, Master Horace finally got his laughter under control. “About those memories, though...”

Apparently, that part of our conversation had caught his interest.

“Do you think they were the Thorn Princess' own memories?” I posited.

“I don't know about that. Hard to believe you could see someone else's memories just by touching them. And assuming they *are* her memories, how do you explain *that*?”

“Hmm... I think there are a few different possibilities.”

Hypothesis number one: The Thorn Princess was a reincarnated version of Kiara Credias.

“That’s got to be the craziest theory of ’em all. You think someone could die and get reincarnated into the *past*? And how would she even find a mentor?”

“Maybe she went to the original Thorn Princess... or something?”

“Why would she need to go by the same name, though? Besides, that doesn’t line up with that backstory of hers she gave us the other day.”

“Oh, true.”

Based on the account of her past, it seemed unlikely that she would be a Kiara.

“Plus, she mentioned that she had changed your fate, didn’t she? It makes more sense to figure she’s just someone who can see the future.”

Also true. So that brought us to hypothesis two: the Thorn Princess could see the future.

“But if that’s all it was, how would she know about those private conversations between Reggie and the original Kiara? I guess it really had to be a dream, or maybe some kind of hallucination.”

“I dunno, though,” Master Horace said, scratching at his hip, “I’d never heard of anyone keeping memories from before they were born. Not until I met you.”

“Yeah, that’s fair.”

Trying to puzzle out the truth behind Thorn Princess always felt like wandering lost in a maze. There was one thing I knew for sure, though.

“The Thorn Princess really *was* a member of the royal family.”

Her tale had almost certainly been autobiographical. Not many people were born with silver hair, and the idea of her being a descendant of the royal family had come up in the RPG lore. If she weren’t talking about herself, there would’ve been no reason for her to bring that story up in the first place.

“Oh well, I can worry about that later. Time to get packed.”



The following day, the Farzian army marched south along the high road. Once we'd crossed the Delphion border, we proceeded west to Lake Luxia. Given how many times I'd marched alongside the troops, I was totally used to this by now—though as usual, I'd been stuffed into a carriage out of concern for my physical stamina.

Today, Gina, Reynard, and Sara were all riding with me, while Girsch and the mega-sized Lila trekked beside the vehicle. The longing glances Lila would cast toward the carriage every now and then were breaking my heart, but there was just no way she'd fit inside. *Will she really go back to normal if she uses enough magic?*

The majority of the army was traveling on foot. Most of them were way stronger than your average Japanese man—not to mention how many of them had jumped to enlist out of a burning desire to trounce Llewyne—but we still had to stop to rest several times a day.

During one such break, I noticed Reggie and his knights wandering off elsewhere. This had happened a couple of times since we'd entered Delphion, so I assumed they had something to take care of away from the prying eyes of the enemy or their fellow soldiers.

I had an idea of what that “something” might be. There was no doubt in my mind that Reggie was teaching himself how to use his magic.

I debated whether to go after him or not. Deep down, I wanted to go see him. Still, as much as I wanted to make sure he wasn't doing anything dangerous, I knew that if he *was*, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from stepping in. The thought of Reggie resenting me over that was a hard one to bear.

As I stood there hemming and hawing, someone gave me a pat on the back. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw Cain standing there. He'd been positioned near my carriage, so he'd probably come over to see me during our break.

“If you're that worried, why don't you just go after him?” I'd explained the whole deal to Cain already, so he likewise figured Reggie was up to something. “Say, Miss Kiara. Would you deny me the right to defend you with my life?”

“Not when you put it like that, no.”

I didn't *want* him to go that far for me. Still, I had no choice but let *someone* protect me.

“I know you don't like the idea of it. But *you've* risked *your* life to protect me. Wouldn't it hurt if I told you not to bother?”

“Well... yes.”

All that really mattered in the end was whether I kept him safe, but I'd still feel sad if he told me off for it.

“Then aren't we better off with a mutual partnership? I believe that's all His Highness wants from you.”

“A partnership, you say?”

Just yelling “Let me protect you!” back and forth had always felt like a dead end, but when he put it like that, it suddenly sounded like a wonderful prospect.

“Good, so you finally understand. Off we go, then.” With that, we hurried off in the direction Reggie and his guard had gone.

The party was gathered in a small clearing, past a grove of trees beyond the army lines. Reggie had clearly attempted to cast a few spells already. He was gazing down at a ball of electricity hovering near his fingertips, which he'd formed in a practiced manner. His knights had gathered around him at a safe distance, keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings.

I dipped my head to Groul in greeting, and Cain struck up a conversation with him.

“Reggie!” I called out.

Reggie lifted his face, extinguishing the magic as he did, and turned to look at me as I came walking over.

“Oh, so you came. Here I thought you might stay away so you wouldn't have to see it,” he said with a smile. Apparently, he'd seen right through my dithering over whether or not to go watch.

“I *was* a little nervous about it, but Sir Cain gave me the push I needed.”

“Quite taken with Wentworth, aren’t you? I’m glad he helped you out, but I admit I’m a bit jealous.”

“Huh?! Don’t be!” I *was* pretty attached, sure, but the mention of jealousy had me freaking out.

“It was just a joke.”

Reggie laughed and patted me on the head, and the comforting gesture made my heart feel lighter in no time. With the way I was just standing there letting him pet me, I might as well have been his pet cat. I was finding it harder and harder to keep my eyes open.

“My, Kiara, you look like you’re about to start purring,” Reggie commented, having another laugh at my expense.

That got my eyes to snap open fast, and I scrambled to steer us back to the matter at hand. “H-Hey, I’m not a cat! And never mind that! How has your magic been treating you?”

“It doesn’t cause me any pain, but it does wear me out rather quickly. Though not to the same degree as you, I’m sure.”

“Heeheehee,” came Master Horace’s laugh. “Not too bad, if *that’s* the worst of it. Besides, it’s rare for anyone to hurt themselves by willfully casting a spell. The only reason your magic was causing you pain before was because you were using it by accident; all you were really doing was unleashing raw energy into the wild.”

Oh, I see. So long as Reggie wields the magic consciously and keeps both the spell and its backlash under his control, it’s not an issue.

“Whatever magic you cast might as well be a third hand of yours. It won’t come back to attack its wielder.”

“Oh, right. I think you told me something like that once before,” I responded, nodding matter-of-factly.

Master Horace went on to goad me. “In other words, if you share some of your mana with this prince here, bringing his will into the picture means it won’t come back to bite either you *or* him.”

“We appreciate the reassurance, Sir Horace. That just leaves me the question of how best to wield it. It *is* magic, after all; if possible, I’d like a way to use it against the enemies out of my sword’s reach.”

That seemed to be Reggie’s biggest concern at the moment. He was right that the potential for ranged attacks was one of the biggest advantages of magic. Given what he currently had to work with, he’d have to get right up close to cast any spells, making it significantly less functional.

“You having any trouble feeling out the flow of the mana?”

“I think I’ve more or less gotten the hang of it. It’s hard to envision shooting it *past* my fingertips, however.”

“I guess that’s about as good as it’s gonna get if you’re not a true spellcaster. You can at least sense the magic inside your own body, right?” Reggie nodded. “Then everything else is just a question of your imagination. We mages cast our spells by summoning up mana in one place and envisioning what happens next. Mana dwells in all things, which means it’s part of the very air we breathe, too. Just visualize yourself forging a path through there.”

“I see.” Reggie fell deep into thought, extending a hand as he mulled over Master Horace’s advice. A few seconds later, a tiny spark of electricity flew from his fingertips.

“Still just a twinkle, eh?”

“Yes, that’s obviously not going to make it very far. Is it simply power that I lack?”

“Hey, little disciple! Try pouring some mana into his arm,” Master Horace instructed, calling on my help with the utmost nonchalance. The moment I thought back to what the Thorn Princess had told us, however, I lost my nerve.

“How do we know that won’t take a toll on his body?”

“The Thorn Princess said it could be done, didn’t she? Then it’s obviously not gonna kill him. If you’re that worried, just go easy on him.”

“Why are you being so pushy about this, Master Horace?” I asked.

He snorted. “You’re about to go up against one hell of an opponent. It only

makes sense to keep as many tricks up your sleeve as you can. Judging by the battle the other day, if that viscount can't make you his, he'd rather see you dead. And if *you* don't make it through this, that's it for me, too."

His reply was a little more brusque than it needed to be, but I understood what he was getting at. He just wanted to come up with more ways to keep me safe. It was the same with Reggie; it was in order to protect me and the people of Évrard that he had unlocked his potential for magic.

"Kiara." Reggie held out a hand for me.

If working with Reggie would serve to protect both him and the rest of my friends, perhaps this was for the best. Having found my resolve at long last, I reached out to touch the arm he'd offered.

"Ah, perhaps you'd be better off touching my shoulder instead. It should be easier to channel it through the path the Thorn Princess built, don't you think?"

"Oh, you're probably right."

Taking his advice, I placed a hand on Reggie's shoulder, then worked to pour my mana into him from there. How much would be too much, though? While I was busy debating that, Reggie giggled.

"I have to admit, it's rather intoxicating to think about a part of you becoming one with me."

"*Reggie!*" I huffed, scandalized.

He merely smiled back, delighted. To be fair, his wisecracking *had* worked to ease my nerves.

"Okay, here I go. I'm only giving you a little, though! I'm afraid to try any more than that. I can't even imagine what this could do to you."

"I believe in you."

With a nod, I finally began the process of transferring my mana to Reggie. Magical energy gradually seeped out of the hand I had on his shoulder, and before long, a bolt of lightning—bigger than any he'd produced so far—flew from Reggie's fingers.

"Whoa!"

Even knowing it couldn't hurt me, I couldn't help flinching.

"Don't worry. I'm fine." Perhaps because he had braced himself for it, Reggie just glanced back at me with a perfectly composed smile. His hands weren't looking particularly crispy, either, so it was safe to say it hadn't hurt him.

"Still, I suppose I can't hope for much more range than this."

That was when I had a eureka moment. "What if you used a sword?"

"How do you mean?"

"I'm thinking of this, uh, sacred painting I saw once, where a goddess' messenger shot lightning from his sword. That would be a lot easier for you to visualize, wouldn't it? Conceptually, it would be sort of like letting a bird fly away."

What had popped into my head wasn't *actually* a sacred painting. It was one of those things I used to see in games and anime all the time: the hero shooting lightning from his sword to strike down a distant enemy.

"I see."

Just as Reggie was about to draw his sword from its sheath, it occurred to me that he should probably use something else for this experiment. "Careful, this might end up charring your weapon. That sword's pretty valuable, isn't it? It's got your family crest on it and everything."

Given his locks of silver hair, Reggie didn't need the sword to prove that he was royalty, but there was no reason to ruin such a valuable relic if we could avoid it. Reggie went ahead and borrowed a sword from Groul instead, then held it aloft.

"You did it!"

From the tip of the blade held high, a bolt of lightning had shot toward the heavens, leaving the trees a dozen meters away scorched in its wake.

Chapter 5: The Blood Flowing Through Eirlain

Eirlain was a hilly region along the shores of Lake Luxia, which bordered the province of Delphion to the west. The azure of the lake and the deep green of the trees were so gorgeous that if we hadn't been in the midst of a war, it would have been tempting to go for a leisurely stroll.

We had pinned *this* area as a potential battlefield for a reason: when rain had flooded the lake and left behind a buildup of earth and grit, the fields that had once graced the land had been wiped away. The nearby woods had been burned away as part of a plan to recultivate the land, so trampling over the ground would have minimal consequences.

The one catch was what there *were* still fields not far from here. The swaying ears of wheat that had once grown there had been harvested in a hurry after the villagers received notice of our approach by messenger bird and post-horse. The goats and sheeps grazing in the pastures had been herded away as well.

Standing atop a hill that commanded a view of the whole region, we scoped out the distant sea of armor gleaming in the light of the sun. According to our reconnaissance, though their numbers had waned, the Llewynians were still 10,000 men strong. Perhaps Salekhard had stationed some of their men elsewhere, as we heard there were only 7,000 of *them*.

If the cutback on soldiers was any indication, this was where Isaac planned to lose.

"Good. We won't have to fight him anymore," I mumbled.

No doubt he was going to hurt a not-so-insignificant number of people to pull the wool over Llewyn's eyes. Still, as long as we could make it through this one battle, we would never have to clash with Isaac again. As soon as *this* was all over, I was going to grab him by the scruff of the neck and give him a good wallop. I owed him one for rescuing me, but even taking that into account... I was never going to forgive him for that kiss.

Reggie's troops moved into position at his command. The methodical formation only made my anxiety skyrocket—and here I thought I was used to this after going to battle so many times. Why did my legs feel like jelly now?

Together with a squad led by Reggie, I marched to the top of a hill just right of Lake Luxia. The wind blowing in from the lake felt a touch cold against my skin. It was a vast enough body of water that I almost could have mistaken it for a sea.

I turned my gaze frontward. The armies of Llewyrne and Salekhard had once again resumed their march; we must have been within their sights. With the way things were headed, we were going to clash exactly where we'd predicted.

As I stood there gazing out at their ranks, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Reggie's.

"Relax; there's nothing to worry about. All our preparations are in place."

Reggie was right. Between our military strategy and his magic, we had plenty of tricks up our sleeve that the enemy would never see coming. There was no reason to be so nervous.

"Thanks," I replied, looking ahead with a newfound calm.

I was blissfully unaware of the meaningful looks Cain and Reggie exchanged behind me.

"What did they say?" Reggie asked.

"They left it up to you. It sounded to me like they've already given up."

"Well, if we don't want her getting upset, we'll have to wait for the right opportunity. Now certainly isn't the time."

"Yes. Knowing too much is only going to hold us back here."

At the time, I had no idea what they were talking about, so I assumed it was some mumbo jumbo about positioning the troops.

Before long, the enemy came to a halt. I summoned my golem at Reggie's prompting. In hopes of conserving my strength, I made this one smaller than my usual fare—about eight mers tall. Formed with a chunk of copper ore I'd smeared with my blood ahead of time, the golem rose to its feet and stood on

proud display before the troops.

Despite my golem's appearance on the scene, the enemy didn't appear particularly perturbed. Clearly this had become custom for *them*, too.

Both of our armies gradually resumed their forward march. Alan, who had been put in charge of the center troops, pulled ahead ever so slightly as he closed in on the enemy. One of his men waved the blue banner of Farzia high and proud—which served as our rallying cry.

I drove my golem straight toward the enemy troops. The left flank dove out of the way, leaving a huge gap where the soldiers had been. At a glance, it seemed like they'd finally mastered the art of dodging my attacks, but upon closer inspection, I saw a few soldiers getting caught up in the assault. Perhaps the charge had been faster than they'd bargained for.

I bit down on my lip. My golem didn't slow down for them.

Soon enough, my golem collapsed with a loud *thump*, like it had lost the strength to keep itself standing. I could feel the moment its life was snuffed out, as if an invisible thread connecting us had snapped.

The Llewynians fell into formation around the resulting mountain of dirt. From behind them, another unit began advancing toward the hill where we stood.

Alan's troops slashed their way through the enemy forces. Nonetheless, the Llewynian squad pressed on, as if we were the only thing in their sights.

Situated at the very center of the unit was Lord Credias, riding high upon his horse. Around him, one group of soldiers limped forward, while more followed along behind him with steely expressions.

"Just as I expected."

This was the first part of Reggie's strategy in action: by putting ourselves on full display, we would draw the attention of Lord Credias and his defective spellcasters away from the rest of the troops.

Predictably, this configuration had drawn strong objections during the strategy meeting. Putting both the prince and the spellcaster—who likewise

made quite the attractive target—on the front lines seemed like a terrible idea. Even knowing that we had lightning magic at our disposal and a scheme in mind wasn't enough to keep everyone from arguing.

Fully prepared to meet with this dissent, Reggie had boldly declared, "My aim is to take out Lord Credias straightaway, and this is the only way to do that."

The most serious threat throughout this war had been the defective spellcasters under Lord Credias' control. Rather than going on a rampage and destroying themselves from within, they could lock on to the target of their attacks, making them significantly harder to contend with.

"So you want to lure him in with Kiara. Are you sure that will work?" Alan had asked.

"In the last battle, he ignored the entire rest of our army to go after her. I assume he wants to drag her back with him at all costs, or else simply settle the score with her once and for all. Taking our spellcaster out of play *would* go a long way toward defeating us, too.

"Last time around, however," Reggie had gone on, "his actions resulted in significant losses for Llewyrne. No doubt he's been reprimanded; I don't think he could afford to focus all his efforts on Kiara again. That's why I need to go with her. If they see a chance to take out the spellcaster *and* enemy royalty in one fell swoop, no one will bother to hold him back. On our end, killing Lord Credias at the outset would put Kiara back at full strength, which puts the odds in our favor."

If I could just cast my magic without issue, it would be easy to turn the tide of the battle. Reggie had instructed each province's respective armies to hold their ground until then. Perhaps they couldn't come up with a better plan themselves; reluctant as they were, the generals had accepted his orders without any further fuss. The remainder of the battle strategy had been left in Alan's hands.

Now, just as Reggie had predicted, Lord Credias was heading our way. Cain and the royal guard, who had formed a protective circle around us—as well as the Évrard and Azuran troops under Reggie's command—wore faces drawn with tension.

There were far more defective spellcasters than we had bargained for.

“I was prepared for about twenty or so,” Groul lamented.

“I thought our most pessimistic estimates had been fairly high,” Cain said, “but this exceeds even that.”

A mere ten defective spellcasters had left Cain and I with our backs up against the wall in Liadna. Even assuming that the viscount would bolster his forces, we had predicted that there would be twenty defectives at most.

And yet, nearly thirty defective spellcasters were lined up in front of Lord Credias as he marched forward. Plumper than ever, he looked like some kind of demon controlling a horde of zombies from the shadows.

He was accompanied by about a thousand regular Llewynian soldiers, but perhaps for fear of getting caught in the crossfire—or perhaps because he had ordered them to stay back—they were all assembled in the rear.

Amid all the panic, Reggie smoothly commented, “At the very least, this is a clear sign of friction within the Llewynian army. That is, perhaps, the one aspect of this in our favor.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Llewyne has been turning their soldiers into defective spellcasters as a means of punishment. Considering the numbers they have lined up there, they’ve started to go after even the pettiest of criminals—the ones they had left alone until now. It’s a punishment equivalent to the death penalty, so I’m sure Llewynian morale has taken a significant hit. In which case, the number of soldiers who will desert at the slightest hint of a disadvantage should be higher than ever.”

“So if we can just take out Lord Credias...”

If the Llewynians lost hope of victory, more and more soldiers would desert, spelling the end for their army.

“Exactly.” After nodding in response, Reggie peered into my face. “If the strain gets to be too much, make sure to say something, Kiara.”

“I’m doing fine, actually. Maybe it’s because of this.”

I was referring to the contract stone the Thorn Princess had given Reggie, which was currently hanging from my neck. Each time I could feel my mana start to run wild, the cool of the stone would quell the magic forces within me.

I had a feeling this was part of the same stone she had given to me way back when. As the very gem I'd used to become a spellcaster, its effects were particularly potent—enough to even lessen Lord Credias' sway over me.

All the same, I could feel a fever gradually building within me. This time around, he was putting his all into shutting me down.

Hold out just a little longer, Kiara.

In hopes of luring him as close as we needed him, I made a second golem. I positioned it to serve as a shield for us.

"It won't be much longer now, Kiara," Reggie reassured me.

I nodded. He was the one in charge of the timing. My confidence that I could leave the decision in his hands drove it home that we were finally, truly fighting alongside each other. Even through the pain, newfound courage welled up within me.

Just 500 more mers... 450 more mers...

The cavalry crouched low as the advancing defective horde shot gusts of air our way. The wind fanned incoming tendrils of flames, which snuffed themselves out as they brought my golem to the ground.

It was then that the defective spellcasters broke out into a run.

"Kiara!"

I answered his call, placing both hands on the ground. Not a second later, I crumpled on the spot, assailed by the familiar feeling of weakness. For my efforts, the soil began to writhe underneath us, seeking to burst forth. Hands of earth reached out to snatch the ankles of both the sprinting spellcasters and the soldiers in the rear.

Lord Credias hadn't anticipated that I could cast such a huge spell under his constraints. Despite his shock, he managed to pull back so as to evade my attack.

In turn, that weakened his control over his defective spellcasters. The zombies that had been barreling straight for us suddenly scattered every which way. When the defectives whose feet were caught began blindly shooting spells, the soldiers in the rear made to retreat, bumping into the men lined up behind them in the chaos.

Though we couldn't get too close with all that magic flying everywhere, this had given us the perfect chance to strike.

"Now!" Groul commanded, and the soldiers in the front row began hurling their spears.

Rooted to the spot, the defective spellcasters were skewered one after the other. The whole reason we had taken up position atop a hill was to boost the hit rate of those spears. Launching them from above gave us an advantage in both range and power.

Unfortunately, some of our projectiles were blocked by wind and flame, leaving a good amount of defectives unscathed.

The cavalry galloped forward. Leading the charge were the Évrard soldiers most accustomed to dealing with defective spellcasters, along with the soldiers who had fought them off alongside Lord Enister and lived to tell the tale. There were Azuran soldiers in the mix, too.

To account for the long range of the enemy's magic attacks, we were fighting from a distance. With this strategy, we had already managed to take out ten mages already.

Before long, Lord Credias wrested back his control, and the defectives' movements regained some uniformity. Heedless of their own safety and unafraid of catching their allies in the crossfire, they worked to burn our soldiers to ash. Still, the situation wasn't as bad as it could have been, seeing as their feet were still fixed in place. There was only so much ground they could cover.

While I watched the battle unfold, I occasionally summoned walls to protect our soldiers from the incoming flames and ice.

Eventually, I heard Reggie call out, "Here I go." After flashing me a tiny smile,

he took a step forward.

As the commanding officer, Groul couldn't leave his position. He thus left Reggie in the hands of Felix and the rest of the knights accompanying him, though he didn't look too happy about it.

Cain stuck by my side, following Reggie with his eyes alone. I didn't move to stop him either, of course. The only thing left to do was pray.

"Be safe. Oh, please be safe!"

Please don't die, I silently implored. But no matter what, we had to beat Lord Credias. Otherwise, there was no telling how many thousands of soldiers we would lose to his defective spellcasters. All I could do, however, was keep my own magic going and wait.

"Nothing to do but have faith in him. It doesn't make sense to pull out a secret weapon right at the start, and your prince already decided he was going to make the most of it," said Master Horace.

I chewed at my lip. Reggie may have gotten his hands on lightning magic, but he could only bring it out when it really counted.

The ideal scenario would have been for him to take down those defective spellcasters and Lord Credias all in one hit. But going with *that* plan meant we'd be screwed if the viscount had a way to dodge the attack. Reggie would be sluggish after casting his magic, and meanwhile, *I'd* be paralyzed by the viscount's power over me. If we both ended up frozen before the enemy, it would be a huge burden on the ones tasked with protecting us.

I simply had to believe in him and wait, just as Master Horace had said. That was easier said than done, of course. But now that I was on this side of the equation, it finally dawned on me how much I'd been asking of Reggie all this time.

Reggie had thrown himself into a free-for-all battle because there was something only he could do, and I'd always stepped up because I wanted to protect him. There was nothing wrong with any of that. I knew it was what needed to be done. Still, realizing how tough this had been on both of us only made it harder to bear.

Practically on pins and needles, I watched Reggie go. He and his knights marched forward, helping out their fellow soldiers by felling the defective spellcasters in their path. While the rest of the men stood by—no matter how accustomed to this they were, they couldn't get too close if they wanted to avoid the flames and wind—the squad stormed ahead, taking advantage of whatever openings they saw.

Scared to watch, I couldn't help tensing up, but Reggie and his knights simply breezed on by. If this were an RPG, I'd have to chalk it up to an insurmountable difference in attack stats.

As Reggie charged, adding more soldiers to his entourage for each enemy he deftly struck down in his path, he caught the attention of Lord Credias. Even from a distance, I could tell the viscount was glaring.

That was when Cain murmured, "It's time, Miss Kiara."

I nodded, dropping my spell at last. Thanks to the efforts of our brave knights and soldiers, the defectives' numbers had dropped into the single digits. We'd taken a considerable amount of casualties in the process, but the fight was getting easier now. The Évrard soldiers quickly got to work luring the newly mobile defective spellcasters toward enemy lines.

Cain held out a hand and helped me to my feet. Using him as a crutch, I went on the move.

After slaying all those defective spellcasters, the front lines had moved slightly farther down the hill. Meanwhile, the Llewynian soldiers who had been keeping their distance, perhaps afraid to get near the defectives, were now trying to cut around from behind us. Groul dispatched soldiers to the rear to deal with them.

With Cain there to protect me, I made my way over to Groul's side. From there, I was able to hear Lord Credias and Reggie's conversation.

"His Highness going solo? My, Farzia must really be low on manpower," Lord Credias jeered, drawing back just enough to use some of the ordinary soldiers as a shield.

"Our spellcaster is too valuable to leave unprotected from, say, a man so obstinate that even after taking a wife, he would continue to chase down the

one girl who ran from him.”

The smile didn’t fall from Reggie’s face even as the soldiers came slashing at him. Felix and Cyrus made quick work of the attackers, and Reggie skewered another man through the throat, not a flinch in his expression.

“You treated our spellcaster to some real *hospitality*, from the sound of it. Why, when I heard what you did to her, I was overcome with the urge to give you the same death I just gave him.”

“Can you really act so high and mighty after seducing another man’s fiancée? I highly doubt a sheltered girl like her could have made it to Évrard all on her own. I think it’s safe to call your hand in it a kidnapping.” Lord Credias’ cheeks twitched in outrage.

“Kidnapping? What a ridiculous accusation. Forced into a marriage, and with no hope of appealing to an adoptive father who had never loved her, what options did she have but to lament her fate? But she wasn’t that weak. Even if she hadn’t met us along the way, she would have made it on her own. You have it backward; *she* is the one who saved *us*.”

His last words nearly brought me to tears. No—perhaps my weakened state had left me extra emotional, because my vision really *had* started to blur. When I rubbed at my eyes, Cain clutched my shoulder in support.

Drawing closer to the viscount, Reggie smiled and said, “To allow Kiara a peaceful life, and to have you pay for the treason of welcoming Llewynian troops into Farzia, prepare to be slain right here and now.”

“You little brat!” Beside himself with rage, Lord Credias’ full attention was on Reggie now; I could feel his restraints on me loosening. I hastily pressed my hands to the ground to cast a spell.

“Reggie!” The moment I called out his name, I set the earth into motion.

A myriad of earthen pillars sprang up between Lord Credias and Reggie. The columns then fell down like dominoes, breaking apart into piles of dirt as they neared the viscount.

Reggie and Felix plunged straight into the cloud of dust hanging through the air. If they could take advantage of the smokescreen to kill him right then and

there, we couldn't ask for a better outcome. And if they couldn't pull it off, at least blinding Lord Credias would give them better odds of dodging his spells.

Llewynian soldiers forced their way into the gap to defend the viscount.

"Protect His Highness!" At Groul's command, the Farzian soldiers likewise jumped into action.

In the meantime, a few other soldiers had decided to throw themselves at Farzia's spellcaster, so I couldn't get closer to Reggie to see what was going on. Fretting all the while, I had Cain step in to protect me while I fired off a few tiny spells to defend myself.

Suddenly, a huge flash of light blew away the gradually settling dust.

"Did he pull it off?"

Was that Reggie's lightning? Or did Lord Credias use some sort of spell?

The answer to my questions soon became clear. What I finally saw when the dust settled was Reggie holding a smoking sword, and Lord Credias standing a short distance away, part of his uniform singed black.

"Damn you!" Lord Credias muttered.

Reggie had conjured up his lightning sword for sure. Unfortunately, he didn't seem to have managed a critical hit. When I looked down at the viscount's feet, I saw a defective spellcaster crumpled on the ground whom he had presumably pulled in to shield him. A few seconds later, the man turned to sand and crumbled away.

More than shocked, the look on the viscount's face was oddly... resentful. "Even the *prince* has become a spellcaster now?!" he moaned bitterly while the soldiers who had drawn back for fear of the light once again resumed hostilities in the background. "It's not fair... Even the prince knows offensive spells?!"

The way Lord Credias was gnashing his teeth and mumbling to himself had me confused.

Well, he seems to be under the mistaken impression that Reggie became a spellcaster... but why does that make him so mad?

While I was wondering that, Master Horace murmured, "I see now. So this

viscount was an anomaly of a spellcaster.”

“What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t have any offensive spells to use. No doubt it ties into the way he can control these defective spellcasters. Heeheehee! My best guess is that his specialty lies in absorbing mana. He can ingest a bunch of different contract stones and manipulate defective spellcasters, sure, but he doesn’t have any magic he can project himself.”

That would explain why he never showed up to battle in the RPG. The player never had to fight hordes of defective spellcasters; what that probably meant was that he hadn’t had a consistent source of contract stones. And if he went into battle without his human shields at his disposal, he’d be dead in an instant.

He *did* have that this time around, which was why he was standing here before us. In lieu of me, he’d gotten his hands on another mage in the form of Ada, but perhaps cycling through disposable spellcasters was more his style.

I’d assumed Ada would be fighting alongside Lord Credias, but I didn’t see her anywhere. Part of me felt relieved, while part of me worried she might be off clashing with Alan’s troops instead. If she did any more damage to the Farzia than she already had, she would lose any chance of Alan or Reggie stepping in to pardon her.

“Why did it have to be the prince?! If I had that power, I could have shred Annamarie to pieces with my own two hands!”

His grudge against his ex-wife really is something.

Considering the way he always likened me to her, no doubt he was hellbent on slaughtering me once and for all today.

Lord Credias took a step forward. While Reggie brandished his sword, the brown-haired Cyrus stepped out ahead of him.

At first, I thought the viscount was going to summon another defective spellcaster, but he showed no sign of it. Nevertheless, he took yet another step forward, followed by another—stepping over the sandy remains of the defective he’d sacrificed as he did.

I don't get it. If he doesn't have any offensive spells, why does he keep moving forward? Is the anger clouding his judgment?

Reggie unleashed another bolt of lightning. He couldn't summon much power all on his own, but he was close enough to the viscount to hit him regardless.

Another defective spellcaster dove between Lord Credias and Reggie to take the hit, disintegrating into sand moments later.

All of a sudden, Reggie sprang back as if he'd just caught on to something. In the same instant, another Llewynian soldier who had dived in to protect the viscount let out an anguished scream, dissolving into dust and dying.

Why? I wondered. Not a second later, Master Horace came to a realization of his own and shouted, "You need to get farther away from him!"

Stunned as they were, unable to believe whatever they were seeing, Reggie, Felix, and Cyrus all managed to fall back.

"Master Horace, what's happening?!"

He replied with distaste, "I bet that viscount can *give* mana to whoever he touches, too. Give anyone too much mana and they lose their form. The magic will run amok through their body until they finally turn to sand."

It was the same fate as caving under a contract stone's power and dying. Nobody could get any closer to him like this.

Perhaps Reggie's retreat had given the viscount time to collect himself; the surviving defective spellcasters were starting to reorganize. When they began hobbling toward us shooting spells, I blocked their flames and wind with an earthen wall.

The moment Lord Credias stepped closer, my wall came crumbling down. Encouraged by this development, the Llewynian soldiers clashed against the Farzians with newfound enthusiasm.

"Let's move back," Reggie said. Now that he and his knights had made it all the way to where I stood, he took me by the hand and dragged me away.

"Heheh... Are you quite pleased with yourself, you thieving prince?" Lord Credias chuckled, drawing ever closer.

Excuse me, but I was never yours! I wanted to shoot back, but somehow I doubted he cared about what I had to say. Besides, I was soon distracted by his next puzzling remark.

“Oh, but part of me does feel for you, Your Highness. How very pitiful you are. Not only was your mother offered up as a sacrifice behind your back, but you weren’t even there to witness her final moments!”

“My mother? A sacrifice?”

This was clearly the first Reggie had heard of it, too. He stared the viscount down with incredulity.

Still... a “sacrifice”? Where else have I heard that word recently?

Before I could remember who had said it, Lord Credias sent even more defective spellcasters our way. Cain and Felix darted off to either side of us. Weaving their way around incoming flames and swords of ice thrust their way, they ran their spears through the defective spellcasters before quickly withdrawing once more. Engulfed in flames and pillars of ice, the defectives lost their lives and turned to sand.

“Reggie!”

At this range, Reggie’s power alone wouldn’t be enough to bridge the gap between us and the viscount. When he noticed me holding out my hand, he nodded back. As Lord Credias watched me nestle close to Reggie, one hand on his shoulder, he let out a howl of rage.

Under the assumption that he could still attack from a distance, Cyrus flung his spear at the viscount, but it turned to sand before it could reach him.

Reggie pointed the tip of his blade at Lord Credias.

“Kiara.”

As soon as Reggie said my name, I started channeling my mana through the hand on his shoulder.

Only the slightest of grimaces passed over Reggie’s face. The light that subsequently poured from his hand transformed into electricity and crawled up the length of his sword, then shot straight for the viscount with a mighty,

vibrating roar.

Just as it was about to strike him down, however, the lightning evaporated.

“Why?!” I blurted out. Beside me, Reggie furrowed his brow.

Master Horace muttered, “Did he fight mana with mana?”

“He can do that?”

“If he can discharge enough mana to break anything down, surely he can do the same thing to magic spells. Take a look at that; seems like he used up a little too much of his reserves. Eeeheehee!” Cackling, Master Horace pointed at the viscount with one of his stubby hands.

“He... lost weight?” Reggie marveled.

Indeed, the viscount’s rotund body appeared to have deflated. The flesh of his face had thinned out, and his uniform was suddenly a size too big for him.

“Storing up all that mana makes his body puff up, and discharging it makes him shrink. That’s the only ace up his sleeve he’s got, so no matter how ugly it looks, or no matter how much it slows him down, he’s got no choice but to keep it that way. Heheheh!”

While Master Horace was busy cackling, the viscount had started charging toward us. If we tried to run, however, there was a chance he would turn his attack on our allies fighting the rest of the Llewynians.

“If you can get him to use up all his reserves, you win, but he’s going to turn tail and run the second he knows he can’t beat you.”

“Then how’s this?”

Taking Master Horace’s advice into account, I placed my hands on the ground and summoned two new golems. One of them charged right toward Lord Credias. As soon as he destroyed it, I felt the backlash. It felt like he’d chipped away at the power inside of me, causing me to moan in agony. For my next move, I just flung a block of rocks at him instead. That swiftly turned to sand and sprinkled to the ground, of course, but it had been the best way to draw his attention toward me and make him believe he was going to win this.

“Ugh! Hrk!” I coughed, strapped for breath. It probably didn’t help that I’d

inhaled some dust, either.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Kiara.”

I’d gone and made Reggie worry about me. Still, all that mattered to me right now was taking down Lord Credias—and severing this awful tie engraved so deep in my memories. It was hard to come out and say that, though.

When I lifted my head, I saw that Lord Credias was darting toward us from beyond the dust with newfound agility—perhaps because of all that weight he’d lost. I rushed to get out of his path, but for some reason, Reggie took a step forward.

Right as Reggie swung down his sword, the weapon crumbled away into sand.

That assured Lord Credias of his victory. He reached out a hand, his sleeve flapping loosely around it. Reggie attempted to dodge his grasp, but it was too late—the viscount had already grabbed hold of his left arm.

I was pretty sure I was screaming, but my voice wouldn’t come out. Still, my throat burned all the same.

In the next moment, however, there came a flash bright enough to leave me blinded. Once the light had died down and I could finally see again, I gasped.

Lord Credias was the one crumpled on the ground—and Reggie was the one standing over him. Small sparks danced in his hand, the leftover remains of the blast.



A few seconds later, it finally dawned on me what had happened.

All Lord Credias had done was expel his mana. It was on the arm he had grabbed that the Thorn Princess had engraved the path for Reggie's magic to flow through; thus, the viscount's mana had simply passed right down his arm, transforming into lightning and coming back to bite the man himself.

Most likely, Reggie had been counting on that. He had botched his escape on purpose, allowing the viscount to grab hold of his arm. If anything went wrong, that would have been the end of him—but he'd taken that risk.

For a few seconds, everyone just stood stock-still, as though they could hardly believe their eyes.

Reggie was the one to finally break the silence. "The spellcaster of Llewyrne is dead! Wipe out the remaining enemy forces!"

At his command, the knights and soldiers snapped back to their senses and descended upon the remaining enemies. Given how many of them Lord Credias had used as a shield, the number of defective spellcasters had been culled significantly, and the remaining two were slain in no time at all.

Amid the raging battle, we stared down at Lord Credias from a short distance away. The fact that he hadn't turned to sand meant he wasn't dead just yet. We couldn't let our guard down.

But all he did was mutter, "Annamarie... Of course you'd betray me," his unfocused eyes gazing off into the distance.

I'd known full well that Lord Credias had never gotten over his ex-wife. At the end of the day, what had truly mattered to him was neither the war nor his own life; it was simply winning back the heart of his late lover.

Being a man who knew naught but how to take his resentment out on others, no matter how many replacements he found for her, he'd never once managed to win even an imitation of her love.

A memory suddenly flooded back to me. It was an image of the viscount clinging to my feet and wailing, screaming about how his father had called him a waste of a spellcaster. Seeing as he couldn't wield ordinary black magic, his

father had never stopped berating him even after he'd become a mage.

In the dream, I was aware that his "father" wasn't his parent by birth. The man had taken in several children and raised only the ones who became spellcasters as his sons, all to keep his family line of mages afloat.

None of that had made me sympathetic toward him, of course. I wasn't enough of a saint to value the feelings of someone who constantly punished me for things I had nothing to do with, and who wasn't even interested in treating me like an actual person. Who in their right mind could hear, *I went through some hard times, so please don't blame me for trying to kill you*, and think that was a reasonable request?

Lord Credias reached out to strangle me, his hands damp with tears. All I could think was how wonderful it would be if this killed me.

The vision only lasted an instant; soon, the battlefield once again spread out before my eyes. Moments later, I was able to witness Lord Credias quietly dissolving into sand.

"You don't have to watch," Reggie offered as I lapsed into silence.

"It's fine. I need to burn this into my memory. That's the only way I can be sure this nightmare is over for good." With a shake of my head, I turned my eyes back toward the viscount's disintegrating form.

And then, somehow... it finally clicked into place what these mysterious visions really were. Perhaps I'd been reborn into this world once already after being born and raised in Japan—and I was now repeating that second life all over again.

To put it another way, I had lived and died once as "Kiara Credias," and I was currently in the process of doing that life over. Something told me that was the answer.

That would certainly explain why these memories were interwoven with such personal emotions. What I *didn't* understand was where the Thorn Princess came into the picture.

With how deep I'd fallen into my own thoughts, I didn't even notice the dark cloud that fell over Reggie's face when I said the word "nightmare."

Interlude: Washed Ashore

A cacophony of sound drifted over from the battlefield—pained screams, the trill of a bugle commanding a forward march, and the clang of swords clashing. Throughout it all, Ada sat huddled in the dim light of a covered wagon.

She had used the recent beating she'd suffered from the viscount as an excuse to stay out of the battle. It was easy for Lord Credias to render her immobile, but he couldn't make her fight against her will, so he'd decided to leave her to her own devices.

Besides, his primary target—Kiara—had demanded his entire attention when he saw her nearby. Thus, despite the threats he'd made against Ada, he had been too distracted to actually act on any of it.

Ada was feeling incredibly relieved. Back on the day she'd rescued Kiara, too, she'd been terrified of what hell he might put her through for defying him; hence why she had screamed and shouted about how much she hated Kiara while she saved her, playing the part of a woman consumed with jealousy. Seeing that his ex-fiancée had nearly died in the chaos, Lord Credias never doubted that she had acted out of mere envy. It was all thanks to that that he hadn't subjected Ada to anything worse than the beating.

In the end, the king of Salekhard had shown up to rescue Kiara from the flames just in the nick of time. When Ada witnessed him carrying her away in his arms, she had felt a deep sense of accomplishment; she'd done exactly what it was that she'd set out to do.

At the same time, part of her wished that *she* could have been saved, too. She knew she was in no position to hope for that. If she went back to the Farzian army, she'd be either executed or imprisoned for her hand in the marquis' death. There was no other way it could possibly go.

Death was the worst fate she could imagine. She wanted to live, no matter how painful it was. That was the reason she'd always buckled under the viscount's threats.

Yet just this once, she hadn't been able to bring herself to go into battle. She'd even lied to get out of it—even though there was no telling what Lord Credias might have done if Kiara hadn't been around to distract him.

What she'd remembered in that moment was the smile Kiara had flashed her as she'd lay on the ground, beset by flame. Though Ada's main reason for attempting to burn her to ash was to disguise the fact that she was helping her, she'd also had a feeling that Kiara had *wanted* to die there.

Ada, on the other hand, would never have wished for death in that situation. Even after everything, she still sought her own happiness—whether that happiness was with the prince or not.

And yet, Kiara had truly been glad. Was it because she *knew* the prince loved her that she chose whatever she had to to keep from betraying him? Ada hadn't a clue. But ever since that incident, Ada had mustered up the courage to disobey and lie to the viscount.

What she *really* wanted was to escape from him, but she had nowhere to go. Thus, she'd stayed put, assuming that someone else would decide where she would end up after the war was over.

Or so she'd thought. A knight suddenly came running over, strapped for breath, only to raise the hood of her wagon and shout, "Lady Spellcaster! We need to get out of here!"

"Why? Did we lose?"

Considering that he was ushering her away in a hurry, it didn't seem likely that they'd won. She was right on that point, but there was even more to it.

"The viscount has fallen in battle!"

Those were the very words she'd always longed to hear, but she couldn't help doubting her own ears. After suffering under his thumb for so long, had all that time she'd spent wishing for his death finally paid off?

"The battle is still going, but Her Majesty instructed us to move you somewhere safe if anything were to happen."

"Her Majesty did?"

Ada was torn. While she sat there hesitating, the knight made her decision for her, tugging her out of the wagon by the hand.

Once she was outside, she saw that the battle was indeed far from over. Though the armies were still trading blows, it was clear from a distance which side was winning.

The Llewynians had supposedly had the Farzian troops outnumbered. Based on all the strategy she'd overheard, she had never expected that they would be pushed back this quickly.

Ada still couldn't believe that the viscount was really dead. Just to be sure, she asked the knight, "How did he die?"

"I wasn't in the vicinity, so I'm not clear on the specifics, but I heard that he was slain by Farzia's spellcaster and the prince."

So it was Kiara. Ada still had no idea that Reginald could use magic, so she assumed it had to have been her.

Although Lord Credias hadn't been Kiara's formal mentor, he had held enough power over her to put her through the wringer. Hearing that *she* had been the one to fell the viscount regardless made Ada's heart leap in her chest.

But if the viscount was gone, did that mean Ada was free to run?

It was at that moment that she saw a band of soldiers running down from the top of a hill. Judging by their blue banner and capes, they were Farzians.

Ada could have sworn she'd spotted a familiar face among them.

"No way..."

Ada smacked the knight's hand away, scurrying closer to the incoming squad. Their figures still looked small in the distance, but there was no mistaking it: that was Felix, the very man Ada had nearly killed.

Not much time had passed since their last encounter; if he was already back in action, did that mean the Farzian army had some sort of specialized medicine at their disposal? Whatever the case, she was just glad he'd survived.

And yet... Ada came to a halt. Felix had told her she shouldn't have done it. All he cared about was faithfully carrying out his prince's orders; if she hadn't

attacked *his* allies, he wouldn't have had to attack her. If he saw her now, would he just hand her straight over to the prince, indifferent to what happened after that? The thought terrified her.

Given Kiara's more naive tendencies, she would probably step in to defend Ada. Still, given that the prince had turned his back on Ada when she threatened to gulp down the contract sand, Ada doubted that he would listen to her. She couldn't stand the idea of Felix turning his sword on her a second time.

And so, she chose to head back over to the knight who had come to take her away. To start, she just had to get away from the battlefield. Then she could start thinking about her next move.



The viscount of Credias was dead. Isaac, too, had heard the news.

"Did Kiara do it?" he wondered aloud. "And here I'd heard that just getting near him was a struggle for her. The girl has guts, I'll give her that."

"Is this really the time to be praising her?" Mikhail sighed beside Isaac, observing the battle from atop his horse.

The battle had reached a stalemate, a constant push and pull.

It hadn't been that long since each side had arrived, yet Farzia had turned their swords on Llewyne and Salekhard without giving them a moment to prepare. Going by just the numbers, Isaac's side had the advantage. Thus, they *had* managed to force the Farzians back at first; however, just as Isaac had called his soldiers' advance to a halt, finding something off about the enemy's path of retreat, the Farzians had created a spiked stone fence to hide behind, sharp enough to pierce a warhorse clean through. If that wasn't bad enough, soldiers had been stationed outside to defend the barrier, too.

No doubt the fence was Kiara's doing. Isaac was constantly amazed by the sheer functionality of her magic.

Complaining wasn't going to get him anywhere here. Instead, he'd told the Llewynians that there was no reason to charge straight in, proposing to split their forces in two and go for a pincer attack.

Perhaps because Salekhard had declared their intent to surrender as soon as the battle was “nearly” decided, Farzia had opted to wedge themselves in the middle and focus on crushing the Llewynian forces.

As the truth would have it, Isaac had spoken to the silver-haired prince just before the battle.



Prince Reginald had sent one of his men to a town Isaac’s troops would be marching by, and the emissary had entrusted one of the villagers with a message.

Isaac hadn’t been averse to meeting up himself. If the prince was looking to talk to him, that meant he’d probably heard about Salekhard’s plans to throw in the towel from either Kiara or Gina. In which case, he figured he might as well take the chance to negotiate better terms for the surrender.

The following day, Isaac had tagged along with a group of soldiers going out on patrol. It was hardly uncommon for him to wander off, so a mere one-or-two-day excursion was unlikely to tip Llewyn off to the fact that he was in contact with Farzia.

The soldiers on patrol had decided on a time to meet back up before splitting up along the way. After that, Isaac had taken a day to travel out to a riverbed just past the Delphion border.

They hadn’t determined their exact meeting place. Neither side wanted to be found out, so they had refrained from marking a spot. Thus, Isaac had simply wandered downstream looking for the prince, and eventually, he had spotted the man in question coming upstream.

Reginald, the prince of Farzia, had the kind of face most women would love to keep a portrait of. As he reflected on how Kiara had likewise been taken in by those good looks, Isaac had come to a stop and dismounted his horse, instructing the three knights who had accompanied him to take their horses and hang back.

Then, he had called out, “Ho there! I heard you had some business with me, so here I am.”

“I appreciate your compliance,” the prince had responded, likewise requesting his knights to stand back before trotting over to Isaac. His smile hadn’t faltered in the least, even as he approached an enemy king with nothing but a single horse. Now here was a formidable man. Unless their face was frozen in fear, most people wouldn’t be smiling as they talked to a man they would soon be fighting against.

“Keep this brief, will you? If I’m away for too long, people might start to get suspicious.”

“I don’t want this conversation to go on too long myself. Otherwise, I won’t be able to hold myself back from punching you,” Reginald had replied without batting an eye. “First of all, I’d like to thank you for rescuing Kiara from a certain loose cannon while she was in your custody.”

The remark had been delivered so nonchalantly that Isaac had taken it for sarcasm, his lips quirking in a wry smile. Apparently, the prince had heard about the kerfuffle with Lord Credias.

Given his cool demeanor, however, it had seemed less likely that Kiara had told him about the you-know-what. It would have been difficult for her to bring up, no doubt. Seeing Reginald so blissfully ignorant had put Isaac in a slightly better mood.

“I heard the truth from Kiara, as well as some Salekhardian mercenaries we hired—that you plan on losing to Farzia partway through the war, that is. If that’s true, I thought we might have a few things to discuss.”

Isaac had nodded. This was exactly what he had expected to hear.

“Sure, why not. I’m sure you’d prefer to settle everything in Trisphede, wouldn’t you? Since you’re running on a fairly tight schedule and all.”

“Correct. Let’s start by discussing the conditions of your surrender.”

The two had then gone into the particulars of the arrangement—Salekhard’s demands, as well as the parts Farzia was unwilling to negotiate on.

It had appeared that Gina had given Reginald a good amount of detail. It had been somewhat vexing to see just how much Gina—and her guardian, Girsch—trusted the prince. Though at the very least, that *had* made it much easier to

get to the core of the discussion. This would take some of the burden off Mikhail in the aftermath.

Once the discussion had ended, Reggie had murmured, “So you really *do* plan to die and give up the throne.” The look on Reggie’s face had been so grave, it was almost as if he was mourning the life of an enemy king. For a moment, Isaac hadn’t known how to react.

Gina had probably told him *that*, too. Nevertheless, Isaac hadn’t been banking on his sympathy.

Perhaps that was what had spurred him to say, “Yes, I believe that should be a fitting place to die. Shouldn’t you look a little happier about it? Oh, right. Tell Kiara that I’m not sorry about the kiss for me, will you?”

Reginald’s eyes had narrowed, a faint smile rising to his lips. “I didn’t *really* want to kill you, but I’m glad to see you don’t want me to hold back. I’ll do my best to keep it painless.” He’d then added, “Of course, whether Kiara will allow it or not is a different matter. Even if it *is* what you want.”

“Isn’t she your subordinate, more or less? You sort her out.”

“Only because we had to give her a formal position in our organization. She’s marching along with us as a courtesy.”

Reginald’s explanation had left Isaac speechless. At the same time, some pieces of the puzzle had finally fallen into place for him. One would have thought she’d be too busy fighting for her life to have time to worry about her *reason* for killing people; that certainly explained why she’d been so scared of murder, unable to find a sufficient justification.

“Say, don’t you think you’re letting her do a little too much thinking? That’s how she managed to stumble over something as trivial as fighting in a war.”

Reginald had known exactly what he was referring to. “I see you’ve talked with her quite a bit. Nevertheless, I’m not interested in making any demands of her. I don’t want to drive her into a corner.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s been treated like an object ever since she was young. Consequently,

she developed the habit of telling herself that everything bad that happens to her is just a dream... as a defense mechanism of sorts. If I put too much pressure on her, she might take refuge in the world of dreams permanently.”

“A dream? Really?”

There had seemed to be more to the story there, but Isaac hadn’t had time to get into the weeds of it. Thus, instead of asking anything more, he’d ended the conversation there and left the two of them to return to their respective camps straightaway. Now that he was back with his troops, he reflected on what he had debated whether or not to say: *I’d say that Kiara’s learned to stop running from you, at least, wouldn’t you?*

“If he doesn’t realize that much, all that hard work of mine might as well have been for nothing. Poor, unappreciated Isaac.”

“What are you mumbling about?! Llewyrne is on the move!”

When he looked in the direction Mikhail was pointing, he saw that amid their attack from two directions, Llewyrne had resorted to last-ditch measures. A line of ten soldiers was being spurred on from behind, and it seemed each and every one of them had been made into a defective spellcaster.

Last time around, Lord Credias had been so focused on taking down Farzia’s spellcaster that it had cost the Llewyrnian army dearly. No doubt he would be just as obsessed with killing her this time, and since they *did* need to take her out, they couldn’t send him anywhere else.

Of course, Farzia had monsters on their side, too. To combat them, Lord Erling had asked Lord Credias for some of the sand to make defective spellcasters.

The defective spellcasters began indiscriminately wrecking everything around them, and as a consequence, about one-third of the fence Kiara had built for Farzia was destroyed.

Salekhard couldn’t very well stand back and do nothing, so they attacked a unit of Farzian soldiers toward the center, which had pulled out ahead of the pack.

Still, Salekhard *did* want to call on compassion from Farzia down the line. They couldn’t take it too far. All the same, they had to give Llewyrne the impression

that they were fighting with everything they had. It was a fine line to toe.

That was when Farzia tossed out one of their trump cards: Gina and her frostfoxes.

The mega-sized Lila's magic, in particular, packed a punch. Both Llewynian soldiers and a portion of the defective spellcasters soon had ice clinging to their bodies, rendering them immobile. In the meantime, a rescue team swooped in, allowing the Farzian unit that had been left behind a chance to flee.

Salekhard couldn't afford to sit there and do nothing, so they sent a group of torch-bearing soldiers toward Lila. The foxes could handle heat just fine so long as they didn't run out of mana, but seeing as exposure to flame would cost them a huge amount of their magic reserves, they weren't fans of it.

That finally got Gina's foxes to stop in their tracks. When the Llewynians saw that they had an opening, they charged at Farzia once more. They still had the advantage in terms of numbers. Both Kiara and a good chunk of Farzian soldiers had been sent to deal with Lord Credias' squad, so their forces had been as good as halved. This was their one chance to back Farzia into a corner.

But then, a new unit came marching down a southern hill toward the Farzian army—a flock of blue capes and swords gleaming in the light.

They were Farzian reinforcements, clearly. They numbered about 4,000—more than enough to account for the gap in their forces. The moment Kiara's squad came back, the battle would be over.

As he watched the troops march solemnly ahead, joining up with the rest of the Farzians, Isaac muttered, "It's over."

Llewyne would retreat before long. Salekhard's best move was to make a show of defending their rear and clash with a handful of Farzians in the process. That would be the perfect chance to put an end to all of this.

"Your Highness," Mikhail called out.

"That's 'Your Majesty' to you."

Isaac gave the same flippant response he always did, but Mikhail looked like he was struggling to keep his emotions in check. "I've begun to wonder if

perhaps you shouldn't have become king after all. Prince Yefrem could have done everything you did. At the very least, then I wouldn't have had to tag along with you, only to suffer feeling sympathy for the enemy," he said, chewing on his lip.

Isaac laughed. He'd probably only said it now because this was his last chance.

"I chose to go through with it of my volition, and you just wanted to save the life of the man you owe so much to. Besides, if my brother wanted to make a show of allegiance to Llewyne, he would've had to get married to do it. No reason to make Ginaida suffer more than she already has."

Isaac had known Ginaida since he was young. While she'd always put on a demure act in front of others, she'd then run off to do something as unladylike as climbing a tree just to get herself a measure of privacy. And then, claiming that she had to keep her skills sharp if she ever wanted to return to her hometown, she would go practice swinging around her sword. She was truly a one-of-a-kind girl, and so Isaac had taken an interest in her.

However, she was in love with his brother. Seeing as Isaac's feelings hadn't yet grown serious, he had swiftly filed her away as a "little sister." And yet, when he'd taken her as his fiancée, just a smidge of those old, faded feelings had been rekindled.

"Really... Maybe I just have a thing for women who like to slap men around."

"Personally, I'd say you have decent taste—though neither of them really acts the part of a noblewoman."

"No surprise there. I don't act the part of a prince or king myself." Isaac then started barking orders mid-conversation. "Hey, our left flank is growing thin! Send over that squad toward the rear! Make sure to start falling back, while you're at it!"

"I think being a king suited you best."

Even amid all the bustle, Mikhail's murmur somehow managed to reach his ears. Isaac flashed him a strained smile and patted him on the head.

"I leave the rest in your hands. Just follow the plan."

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he answered. Isaac smiled back, wholly satisfied.

But when he spotted a certain something in the corner of his eye, his expression did a one-eighty.

“That’s not good... It looks like this is going to drag on a little longer. All troops, halt your retreat!”

When Mikhail noticed the same thing, he turned white as a sheet.

Chapter 6: The Light That Shines on the Battlefield

It didn't take too long to take down the troops formerly under Lord Credias' control. Sensing which way the wind was blowing now that their spellcaster was dead, the Llewynians had started running off in all different directions.

Letting the deserters be, we hurried to join up with the main body. A few daring Llewynian soldiers made to intercept us along the way, but I just mowed them down with the golem I had running alongside us.

It was hard to manage that while running at the same time, however. I had to disassemble my golem partway there.

When he saw that I'd run out of breath, Reggie spoke up, concerned, from my side. "Don't push yourself too hard."

"I'm fine," I managed to answer him with a smile. After all that time spent under Lord Credias' restraints, my body was feeling exceptionally light. It *was* true that my mana hadn't stabilized, however, and I was still a little feverish, too. Thus, I refrained from wielding the full extent of my power and opted not to keep my golem going.

The main body, led by Alan, was still in the midst of their fight. While we were busy battling Lord Credias, we'd had the elite troops we recruited at an additional expense rush in wielding the frostfoxes' swords of ice.

They were so much mightier than your regular sword that the Llewynian soldiers faltered, allowing us to force a clean break between the Llewynian and Salekhardian forces. The Llewynians continued to advance, attempting to skirt around the chaos. Once they'd used their defective spellcasters to break down a part of the fence I'd built earlier, enemy soldiers flooded in through the openings.

I spotted Jerome—who was defending the right flank, the forces closest to us—pulling his soldiers back, overwhelmed by the enemy's momentum. Lured into charging forward, the Llewynians soon found themselves hurtling down a

number of pitfalls. The holes were a touch deep, but not particularly wide; since they weren't big enough to bring the men to a full stop, the soldiers instead landed in a heap on top of each other, presenting an obstacle for the forces in the rear.

Jerome had asked me to make *those* ahead of time, too. The Farzian soldiers had been instructed to avoid the holes, and I'd left markings to make it clear where they were. Obviously the Llewynians weren't aware of that, and carefully watching where they stepped wasn't a luxury most soldiers could afford on the battlefield.

Now that the enemy's march had slowed, Lord Enister's troops in the center rear went on the move, launching a joint attack with Jerome's forces. Unfortunately, that wasn't quite enough to force the Llewynians to retreat. They'd gone back to mass-producing defective spellcasters.

Worse still, they were using injured Farzian soldiers now. Finding themselves under attack by their fellow soldiers in blue capes was understandably throwing our men into disarray.

Meanwhile, the Llewynians were starting to reposition their forces.

"Just how many contract stones does Llewyne have?!"

"No idea, but it looks like they dug up enough to hand 'em out like candy. Heeheehee! This isn't looking too good. The unrest within our ranks is the worst of it."

Master Horace was right. Back during the battle at Delphion, too, adding soldiers who had only just defected from Llewyne into the mix had bred enough paranoia to throw our troops into disarray. At this rate, we were going to come out of this with considerable damage.

"Stop right there, Kiara. Someone bring us a skilled archer!" Reggie commanded, having arrived at a similar assessment. As soon as I'd come to a halt, Reggie whispered his idea into my ear. I nodded, then handed some copper ore to the soldier who had come along with a bow in hand.

The soldier promptly moved to a spot of Reggie's choosing, firing off an arrow fastened with the copper ore. I placed my hands on the ground, raising the

earth on either side of where the ore had landed. With that maneuver, I managed to separate the Farzian and Llewynian forces.

“Kiara!”

I stood up and placed my hand on Reggie’s shoulder, and lightning gushed from his sword. With a mighty roar, the lightning extended its light as far as Reggie willed it. It rose all the way to the sky in the blink of an eye, then came crashing back down—toward the side of my earthen wall where all the Llewynians were gathered.

The rumbling of the earth carried all the way back to my ears and feet.

Based on how many screams I’d heard, that attack had killed a great number of Llewynian soldiers. Though I hadn’t been the one to strike them down myself, their cries didn’t hit me any less hard for it. Perhaps the reason I wasn’t quite as scared as I usually was, however, was because Reggie was the one running the show.

Almost as though he’d sensed what I was feeling, Reggie lowered his sword and placed a hand over the one I had on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry. I’m right here with you.”

Just knowing that there would be someone by my side through all the tough times—whenever I had to fight, whenever I had to kill—was enough to give me peace.

“Don’t mourn them too much. It’s easier to resign yourself to your fate when your opponent shows no shame. If the person you lost to apologizes, it just makes it harder to hate them, no?”

“Uh... yeah? Maybe?”

He did have a point; if someone punched you in the face and then got down on their knees to apologize, it would be hard to know how to react. Perhaps it was best to think of a fight to the death the same way.

There wasn’t much time to dwell on that, though. While the Llewynians were still in disarray, we ran closer and closer to the Farzian camp. As we dashed by, Reggie yelled to his soldiers, “The spellcaster of Llewyrne is dead! The defectives

are no match for Farzia!” His declaration dealt quite a blow to the Llewynian soldiers’ morale.

After Lord Credias had come along with his huge line of defective spellcasters in tow, everything had panned out just as Reggie had expected. Now that their lifeline of a spellcaster had fallen in battle, the Llewynian troops had steadily begun to bleed soldiers.

Now that we’d cut down so many of the Llewynian troops, there was no reason for Salekhard to keep up the fight. As I was thinking to myself about what a good opportunity this was for Isaac to put on a show of being cornered and raise the white flag, we finally arrived back at the vanguard of the Farzian army.

“How’s the battle proceeding?” Reggie asked briskly.

Alan was looking out over the battlefield from atop his horse, his expression grim. He replied, “As you can see, we have the upper hand—all thanks to the reinforcements you had that knight of yours, Dior, call in from his home territory of Tarinahaea. It’s only a matter of time before we clear out the Llewynians... but that still leaves the matter of Salekhard.”

Given how the frostfoxes’ onslaught was keeping them from effectively utilizing their defective spellcasters, the Llewynians looked ready to make a run for it. Yet Salekhard still hadn’t shown any signs of retreating.

“Perhaps we need to push a little bit harder; for now, let’s concentrate on wiping out the Llewynians. I’d like to throw Salekhard off their game, too. Where’s Gina?”

“Salekhard knows how to deal with the frostfoxes, so she’s having trouble getting an attack in.”

“Then let’s just focus on Llewyrne.”

“Alright. You just stand back and watch, Reggie. You’re looking awfully pale.”

Alan gave him a shove on the shoulder. Reggie must not have seen it coming, seeing as it actually threw him off balance for once.

Groul rushed in to catch him. “Are you quite alright, Your Grace?”

“Yes. I’m feeling the burn from earlier, that’s all.”

Reggie had used his magic several times in the battle against Lord Credias. During the climactic moment of the fight, he’d even had to absorb the mana blast Lord Credias had unleashed with the intent to kill. Considering it wasn’t *my* mana he was dealing with there, it had probably taken an unforeseen toll on him.

“Let me have a look at you, Reggie,” I demanded, dragging him back out of the way and urging him to take a seat.

It was clear that he was in quite a bit of pain; for once, he didn’t bother to dig in his heels when I grabbed him by the wrist. Now that I was touching him, I could sense the mana writhing around inside of him, rough enough to turn his throat into sandpaper.

All that running must have been hard on him, too. He was in no condition to be worrying about me! No, this is my fault. He’s still getting used to using his magic, so I should have paid more attention.

“I’m sorry I didn’t notice until now.”

“Don’t be, Kiara. We didn’t exactly have the luxury to rest until we made it back here.”

So he claimed, but the moment the storm of mana finally began to die down, I heard him breathe a sigh of relief.

“What about you, Kiara?”

“I’m fine. This is nothing.”

I still had plenty of fight left in me. If we wanted to protect our soldiers, we had to use the viscount’s death to our full advantage.

And so I declared, “Well, off I go!” before leaving Reggie’s side and making my way back over to Alan.

“I’m good to use my magic whenever, Alan. Is there anything you need me to do?” I asked him.

He pointed straight at Salekhard’s forces. “Lila is stuck in a standoff over there. She *is* helping to keep Salekhard at bay, but we’ll be in trouble if we can’t

get her out of there soon.”

It was hard to see around the crowds of soldiers, so Cain lifted me up onto the front of his horse, giving me a better angle. From the looks of it, the frostfoxes were indeed at an impasse. Since they were standing on low ground, I had a clear view of the oversized Lila and the knights accompanying her, as well as the torch-bearing soldiers surrounding them.

Being frostfoxes and all, Lila, Reynard, and Sara were weak to heat. It was solely thanks to their magic that they could stroll around in the middle of summer without issue. Of course, having a heat source thrust before them like this forced them to drain their mana reserves just to stave off the warmth. Perhaps that explained why Lila was looking a full size smaller than she had yesterday.

Though they were continuing to fight back, their attacks were limited to the occasional blizzard—possibly because they knew Salekhard would have to retreat sooner or later.

“Take me to them, Sir Cain.”

“Alright.”

As we galloped toward the frostfoxes, we found only Évrard soldiers in the vicinity. That was likely an intentional move on Alan’s part; if he left the fight up to soldiers under his direct command, it would make it easier to call off the attack once Salekhard raised the white flag.

When I hopped down from our horse, Cain ordered the soldiers to open a path for me. Knowing that the spellcaster was about to take action, the soldiers swiftly complied. Now that they’d moved out of the way, I had a clear view of the frostfoxes, even as I knelt down to place my hands on the ground.

“I’m going to levitate the ground around the frostfoxes! Everyone get out of the way!” I called out, and once I was sure I had the timing right, I cast my spell.

The ground soon began to swell underneath the feet of the Salekhardians, who had formed a semicircle around the foxes. Some of the men fell on their backsides in shock, while others bumped into the soldiers behind them as they tried to get out of the way—and soon the rising slope of the ground hid them

from view entirely.

Gina and her frostfoxes fled downhill toward the Farzian troops. To stave off the Salekhardians who had come chasing after them, weaving around the bulges of earth, I went to work constructing an earthen wall straight across. I piled two-mer walls one on top of the other to give the straggling Évrard soldiers a chance to escape.

All that work had left me a little strapped for breath. Perhaps this was starting to take too much of a toll on me.

“That’s enough, little disciple. Go take a break.” Having picked up on the turbulence in my mana, Master Horace advised me to stop there. I nodded in response.

Évrard fell back to make sure we kept a clear view of the front lines. Now that it had become significantly harder to attack us, Salekhard was likewise bound to withdraw for now—or so I’d thought.

Contrary to my expectations, Salekhard had begun navigating around my wall. And here I’d just given them a perfectly good excuse for a ceasefire.

“Why aren’t they retreating?!”

“Miss Kiara, if you’re not planning to cast any more spells, let’s move to the rear.” Cain scooped me up and plopped me down on his horse, moving me out of the way whether I liked it or not.

When I glanced back over Cain’s shoulder, I saw the Salekhardian forces colliding with Évrard’s. As they slashed at each other with their swords and stabbed each other through with their lances, the bodies started to pile up one after the other.

Given the enemy’s numerical advantage, Delphion soldiers were rushing over to join the fight. Lord Enister and his men, too.

With the way things were headed, Alan was going to have trouble calling off the attack on Salekhard. It would look far too contrived.

While I was sitting there at a loss, Reggie and his guard passed us by on horseback.

“What’s going on, Reggie?!” I shouted.

Reggie brought his horse to a halt and explained, “Llewyne brought in reinforcements. They hid themselves on the islands of the lake, so I didn’t notice they were here until it was too late. The new troops have a ship moored in the lake, and they’re sending soldiers out in smaller boats to join up with Salekhard from behind. Thus, Salekhard is in no position to retreat.”

We had rushed to get here precisely so that we could put an end to this before reinforcements arrived. Unfortunately, the Llewynians had been one step ahead of us.

“So Salekhard is going to keep on fighting?”

“It looks that way.”

We have to keep on fighting them? What, all the way until one side or the other is defeated?!

Knowing that Reggie was heading for the front lines didn’t help ease my nerves one bit.

“I’m going to go stop them in their tracks, so you ought to hang back a little, Reggie.”

I could always buy us some time by creating more pitfalls. That was what I’d had in mind, in any case, but Reggie just gave a calm shake of his head.

“I have to end this now. If it’s a duel with me the king of Salekhard wants, then I’m going to give it to him.”

“What? Why?!”

If he fought against Reggie, it would only draw the attention of even more Farzian soldiers. It would rob them of the chance to pull their punches and fake a predetermined outcome. Sensing that things were heading in a direction I hadn’t accounted for, I felt a shiver down my spine.

That was when Reggie said, “Say, Kiara. If all he planned to do was surrender, he could easily do that behind closed doors. He could feign defeat any time he wanted. Didn’t that ever occur to you?”

He was right, and I *had* thought as much back when Gina told me the full

story. I'd bought the idea that he had to fight against Farzia to avoid arousing suspicion from Llewyn. Still, considering that he'd conquered Trisphede and crossed swords with Farzia once already, he ought to have pulled his weight by now. I didn't really understand politics, so I'd just chalked that up to some unspoken rule he had to abide by.

"Frankly speaking, given that they invaded Trisphede and killed the lord of the land, we would have had to extort quite a bit from Salekhard upon their surrender. To do otherwise would set a bad precedent, after all," Reggie declared. "We can't simply let them off the hook. Surely you understand that."

"But if the king responsible for the invasion were to die, it would be difficult to take his successor to task for his misdeeds. Painting him as the villain who single-handedly threw the nation into turmoil allows Salekhard an excuse for their defeat, too. He whose lineage was the root of all this trouble will be estranged from his homeland. Being the practical man that he is, he's never once hoped for a different outcome. He even said that this would be a fitting place for him to die."

"He did?"

Why is he so set on dying? I thought, when something suddenly occurred to me.

"Wait a second, Reggie. You talked to Isaac?" I asked, noticing that his phrasing implied that he'd spoken to the man himself.

Reggie nodded. "And by the end of our discussion, I realized how difficult it would be to dissuade him. I decided that, if nothing else, I could at least slay him by my own hand. So... what's your plan now, Kiara?"

After dropping that one last hint, he galloped off into the distance. I was too stunned to stop him.

Cain stepped in to explain, "His Highness knew beforehand that the king of Salekhard would seek leniency for his country in exchange for his own life. He met with the man the other day to confirm his position, and found that he was firm in his decision."

When I glanced back over my shoulder, I locked eyes with Cain, who was

staring down at me with a tranquil expression.

“How did Reggie know that? Why did he decide to meet with him?”

It would’ve been one thing if he’d been forced to negotiate with an enemy, but given that Salekhard was going to be the one surrendering, Farzia had them at an advantage. There shouldn’t have been any need to find a compromise.

“We heard about the king’s plans to die from Gina. Considering your relationship with him, she was worried you might be upset when the time came, so she came to talk to us about it.”

I see. So Gina knew about this from the start.

It must have been hard on her, knowing that her childhood friend was going to die and not being able to do a thing about it. If it were me, I wouldn’t have been able to bear it.

“I’m the one who heard it straight from her mouth. She never managed to talk the king out of it herself... and so she found herself wishing that you might be able to *make* him stop. That said, we had no idea how the battle against Lord Credias was going to turn out. Being forced to deal with Salekhard on top of that could have put too much pressure on you. That is why Gina neglected to mention it to you, and why His Highness and I likewise chose to keep mum on the matter. Instead, His Highness opted to negotiate with the man directly.”

“Reggie tried to talk him out of it?”

If Reggie went to meet with Isaac, he’d probably had to venture pretty close to enemy territory. He’d likely had to keep the number of bodyguards he brought to a minimum, too, to make sure no one spotted him there. Had he really gone to such lengths just to dissuade Isaac—the same man who had nearly murdered Cain—from his plan?

Cain flashed me a faint, rueful smile. “He did it for you. He knew how sad you were going to be. Considering how much you hate killing your enemies, there was no telling how shaken you’d be by the death of someone closer.”

I couldn’t believe how far Reggie had gone just to look out for me. The guilt was crushing.

“I broke my promise to you and refrained from saying anything because I thought it might hamper your ability to fight. You already had your hands full dealing with the viscount, didn’t you?”

I thought back to the conversation Cain and Reggie had had just before the fight against Lord Credias. *So that’s what they were talking about*, I realized.

If everything went well, they would tell me the truth. On the other hand, if I had exhausted myself and collapsed on the spot, I wouldn’t have found out until after Isaac was dead.

I chewed on my lip. I knew that Isaac was doing all this because he wanted to protect both his country and his brother, who would become its next king. I wasn’t sure whether I had any right to get in his way.

It was right then that I caught sight of Gina and Girsch, who had withdrawn to the rear alongside their frostfoxes. Gina was watching Reggie and his knights gallop away, her mouth drawn into a thin line as she did her utmost to keep herself from crying. Once I saw that, I knew exactly what I had to do.

In the heat of the moment, I hopped down from my horse.

“Miss Kiara?!” Cain cried out.

“Sorry! Coming through!” I shouted as I made a beeline for Gina.

“Kiara?!” she exclaimed.

“You came over here all by yourself?” Girsch asked, equally shocked.

“Let’s go, Gina!” was my only response as I grabbed her by the wrist.

She seemed bewildered by this turn of events. “Go where?”

“We’re going to stop Isaac!”

Gina let out a gasp, and her expression quickly shifted to something more contrite. “You heard?”

“Yeah, just now. But I refuse to accept it. You aren’t okay with it either, are you? Let’s go stop him, then. I need your help.”

The moment I asked Gina and Girsch to pitch in, the looks on their faces changed.

“What should we do? Just say the word!”

“If you need my help for something, that must mean my frostfoxes are part of your plan. What do you want me to do?”

I was relieved to see how quickly they had started looking to me for instructions.

“Thanks, you two. If we want to stop Salekhard, first we need to focus on taking out Llewyne’s reinforcements. To that end, I’d like you to lend me the frostfoxes for a bit.”

“The frostfoxes?”

I nodded. “Also, I’ll need you to buy me some time until I’m ready.”

“I’ll ask Lord Alan,” Cain offered, now that he’d finally caught up to me again. “I have a vague idea of what you’re planning to do. I fear it might put too much strain on the both of you, but if you believe you can manage, I’ll let you have at it.”

Cain swiftly took his leave. Meanwhile, I dashed off alongside Gina and Girsch, hoping to drag Reggie back from the Salekhardian ranks he’d headed off into.

“If you need someone to go fetch His Highness, just leave it to me!” As soon as we’d reached the front lines, Girsch called me and Gina to a halt before diving straight into enemy ranks. Swinging about a sword at a furious pace, the mercenary struck down one Salekhardian soldier after the other to carve out a path. It wasn’t long before other Farzian soldiers had begun to flock over, hiding Girsch from sight.

Not too much later, Girsch came running back from the front lines with Reggie and his royal guard in tow.

“Found him!” the mercenary declared, wiping away a few beads of sweat with the refreshed smile of someone who had just finished up a light jog.

All that was only enough to work up a light sweat? Girsch sure is incredible!

Reggie probably figured that I’d come up with some sort of plan, and he looked absolutely delighted by this turn of events. “I heard that you wanted to speak to me?”

“Let’s start by defeating Llewyn’s reinforcements. I think I know a way to lighten the load on us, so let me check something real quick.” I then asked Reynard, “Hey, boy, could you try brushing up against Reggie for me?”

If the frostfoxes could quell the storm of *my* mana, the same ought to apply to Reggie. Inferring what I had in mind, he extended a hand toward Reynard... only for the fox to chomp down on it. Reggie stared down in round-eyed surprise before bursting into a fit of giggles.

“Does that hurt?”

“Not at all. He’s just play-biting. I suppose he’s taken his consumption of me rather literally. But in any case, I more or less understand what you’re getting at.”

From the sound of it, Reggie could feel the heat of his mana draining away. Everything was going according to plan.

“Let’s do this, then!”

“Of course. I’d never refuse a request of yours,” Reggie smoothly replied, flashing me a smile. Just knowing I had his approval was enough to ease my nerves and give me the strength to do my best.

Alright! I psyched myself up. There was one more thing I had left to do if I wanted to stop Salekhard. While Alan’s troops were in “standby” mode, I had to do something to keep casualties on either side to a minimum.

“Can I put you in control of another golem, Master Horace?”

“Heheh! What, you want me to send those kids running around in a panic one more time? Can’t believe all my hard work prowling around in the dead of night storing up mana is going to pay off a *second* time. Why, just the thought of it is enough to lift my spirits! Mmheehee!”

Once I’d gotten his consent, I used a block of copper ore to give him an extra coating and toughen up his defenses, just like I had way back when. Next, I stepped away from our battle lines to go make my Master-Horace-equipped giant golem. Of course, in hopes of giving all those Salekhardians who believed he was a cursed doll a good scare, I formed the golem itself in his image, too.

“Have at it!” I shouted, and Master Horace stomped his way along the edge of the battlefield, heading for the Salekhardian troops.

Amid the subsequent screams of the soldiers, I moved to a spot near the lake with Gina, Girsch, and Reggie. We were already surrounded by knights, but soon after Groul had spoken to the knight commanding the nearby soldiers, we found ourselves even more tightly guarded. Cain joined up with us, bringing a flock of Évrard soldiers along with him. By then, our numbers had reached nearly seventy.

Reggie lifted me up onto his horse. With the way my pulse was going a mile a minute from deploying Master Horace, I was worried about what would have happened if I’d tried to run, so I appreciated having the ride. Then again, the way he wrapped his arms around me from behind just made my heart race for an entirely different reason.

“Hey, Reggie...”

Riding a horse together didn’t require him getting *this* close to me. But no matter how flustered he was making me, I was dismayed to find that I hated the thought of pulling away.

Reggie murmured, “I’ll always want to aid you in doing whatever it is you desire, but keep in mind that he’s a fairly stubborn man himself. I don’t want you to take this too far.”

“Uh, sure? I’m not really planning to get myself killed.”

I wasn’t sure what he was getting at, but I could tell he was worried about me. Not long after, we arrived close enough to get a clear view of the lake.

“We ought to be able to reach from here.”

More accurately, we couldn’t get any closer than this. The Llewynian reinforcements were disembarking not a few hundred paces away, and the Salekhardian soldiers who had spotted us were already moving in to defend them.

Wait, they’re already here?!

“Hold it right there, prince of Farzia!”

A group comprised of nothing but cavalrymen clad in the green capes of Salekhard began charging toward us. Surprisingly, Isaac was there among them. I couldn't say for sure whether their numbers reached the triple digits or not, but either way, they certainly had more knights than we did.

Once we were close enough, I could hear Isaac's voice loud and clear from the vanguard. "You wretched liar! You agreed to settle things one-on-one with me!"

Reggie's reply was nonchalant. "I may have heard out your request, but I never said I'd *do* it."

"You damned pedant!" Isaac screeched, looking just about ready to tear out his hair. I felt oddly sympathetic to his reaction, but nevertheless, I pressed on with what I had to do.

"You know what to do," Reggie offhandedly ordered Groul, who had been tasked with holding Isaac's men at bay.

The ones to step out front and center were Girsch and Gina, who had Lila in tow.

"Stay out of our way! You know full well what the plan is, Lady Ginaida!" a knight shouted as he was brought to a halt by Lila's blizzard.

"Nope, I don't know a thing! I'm just a hired mercenary for Farzia now."

"And I'm just a fruitcake!" Girsch chimed in.

Watching the pair grin from ear to ear and brush off the enraged knight was quite the sight to behold. Anyone who attempted to skirt around them found themselves blocked by the wall Groul, Cain, and the rest of the knights had formed, forcing them into a deadlock.

"Now's the time." Having dismounted the horse along with me, Reggie drew his sword, held it in his left hand, and raised it high toward the sky.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Aim for that big ship in the lake, Reggie. Try to spread the blast out as much as you can. I'm going to give you an extra helping of mana, so it might be a little much to bear."

"That's fine. Whatever it takes to put an end to this battle."

Once Reggie had nodded his consent, I poured my mana inside of him, being a

little more liberal with it than usual. Soon after I felt my hand link up to Reggie's arm, I was struck with a bout of anemia.

While I was doing my best to ride out the dizzy spell, a flash of light flooded my vision. A strip of lightning soared up into the sky in the blink of an eye, and in nearly the same instant, split off in seven different directions and crashed back down toward the lake. As my eyes were once again seared with white, there came a loud clap of thunder I felt all the way down my spine.

I screwed my eyes shut on reflex, but of course, I had to see what had happened for myself. I opened them up to take a look at the lake.

Of the five ships anchored in the lake, two of their bows had been left completely destroyed, smoke billowing into the air. One of the smaller boats caught rushing back to the shore had also been capsized, remnants of the demolished vessel left to float in the water with its former passengers. Perhaps because the lightning had been borne of magic, dregs of the blast lingered in the aftermath, sparks crackling over the surface of the lake.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from all the corpses floating in the water.

A single stroke of lightning had completely wrecked the ship carrying the Llewynian reinforcements, killing a majority of the soldiers in the process. I'd known this was what was going to happen, but my legs trembled beneath me all the same.

The eyes of Isaac and the rest of the Salekhardian soldiers who had witnessed it were glued to the slaughter, stunned. Even the soldiers of Évrard couldn't bring themselves to look away.

Now was our chance.

"Are you alright?" I asked Reggie, whose breath was coming a bit raggedly.

He just smiled back. "Yes, thanks to Sara's help."

Now that he mentioned it, I noticed Sara nibbling on the same hand Reynard had chomped down on earlier. *So both of them would rather take a bite out of his hand than snuggle up to him? What, does he taste that good?*

I took my hand off of Reggie's shoulder to hide the fact that I was getting the

chills. A moment later, Reynard came up by my side. As much as I appreciated him suppressing my fever...

“Uh, Reynard? What happened to the fight?”

When I took a look, I saw that the Salekhardians had lowered their swords, as had Isaac himself. After seeing them draw to a halt, Gina and the Farzian soldiers had likewise paused their attack.

“Llewyne’s reinforcements have been annihilated. They no longer have any hope of turning the tide of this battle. That means *you* have no reason left to fight either, king of Salekhard,” Reggie declared.

Isaac glowered in response. “I wasn’t aware *you* had become a spellcaster as well, prince of Farzia. Were you aiming to hand us a pretext for surrender from the start?”

“I *did* suspect that things might end this way. Why on earth did you believe that I would show you all of my cards, anyway?”

“And here I recall you promising to kill me. Hmph. Fine then. I surrender,” Isaac conceded, heaving a weary sigh, before adding, “I expect you to adhere to our agreement.”

No sooner had he said that than he turned his sword on his own body, aiming to run himself clean through.

Everyone standing witness let out a gasp. Gina rushed to stop him, but she was too late. Girsch, who had been standing nearby, ran over to knock the sword out of his hands, but all that managed to do was shift where the blade made contact. Isaac thrust the sword deep into his own gut. The tip of the blade punctured him all the way through to his back, where it dripped blood over the ground.



“Isaac!” Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself breaking into a run. *Wait. Why would he do that?!*

Reggie had defeated the Llewynian reinforcements. We’d put Salekhard at enough of a disadvantage that it would have been perfectly understandable for them to raise the white flag.

Perhaps the Salekhardian cavalry had seen this coming. Only one of the knights stepped up to catch the king’s crumpling body, lowering him to the ground in his arms. The rest of the men simply dismounted their horses, stowing their swords in their sheaths.

Gina had slumped to the ground in shock. I breezed right past her, rushing over to Isaac’s side.

Nobody tried to hold me back. It was clear now that the curtains had been drawn on this fight. Only Reggie and a handful of soldiers even bothered to follow after me.

One Salekhardian knight sent another cavalryman off with a message—presumably to inform the rest of the army of Salekhard’s surrender, now that Isaac was dead.

Except he wasn’t dead just yet. He relayed something in hushed tones to the knight kneeling by his side. As soon as that man had risen to his feet, Isaac’s eyes flicked over to me. I staggered over, drawn in by his gaze, and kneeled down next to him.

“Why...? Why are you so determined to die?”

“Because that’s what I decided to do. I botched it, though... I meant to take better aim at my vitals, but... well.” Isaac glanced over at Girsch, who was standing a few steps away and watching over us with a rueful expression.

If he had the strength left to talk, he was going to be alright.

“Let me tend to your wounds.” I reached out a hand, ready to cast my magic with or without his approval.

“No thanks,” Isaac replied, grabbing me by the wrist and refusing to let me touch his wound. He had more strength left in him than I would have thought—

more than enough to keep me at bay. “Seeing as that knight of yours I left for dead is back in tip-top shape, I assume you have some sort of ability to that end. I’d prefer you keep your hands off of me. Besides,” he went on, “I think this is the perfect opportunity to teach you the harsh realities of life.”

“Excuse me?”

“The people you failed to save... were always those far removed from your own life, no? So it was always easier to gloss over the death... by covering your eyes.”

“What are you talking about? Just let go of me!”

Isaac’s voice was growing weak, his words dropping off every now and then. Why was he doing this? I had to hurry up and heal him soon, or there would be no saving him.

I desperately wanted someone to come help me out, but none of the Salekhardian knights standing around me so much as moved a muscle. Gina was still on the ground, wailing. Girsch was staring down at Isaac where he lay, lips drawn into a tight line.

“Girsch, please! Come help me!” I begged, but the mercenary only looked back at me with a heartbroken expression.

“Kiara... I *want* to, but if he’s that staunchly against it, I just don’t know if I should. Rather than forcing him to suffer through the rest of his life, it might be kinder to let him do as he wishes.”

Was Girsch telling me to give up now that it was clear Isaac *wanted* to die? My vision blurred as panicked tears welled up in my eyes.

Isaac only teased me in that hoarse voice of his. “Not only am I your enemy, but I personally gave you hell... and you’d still cry for me? Give it a rest. Your prince is going to get jealous enough to come finish me off before I can breathe my last.”

As I wiped my tears on my arm, I shot back, “It’s your fault for feeding me.”

“Hah! So *that* was what did it?” Isaac huffed a tiny laugh, only to wheeze for air in the next moment.

“Besides, whether you’re an enemy or an ally doesn’t make any difference to me. It’s to keep the people I know from dying that I fight... and kill.”

If it weren’t for my past-life memories, Reggie would have died. On the other hand, everything always felt too much like it was happening on the other side of a glass wall for me to feel rage over my loved ones getting killed. The impact of it was too weak. Perhaps it was because part of me believed that these were all just the events of a game, and that when I opened my eyes, I would wake back up in my past-life home.

“You’ve learned by now that this is reality. That’s why it bothers you so much to watch an acquaintance die.”

“Oh, Isaac...”

“If you want to feel something even more real than this... go ask that prince of yours. He’ll teach you everything you want to know and more.” Despite hanging on death’s door, Isaac flashed me a grin.

“Why do you always have to be so nice to me?”

I just barely managed to catch his breathy murmur. “Because I loved you, probably.”

It was a simple, clear-cut answer, and that made it hit all the harder. It was so heart-rending, so painful, that all that spilled from my trembling lips was, “Dummy.”

Isaac looked like he wanted to say something back, but he could only manage to part his lips a fraction. The light in his eyes was starting to fade away—and yet, the strength of his grip alone was the only thing that had yet to give. He took a shuddering breath, turned his head to the side, and spat up blood onto the earth.

“Hurry up and move your hand!” I shouted, but Isaac refused to loosen his grip, dying man though he was. *Someone help!* I frantically thought, looking back over my shoulder.

The one I saw standing there was Reggie.

“Reggie, please!” I pleaded.

The look on his face was conflicted. “We’ve offered him more than enough ways out of his predicament, yet he’s simply brushed our hands away, determined to die. If he’s that set on it, I’d prefer to respect his will. Are you willing to overturn his decision, even if it means going against his own wishes? If so, I’ll help you out. You’re the only one left who can save his life, now that it’s come to this.”

Saving Isaac’s life would mean forcing my own desires onto him. As long as I was willing to rescue him in spite of that, Reggie was offering to help me.

After chewing on my lip for a moment, I said, “Reggie, make a cut across the back of my hand.”

Reggie nodded, then did as I’d asked. I grimaced at the searing pain as his knife sliced through my skin. Too weak to say anything more, Isaac only frowned, looking as though he hadn’t the faintest idea what I was doing.

He didn’t want me doing this. I realized that, but I paid him no mind, allowing my freely flowing blood to drip down over his body.

“Can you make sure no one else can see?”

If I was going to be disregarding Isaac’s own wishes to save him, I wanted to do everything in my power. Hence why I made the request.

Reggie rose to his feet. As the footsteps of soldiers shuffling around reached my ears, I channeled my mana through Isaac’s hand—the one still firmly gripping my wrist—working to heal his injury. For each part of the broken flow of his mana I mended, his face twisted in agony. The pain ought to have been unbearable, yet he still held stubbornly on to consciousness, looking up at me with a fierce glare.

“Damn you... Just let me meet my maker,” he berated me, barely able to squeeze out the words. But it was too late; I refused to back down now.

“Not on your life.”

“You... selfish harpy. Don’t think I’ll forget this.”

Maybe I was doing him an injustice here. Deep down, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had no right resuscitating someone who had no desire to live. The

thought hurt enough that I almost wanted to cry, but since I was the one being selfish here, I held it in.

“You’re not allowed to die before I’ve given you a piece of my mind, mister. And I’m going to work you so hard you’re going to wish you *were* dead, so you’d better get ready for what’s coming,” I retorted, putting on a tough act to steel my resolve.

I didn’t need him to be grateful; I just wanted him to live. Still, it was hard to know how livid he was with me—and that only enhanced the reality of the situation. I just *knew* that I was bending someone’s life in a direction they didn’t want.

At the same time, that gave me a firm sense of what exactly I was doing. I’d made a decision for myself, and I was going to see it through.

Before long, Isaac passed out, unable to bear the pain any longer. A few seconds later, I managed to close up the wound just enough to keep him alive.

Now that the strength had left Isaac’s body and I could move my hand freely again, I reached out to touch his neck. I couldn’t tell how his pulse was doing. My own heart was beating so fast that I could hear it drumming in my ears, and my fingertips felt like they might as well be an extension of it.

“Reggie... Can you check on him for me?” I asked, strapped for breath. At some point, Cain had come up by my side, and he checked on Isaac’s pulse and breathing for me.

“Don’t worry; he’s alive.”

What a relief.

What struck me in that moment was lethargy, chills, and drowsiness, all bundled up with the strong desire to break down sobbing. By the time I realized what was happening, I was already fading out of consciousness.

“Bring him back to our camp, please. And go find Master Horace while you’re at it.” It was all I could manage just to ask that of Cain.

“Are you happy now, Kiara?” a certain someone asked gently, wrapping his arms around me from behind. I couldn’t bring myself to struggle against his

embrace.

“Reggie...”

Just as soon as I’d grasped his fingers in mine, I lost consciousness, feeling myself hurtle down into a deep, dark abyss.

Interlude: Never Let You Go

Gina was already waiting in the room, it seemed. She beckoned Reggie in after cracking open the door, and he stepped inside.

Curled up under the blankets of the bed was the small figure of a girl, her soft, chestnut hair spread out over the bedding. Her profile stood out against the light of the distant lamp, her skin still a paler hue than it ought to have been.

Kiara stayed completely still, breathing rhythmically in her sleep. She had been out cold for two days now.

“She isn’t crying today, I see,” Reggie murmured.

Gina nodded. “I’ve been keeping watch over her the whole time. She’s doing fine.”

Ever since she had fainted on the battlefield, she would cry in her sleep with alarming frequency.

It wasn’t like that at first, Reggie reflected.

It had all started after Kiara finished healing Isaac. She’d held on tight to Reggie’s fingers, refusing to let him go; thus, he had left Alan to handle the aftermath and carried her away to a house they’d requisitioned just before the battle.

Reggie had then left Kiara in the care of Gina, who had tagged along with the freshly retrieved Horace in hand. Judging that he’d reached his limit himself, he’d taken a seat on the floor next to her bed and fallen fast asleep. He recalled that, at the time, she had managed just fine even after he let go of her hand.

It had been the middle of the night when Reggie finally woke up. After checking to make sure Kiara was sleeping soundly, he had left the room to find out what had happened in the wake of the battle. Once he’d spoken to Alan, who had forgone sleep and taken care of most matters of import, he had procured himself a change of clothes and returned to check on her one more time... only to find her crying.

She was whining in her sleep like a fussy child, tears occasionally seeping from her eyes and rolling down her cheeks. Gina, who had been staying by her side all this time, was at a loss for what to do. She'd been standing watch in shifts with the lady of the house, and according to her, Kiara had ended up like this shortly after he left. And yet, she still hadn't shown any signs of stirring.

"Given how much magic she used, she'll probably be out for another day yet," Horace said, rapping his tiny hand against the soundly sleeping girl's head.

That was when Reggie had noticed Kiara's fingers twitching as if they were grasping for something. No sooner had he brushed his fingers against hers on a whim than she grabbed on tightly to his hand—just like she had right before she passed out.

The crying stopped.

Reggie couldn't help feeling a little pleased. A mysterious burst of pride welled up within him, but he set that aside to glance over at Gina.

"Is she lonely, you think?"

"Maybe... But you can't just stay like this indefinitely, can you?"

"Perhaps not. Let me test a little something, then."

He lifted Horace up and nestled him in her arms like a teddy bear. Now that she had been forced to let go of Reggie's hand, Kiara furrowed her brow with a moan, started sniffing all over again... and for reasons unknown, sank her teeth right into Horace.

"Wha—are you trying to eat me alive?!"

There came the sound of gnawing. Reggie did his best to stifle a laugh at the comical scene, while Gina rushed to snatch Horace out of his predicament.

"This is no time to be laughing, Your Grace! If she bites down on him too hard, her teeth might crack!"

"Apologies. I didn't see that one coming, so I just couldn't help myself."

"Tch. I wish she'd taken a bite out of *you* instead. She didn't take a chunk out of me, did she?" Horace asked, a tinge of exhaustion in his voice.

Gina examined the top of his head. “Nope. You’re fine, Sir Horace.”

Considering that he was sturdy enough to have fallen from a second-or third-story window and come out of it unscathed, according to Kiara, there was no chance he could have been whittled down by such a delicate girl’s teeth.

“Still, if even Sir Horace can’t stop her from crying, it must be fairly dire.”

“If she’s crying the whole time she’s asleep, she’s not really getting proper rest.” After heaving a sigh, Gina went on, “Since we don’t have many other options, I think it’d be best if you stayed with her. We can take shifts, if that suits you better.”

Gina proposed turning Reggie into the equivalent of a stuffed animal to pacify a crying child. There was just one problem with that plan. Reggie was—as anyone could tell you—not only a living, breathing human being, but a male one at that.

“I don’t mind, but are you sure this is appropriate?” he asked, several different implications to his question.

Gina just grinned. “Sure; I’ll leave this to you guys. Master Horace will be here with you and all, so it’s not like you’ll have a chance to try anything naughty.”

“Listen here, you dogkeeper! I’ll have you know that this prince doesn’t give a damn if I’m watching!”

“It’ll be fine. His Highness would never do anything to make Kiara cry,” Gina responded, then gave Kiara a pat on the head. “So you finally figured out who you really love, hm?”

Reggie found it a touch reassuring to hear her come out and say it.

“Look after her until morning, okay? I’ll make sure everyone else knows what you’re up to.”

With one last bow, Gina promptly took her leave. Despite his lingering hesitance, now that she was gone, Reggie had no choice but to go along with her plan. Having made up his mind to stay, he took off his jacket and hung it over a nearby chair. Just to be on the safe side, he likewise removed the belt and sword he always walked around with.

“Whoaaa nelly, little prince! Let’s not rush into things here!”

Horace flapped his arms with a *clack-clack-clack*, alarmed by this turn of events. Reggie just barely kept himself from cracking up at the sight of it, instead sitting down on the bed with an air of nonchalance. “My, you seem so concerned, Sir Horace. Based on what I’ve heard, you’ve had your fair share of experience yourself. What has you so panicked?”

“Wha...?!”

Horace quite literally sprang into the air. Reggie was impressed to see that a doll had such powerful legs on him.

“What’s that got to do with it?! This is a matter of my disciple’s safety!”

“Haha. You’re usually so good at keeping your cool, yet you fall apart when your disciple here enters the picture.”

“Ugh...”

Reggie hated to leave Kiara crying, so he entwined his hand with hers, poking fun at Horace all the while. To his great amusement, the doll fell dead silent. Being made of clay and all, the look on his face didn’t actually change, but he somehow gave the impression of a furrowed brow.

As Horace lapsed into silence, he gazed at the miraculously pacified Kiara for a few moments. Eventually, he muttered, “Just between you and me, this is the first time a kid like her has ever taken such a liking to me.”

According to Kiara, Horace had been a “ghastly old geezer” in life, so it was indeed hard to imagine that he would be popular with children. Reggie suspected that having a lonely girl like Kiara grow so attached to him had slowly but surely melted the old man’s heart.

“I wouldn’t do anything to make an enemy of my own father-in-law—and certainly not right in front of his very eyes. I only took off my sword because I wouldn’t be able to sleep while wearing it.”

“Huh?! ”

“If it’s still too much for you to handle, just stay under here.”

“Ggh!”

Reggie crammed Horace underneath a pillow. Though he kicked up a bit of a fuss at first, it wasn't long before he stopped struggling. That was probably his idea of a compromise. He *did* have a certain amount of trust in Reggie, too.

Such a worrywart, Reggie thought with a soft laugh.

Frankly speaking, Reggie was hardly in peak condition himself. A fever similar to what he'd felt after getting shot with that assassin's arrow was still smoldering throughout his body. The moment he closed his eyes, he was likely to drift off into a deep sleep.

Before he could let that happen, Reggie reached out to wipe the tears from Kiara's face. Her grasp on his hand as firm as ever, she remained dead to the world.

Kiara had never objected when he kissed her. Two times it had happened now, and she had never once tried to dodge him. What's more, if she actively wanted him to stay by her side, the notion that she felt something for him was clearly no delusion of his. Even Gina had come to the same conclusion.

Still, Kiara had yet to give him an answer. There was something she was having trouble working past. She was the sort of person who couldn't take action unless she'd come to terms with her decision, so that was all it would take to make her falter.

For his part, Reggie planned to wait for however long it took.

"It'd be nice if she came to a decision sooner rather than later, however. Until then, I'll just have to make do with this."

After pressing a kiss to the trails of her tears, he laid down next to Kiara and wrapped his arms around her. Though it was probably just a subconscious gesture, Kiara responded by nestling closer. For a fleeting moment, the sweetness of her fragrance nearly left him woozy.

He'd figured he might have trouble falling asleep like this, but he was so exhausted from casting his magic that he drifted off in no time.

After two more days had passed in that manner, Kiara finally began to mumble in her sleep. Based on what he heard her say, she was dreaming of a scenario where Reggie had been killed in Évrard.

Not only had Dream-Reggie given her a ring as a present, but he owned a matching one himself, so it was easy to tell how attached they were to one another. Horrifyingly enough, the queen had chopped the fourth finger off of Reggie's corpse, ring and all, and presented that to Kiara. If *that* was the dream she was having, it suddenly made sense why she kept trying to feel around for Reggie's fingers.

In fact, it was almost cute how she kept tracing over his finger in her sleep, then looking relieved by what she found there. It made it so oh-so-tempting to start teasing her.

That said, there was something that struck him as odd about Kiara's memories. When they had first met, she had described it as the story of a time she had lived in an entirely different world, and she hadn't seemed to be keeping any hidden secrets about it.

It was ever since she had become a spellcaster that Kiara had started remembering these "what-if" scenarios.



"Going to stay with Kiara today?" Gina asked with a sly grin on the day Kiara finally regained consciousness.

Reggie shook his head. "If I hung around while she was awake, I'd be tempted to wheedle my way into bed with her, so I'll refrain."

With that, Reggie briskly headed back to his own quarters.

His return seemed to catch Groul off guard. "Oh! Erm, will you be sleeping in your own bed today?"

Reggie had to wonder about his reaction. Had Groul assumed he would be sharing a bed with Kiara indefinitely? The thought of it was so amusing that the prince felt compelled to have a little fun at his knight's expense. "Yes, I will. Kiara seems to have gotten a hold of herself again. For my own part, I find being around her so relaxing that I can't help myself from... fooling around, if you will. Best to stay away."

Fooling around by poking her cheeks, to be precise.

“Hold on, Your Grace... Have you already made a move on her?!” Groul’s eyes went wide as saucers.

Stifling a laugh, Reggie went on, “When a girl would let you do anything to her, conversely, it makes it harder to try anything at all.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it.” Groul exhaled a genuine sigh of relief.

Of course, to be so openly suspected of taking advantage of Kiara was starting to grate on Reggie’s nerves. He sniped back, “My, do you have so little faith in me when it comes to these matters? I don’t recall doing anything so untoward as to warrant that reaction.”

“Most certainly not! It’s simply that—pardon me for saying so, but you do seem rather *attached* to her.”

“You’re not wrong there,” Reggie bluntly replied, sitting himself down in a chair with a soft laugh. “But I’m not interested in deflowering her just yet. The time isn’t right.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I die, I will have taken her chastity and left her nothing to show for it. Of course, Wentworth doesn’t seem like the type to care about that... but there’s no guarantee that *he’ll* come out of this alive, either. I’d prefer to at least wait until the war is over.”

There was no telling when and how he might fall on the battlefield. As the time he’d been shot back in Évrard had shown, he couldn’t stay perfectly vigilant 24/7. If he set that aside and pushed things forward purely for his own satisfaction, Kiara would be the one to suffer for it later.

Groul looked satisfied with his answer.

Reggie then declared that he was going to turn in for the evening, requesting that Groul leave the room and encouraging the knight to get some rest himself.

Once he was gone, Reggie finished his previous thought by murmuring, “Or until she gives me her answer, I suppose.”

He had it in him to keep on waiting until then. After all, he knew he had already won her heart.

Chapter 7: The Post-Battle Agenda

In my sleep, I traced over each one of his fingers with my own, counting them off. The moment I'd confirmed that all five digits were still firmly attached to his hand, a wave of relief washed over me. It was reassuring to know that the severed, ring-bearing finger I'd seen of his had only been a dream.

I heard him murmur, "Don't worry. I'm right here," to which I responded by clamping both of my hands around his, squeezing it tight.



“Évrard was invaded, and not long after, someone showed me your severed finger. All I could recognize of it was your ring. The next thing I heard was that you were dead, so I just...”

He assured me that nothing of the sort had happened. When he remarked on how worried I seemed, I told him how fraught and distressing it had been. The warmth of his hand made me realize how cold I was, and I snuggled up against the whole length of his arm. With a small laugh, he wrapped me up in his embrace.

Reggie was warm and breathing. Of course he couldn't have died. When I said that out loud, halfway to tears, he asked me if those dreams were why I hated the idea of my loved ones dying so much. I nodded in response. I never wanted to be left behind again.

“You didn't have to run off to kill Lord Credias. If it was going to cost you your life, I would have rather died alongside you.”

When I blurted out the thought that had been haunting me for ages now, he once again assured me that it was just a dream. “We took him down together. Don't you remember?”

That didn't sound right to me, but at the very least, it reassured me that Reggie no longer had a reason to throw himself into danger. So I said, “Don't leave me behind. Don't run off on your own.”

What I heard was, “I don't plan on ever letting you go, whether you like it or not. Sure you can handle that?”

Why on earth would I ever have a problem with that? Finally confident that he wasn't going to leave me all alone, I clung to him even harder.

“Alright, that's enough. Seducing you while you're still half asleep is a coward's move. Time to wake up, Kiara.”

“Hm?”

He shook me by the shoulders, snapping me out of my warm fuzzies.

“Come now, while I still have my wits about me.”

He gave me an even harder shake, and I felt myself slowly fading back into

consciousness. *Wait, was I asleep?*

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was Reggie's face, no more than ten centimeters away from my own. His beautiful, silver eyelashes were long enough to inspire envy, and the porcelain white skin of his face looked perfectly smooth, save for one almost-faded cut across his cheek.

When I instinctively reached out to touch it, I was astonished to find myself wrapped up in Reggie's arms.

Hold on, is this a bed? Why are the two of us lying atop the nice, white sheets of a fully made bed?!

Once the wheels in my head started turning, I opened my mouth to shriek. Reggie wasted no time shoving my face into his shoulder to shut me up.

"If you scream, people are going to assume I'm up to no good and come flooding in to check on us. Is that what you want?"

"What are you talking about? Huh? What's all this?"

Had I been sleeping next to Reggie all this time? As much as I wanted to ask, I stumbled over my words, too embarrassed to come out with the question.

While I desperately tried to come up with a way to play this off, my eyes darted this way and that, skimming over wooden beams, a ceiling, and plaster walls. We were obviously staying in some sort of building rather than camping outdoors. Each of us was fully clothed, too, and when I stopped to take a closer look, I noticed that I was wrapped up in my own private blanket cocoon.

In the meantime, Reggie took a stab at what I was trying to ask. "You passed out soon after healing the king of Salekhard."

"Yeah, I remember *that* part."

"I *had* asked Gina and Lady Emmeline to look after you, at the start, but then you grabbed hold of my fingers and refused to let go. It would have been quite the challenge to tear myself away from you, not to mention that Sir Horace told me I ought to get some rest after all that magic I'd used. And that's how we ended up here."

One of the last things I could recall was, in fact, grabbing hold of Reggie's

hand. Who could have guessed that would make it so hard for him to go anywhere?

“Uh... Sorry.”

Ashamed and self-conscious, I made to tear myself away from Reggie, but he refused to loosen his hold on me.

“No need to apologize. You *have* let go of my hand quite a few times in-between. It’s been two whole days, after all.”

“Two days?!”

I was appalled. Not only had I conked out for multiple days, but I’d inconvenienced Reggie all the while.

“Err, did *you* spend all that time sleeping, too?”

“A few hours of rest was enough for me. All I had to do was channel mana through my body, so I got off lighter than you, it seems. But every time I came to check on you, you would grab me by the hand and pull me close, so I took turns with Gina staying by your side.”

Reggie lifted up the hand of mine he was holding. While I sat there staring dumbly, wondering what he was about to do, he placed a kiss on my fingers.

“Oh...”

I gasped at the gentle tickle of his lips, which drew another giggle from Reggie.

“Since I couldn’t very well leave your side, and you wanted me there so badly... I seem to have lost my sense of restraint.”

“*Restraint*?! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Of course, I did have some inkling of what he was talking about. Back when I lived in Japan, I’d had plenty of exposure to *that* sort of thing through television, the internet, and the like. So many different scenarios popped into my head that it threw me into a tizzy, and Reggie smiled warmly at the sight of it.

“I won’t try anything until you give me your answer. The last thing I’d want is

to fall out of your favor.”

I still couldn't bring myself to give him a straight-up answer as to whether I loved him back or not. There was a part of me that was afraid to say it, which I blamed on the dream I'd just had—my memories of the life I'd once experienced as Kiara Credias.

That Kiara had been taken as Lord Credias' wife and had suffered endless abuse at her husband's hands. Perhaps due to how short their time together had been, she had never been able to bring herself to trust Reggie completely. In spite of how dearly he cherished her, she had resigned herself to the fact that he would never be able to free her. Her despair had driven Reggie to plot Lord Credias' assassination, but unfortunately, he'd died a victim of the Llewynian invasion before he could put his plan into action.

Further convinced that no salvation awaited her, Kiara had refused to let Cain, who had heard about her from Reggie, talk her down. In the end, she had chosen to die at Alan's hands.

Still, could someone really live out their whole life and then be reincarnated back into the past? That aspect of the timeline still gave me pause, but considering I definitely *had* been reborn in a parallel dimension, I just had to assume that anything was possible.

Either way, whatever joy I might have felt was tainted by the knowledge that Kiara Mark I's life had hit rock bottom the moment she found happiness.

As I fell deeper and deeper into thought, Reggie murmured, “By the way, what *was* your fixation with my finger? You kept mumbling about it in your sleep.” A captivating smile rose to his face. “I seem to recall you asking me not to leave you, too.”

I just about fainted from embarrassment.

No matter HOW groggy I was, I can't believe I just let my thoughts slip like that! Ahhhh!

I was so humiliated that I feigned amnesia. “What? Did I really say that?”

“You sure did. And you even traced over one of my fingers... just like this.”

“Wha...? Hey! Cut that out, Reggie!”

That tickles! Okay, I definitely do remember doing that!

“Oh, so *you’re* allowed to do it, but I’m not?”

It was hard to come up with a retort for that one. Just as I felt ready to burst into tears, a savior appeared.

“Oh dear. Am I interrupting something?” Gina had opened the wooden door a crack to peek in at us, her mahogany hair tied high in a ponytail and her gray-blue eyes wide and round.

“Gi—urp.”

I rushed to sit up. Reggie didn’t move to stop me this time, but a dizzy spell sent me flopping back down onto the bed.

“Ugh... I’m gonna be sick.”

“Don’t push yourself,” Reggie calmly rebuked me as he slid off the bed and got to his feet. *Best me, will you? And it’s your fault I had to rush to get up in the first place!*

Worse yet, *he* didn’t look the least bit flustered. How come?

“Still feeling under the weather, Kiara?” Gina asked. “Do you want some water?”

“Yes, please,” I responded. Gina took a jug of water from a nearby table and poured it into a cup for me. Reggie helped prop me up into a sitting position.

After everything that had happened only moments ago, feeling his hand on my back was enough to give me goosebumps, but a gulp of water was all it took to clear my head.

“Have you caught her up on what’s happened, Your Grace?” Gina asked Reggie.

“Not yet,” he replied. “Just the part where she’s been asleep for two days.”

“Let’s start with the king of Salekhard, then.” Gina turned to face me once more. “Sorry to get right down to business like this, but you gave the order to take Isaac back to the Farzian army, right? I’d like to know what you plan to do

with him next. We started getting pesky inquiries about whether he's supposed to be a hostage or what condition he's in, so His Highness made the call to let a single lord-in-waiting from Salekhard stick by him, but that's where we're at."

Oh, right. I asked them to bring Isaac along because I had an idea for what to do with him.

"I'd like to hear what you're planning, as well. It involves the negotiations between Salekhard and Farzia, I assume."

Leave it to Reggie to figure out exactly what I had in mind.

I nodded, then proceeded to tell Gina and Reggie my idea. Once he'd heard me out, Reggie mulled it over for a bit before responding, "That's fine by me. I'll need to confer with Alan and the rest of the generals, however, so hold off on doing anything for now."

He evidently intended to hold that discussion ASAP, seeing as he then turned to take his leave. I still had one more request to make, however, so I stopped him before he could go.

"I'd like to be the one to explain my idea to Isaac. Would it be okay for me to go see him?"

"As long as you're just going to talk to him, I don't see why not. Rather, there's little point to having that conversation without you and Sir Horace present." Reggie gave his ready consent, a smile on his face.

Soon after he'd left the room, I made my second attempt to get up.

"By the way, Kiara," Gina said with a grin, "I see you've decided who your number one is."

"M-My number what?!"

"You realized you're in love with His Highness, didn't you?"

Gina's straight ball of a question reduced me to incoherent babbling. "Uhh... Err... Whyever do you ask?"

"I mean, look how close he got to you, and you never even tried to escape! If that were Sir Cain, I bet you wouldn't have taken it lying down."

Ugh... I can't argue with that. It's true that if it were anyone else, I probably would have humiliated myself tumbling out of bed to get away.

When she noticed how I was clamming up, Gina's grin grew wider. "Something tells me you *wanted* to stay like that. What do you think, Sir Horace?"

"No question there. This disciple of mine was still dreaming, and meanwhile, that prince never gives the slightest damn about who's watching."

"Eek! Master Horace?!"

I hadn't noticed him there because he hadn't spoken up until now, but Master Horace crawled out from underneath a pillow right on cue. *Why was he hiding down there?! And considering he's got a face made of clay, how does he manage to look like he's grinning just as hard as Gina?!*

"It takes more than just an audience to embarrass His Highness. One of these days he's going to take it too far right where everyone is watching, just you wait."

"I doubt he even has a concept of 'taking it too far.' Heeheehee!"

"Yeah, I know what you mean. He seems like the type to forget about anyone and everyone else in the vicinity."

That was a pretty merciless characterization of him, but I couldn't exactly refute it. Back when Gina was watching us, he'd been pretty nonchalant about hitting on me. Or maybe casual was the word for it.

"He *did* keep his wits about him, at least. Eeeheehee! Things started out with the two of them just conking out together, anyway."

Conking out? Well, that made sense. Given that Reggie had used more magic than he ever had during his practice, he *had* told me he'd passed out from exhaustion. That must have been what Master Horace was referring to.

"Um, Master Horace... Does Reggie seem like he's going to be alright?"

We both knew that we were going to end up using a lot of magic in that battle. Still, I hadn't expected that Reggie would cast so many spells he'd need to rely on the frostfoxes' support. In the end, he'd even had to draw his sword

and fight. I'd wanted to ask Master Horace how Reggie was holding up in his eyes.

"Well, all *he* had to do was let the mana flow through him. Usually he'd feel a bit of the burn after the fact, but it looks like those mutts gnawed all the side effects out of him."

"They're foxes, Master Horace."

Grateful for the change in topic and relieved to hear that Reggie was doing okay, I got out of bed. As long as I didn't spring straight onto my feet, it seemed I didn't have to worry about getting dizzy again. *Whew.*

Since I'd spent all that time sleeping, I was still in my pajamas. It was time to get changed.

That was when Gina cut in, "By the way, I've been meaning to thank you. It means a lot to me that you saved Isaac." She clasped both of my hands in hers, then thunked her forehead against them in a deep bow.

Her words flustered me. "You don't have to thank me! I was just doing what I wanted!"

"You're the only one who could have stopped him, though. He never listened to me or Girsch, and I was afraid he might take his own life even if the tide of the war changed."

Her fears had been realized when Isaac impaled himself on his sword, apparently. According to her, Isaac was the type of person to pull whatever crazy stunt it took just to get his way.

"To stop him, we either had to drive him into an inescapable corner or bring him back from the brink of death. That's why I hated the thought of asking you for help; I knew it would leave you laid up like this."

"Honestly, I didn't think Isaac was going to go that far."

At the time, I'd had no idea what could have been running through his head; I'd been far too disoriented for that, and all I could think about was how to stop him. Now that I could afford to look back on the events more calmly, I felt like I could understand his actions a little bit better.

Isaac had tried to protect what was most important to him by bringing about his own ruin. That included his brother and his country. Gina and Girsch, too. He wanted to bear the regrets of his father—who never managed to find a better way out of their predicament than suicide—as well as the grudges of Salekhard’s soldiers—who, even if it was to keep their country from being hijacked, had been dragged into a war they were destined to lose—and take those with him to his grave. Thus, if no one else was willing to kill him, he had believed he had to carry out the deed himself.

It was because he already planned to carry so many people’s burdens with him to the afterlife that he tried to take on *my* burdens while he was at it, too. I understood the logic behind it, but that didn’t make me hate the idea of it any less. Given my own personal philosophies, I could never comprehend why he would actively choose death.

“Don’t worry about it, Gina. It was what I wanted to do. It really hurts to watch someone I know die, so at the end of the day, I would have insisted on healing Isaac no matter who asked me to.”

Gina flashed me a conflicted smile. “You know, the first time I saw you get so broken up over people dying in battle, I was worried that one day, your heart was going to break under all that weight. But it’s all because you’re that kind of person that Isaac lived to see today. It makes me think what a happy coincidence this all was.”

“A happy coincidence?”

“Maybe I should just call it ‘destiny.’ It’s all because his fate took him this far that he managed to meet you.” When Gina finally let go of my hands, she was wearing a truly heartened look on her face.

“By the way, are you and Girsch planning to go home to Salekhard now?”

Gina shook her head. “Honestly, that was never really part of my plans.”

“But what about Isaac’s brother?”

Here I’d thought the two of them were supposed to get married. Based on what I’d heard, that had been part of Isaac’s plan.

“It’s too late for us now. Once my engagement to Isaac was called off, I

ditched my family. I'm no daughter of nobility anymore; I'm just a common mercenary. If Yefrem is going to become king now, that's even more reason I can't marry him. Even if the soldiers of our army went along with it, the aristocracy would never accept our union."

I'd wondered about that, too. Did a girl who hadn't been born into nobility have any hope of marrying a king?

"Oh, but what if you were adopted into a noble family?"

"I think that's what Isaac was making arrangements for. I wonder if he's already finished negotiations with my father's house... Either way, my temperament just isn't suited to living the noble life. And standing by the *king's* side? Forget it. Even if I tried sticking it out for love, we'd just be headed for disaster somewhere down the line."

There was a huge disparity between the lifestyle of a noble and that of a commoner. The standards for what they could and couldn't do were completely different. Thus, it was only natural for her to get cold feet, worried about whether or not she could live like that.

"And I'd *hate* to become his concubine as an alternative to marrying him. I'd rather just go our separate ways and look back fondly on the good times we had together. Isaac was crazy to think things would magically work out thanks to a few feats of war. It's nowhere near the same thing as a man racking up achievements and climbing the social ladder."

There, Gina laughed. "So if His Highness is willing to keep me under his employ, I'd like to stick with you guys until we've seen this war through. After that, I'll just go home to our mercenary village."

I was relieved to find out that Gina wouldn't be leaving us just yet. Still, it hurt to hear that she was planning to give up on the man she loved.

All the more reason I had to make Isaac see things my way.



It was some time later when Reggie finished up the discussion with his generals. I managed to get a bite to eat during that time, so I was lucky it had taken so long. With food now in my stomach, I was a lot steadier on my feet

than when I'd first woken up.

I paid a visit to Isaac's room with Reggie, Alan, and Cain. Gina and Girsch came along to watch over the proceedings.

When we stepped inside the room, we found Isaac lying down for a rest. Perhaps because I'd spent too much of my magic beforehand, I hadn't managed to seal up all of his wounds. Thus, while he still held on to consciousness, he had become a long-term resident of his bed.

He was probably running a fever from all his injuries. His face was flushed, and he was looking more haggard than usual. Still, I was relieved to see him alive and kicking. This was the man who had stubbornly insisted on suicide even after we'd given him the perfect opportunity to surrender; there was a decent chance that as soon as he was even slightly capable of movement, he would take a second shot when no one was looking.

Mikhail sat beside his bed, the look on his face speaking to his exhaustion. When he saw me, he offered a rueful smile. *He* certainly didn't seem to mind that I'd kept his king alive. The two of them had seemed rather close, after all; he'd probably never wanted Isaac to die in the first place.

But Isaac, the one I had actually thwarted, was a different matter.

"You should have minded your own damn business."

He was glaring at me with those gray eyes of his. I could tell how much displeasure simmered in his gaze, and it was all I could do to stop myself from flinching. But if I let myself get pushed around by an invalid, there was no way I was going to get him to accept my proposal.

Reggie and company must have believed I could get the job done all on my own; they said nothing and simply watched me do my thing.

To prove myself worthy of their trust, I stood tall and shot back, "It *was* my business. I know what your end goal is. But I came up with a way to make you more useful to us alive than dead."

Isaac scowled. "You mean you came up with an excuse to keep me from dying?"

“Don’t worry; I know you’re going to hate it. When everyone else hears it, I’m sure they’ll think it’s the perfect way for Salekhard to pay off its debts, too.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Forced labor.”

“Excuse me?” Isaac blinked.

“From here on out, our plan is to capture Kilrea and retake the royal domain north of Patriciél. We want you to be our outrider.”

His expression gradually shifted from surprise to hesitation. “So you want me to pay off our war debt by fighting for your cause?”

“With favorable enough results, you ought to be able to reduce the reparations you’ll have to pay,” Reggie chimed in from beside me, a grin on his face. “Though it may have been a joint effort with Llewyne, you still invaded Trisphede and murdered the family of its count. Frankly speaking, I doubt money alone would be a sufficient means for you to make amends. I must confess that I *did* think your death would be a solid way to appease the citizens of Farzia.

“However, it never would have been possible for you to take on the brunt of the responsibility, die, and simply gift the next king an untarnished Salekhard. The people of Trisphede hate your country more than ever, meaning you’ll lose the most convenient trade route to Farzia.”

The people of Trisphede would despise Salekhardian merchants, no doubt. The same could be said of Évrard. Even if Lord Évrard and Alan made the more pragmatic call, the feelings of their citizens wouldn’t just vanish with a single decree.

Of course, I hadn’t actually thought everything out that far, and I’d needed Reggie to explain it all to me. That part was a secret, though. For the moment, I was putting on my best know-it-all act.

“If the journey becomes too perilous, that route will be shut down. Once it’s gone, your merchants will flock to the roads that are still easy enough to traverse, no?”

In other words, traffic would flow toward Llewyrne. Reggie was implying that his whole reason for fighting in the war would be rendered meaningless. This probably wasn't the first time this had occurred to Isaac; his expression turned sour when it was pointed out to him.

"I expected to run into that problem eventually, yes. I was in the midst of thinking up a way to combat the issue."

"And I'm offering you a way to alleviate that post-war hardship right now." A breezy smile rose to Reggie's face. "I think Kiara's proposal is quite pragmatic, really. The reparations will be less than they would have been if you died. I even have the approval of the rest of my generals. Why, you even have the chance to put us in your debt and lighten your hardships down the line."

Isaac groaned. "Farzia can't honestly believe we'll just keep our heads down and do as you say. Would you really just sit back and let us fight, knowing we could always double-cross you somewhere down the line? I looked into ways to aid Farzia's war effort following our surrender, but I eventually had to nix the idea from my plans."

"Oh, we have a plan to deal with that," I said as if I'd been just waiting for him to bring that up. "Don't we?" I glanced over at Master Horace.

"Keeheehee!" Master Horace, who I'd brought along for the ride, broke into an ominous cackle. "Ohhh, I see. You want to use me to keep those Salekhardians in line, eh?"

"If our soldiers see your men scared stiff, they'll think, 'If they're this scared of curses, they definitely won't go against us.' Anyone who hears the rumors will get that you guys are too pathetic to turn on us, too."

Isaac looked like the picture of dejection. "Oh, come on. Has Salekhard's reputation really fallen that far?"

"I know, I know. Still, wouldn't you rather ultimately be seen as an ally than an invading country? It's not like your honor is what you're out to protect. Then what's one last, silly hit to your ego?"

If we wanted to restore diplomatic relations as quickly as possible, Isaac was better off living and getting dragged through the mud. As matter of fact, that

would make it much easier for Salekhard to pose as an unfortunate country put through the wringer by its blundering king.

I pushed as hard as I could, hoping he would hurry up and cave, when Isaac suddenly burst out laughing. “You always do give yourself the short end of the stick, don’t you?”

“Huh?!”

“You’re asking me to put on a pitiful act and garner sympathy, no? That makes *you* the bad guy in this scenario.”

“Ugh...”

He was right. The gist of the plan was that Farzia’s spellcaster would “place a curse” on the Salekhardian army and make them dance in the palm of her hand. *Hey, could this be the start of my journey to villainy? I thought my whole goal was to avoid that!*

Now that I’d finally realized the implications of what I was asking, I couldn’t help moaning over it. Through fits of laughter, Isaac finally said, “Fine by me.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll get on board with your proposal. Hey, Mikhail. Henceforth, our forces are going to play the role of the lady spellcaster’s poor, poor victims. Make sure everyone puts on a grand show of fear when she comes to menace us.”

Mikhail smiled at Isaac’s orders. “What a simple task, compared to cleaning up after your death.”

“Is that right?”

“Persuading people to act in the interest of clearing their name is much easier than bringing home a funeral procession.”

With that, Mikhail left the room to start reaching out to people.

“We can go over the details later. I’m sure you could use some time to recover,” Reggie said, likewise preparing to take his leave.

I stopped him to ask, “Can’t I just heal him now?”

“I’d advise you not to. The soldiers are already aware that you can heal

certain injuries, as do they know that you'll pass out if you reach your limit. Still, it's not something we should keep allowing them to see, so I suggest you don't use that ability too frequently, that's all. If you were to heal him up like it's nothing, people will start to forget that you may very well be taking a chunk out of your own life to do it."

Isaac agreed with him. "Men will start coming to you begging you to heal their comrades, assuming you can fix everything with your magic. If you hit your limit and refuse someone for fear of working yourself to death, what do you think will happen? Though they might understand the logic, if they lose a loved one over it, they may come to resent you regardless. You should be stingy where you can."

Now that the patient in question was telling me the same thing, I relented.

People's demands were quick to escalate. I didn't want my good intentions to one day land me on the wrong side of a deadly grudge, so I was better off refraining. At the very least, I shouldn't have been giving anyone a reason to kill me before we retook the royal capital.

After I'd left the room, I decided to go get some rest, considering I was still convalescing myself. Gina tagged along with me.

"Thank you, Kiara."

I smiled and replied, "Now you'll be able to see Yefrem once the war is over."

"What?" Her eyes widened a fraction.

"He won't become king for a while yet. You spent several years living as a daughter of nobility, so I'm sure you could make it as an aristocrat's wife."

This was the same girl who had been fiancée to a prince. There was no way she could be as incompatible with the noble lifestyle as she claimed. As long as she didn't have to become queen, I doubted the stress would be too much for her to handle.

"Besides, just look at who your king is! I'm sure he'll take the reins and do something to fix all the obstacles in your path."

"Kiara, I..."

“I think it’d be nice if you try your hand at finding happiness. How about it?”

Gina would have to be the one to make the decision in the end, but with this, I’d foisted her biggest barrier to marrying Prince Yefrem onto Isaac. Whatever other obstacles were left in their path, I was sure Isaac would be considerate enough to deal with them. She had no more reason to give up on her own happiness.

Her eyes grew damp with tears. “You know, right after I heard about the plan from Isaac, I got a letter from Yefrem. Deep down, he wished he could remain imprisoned even after Isaac died shouldering all the responsibility. Of course, he knew it would be wrong to run away after his brother had given his life to rid us of Llewyne’s influence. Still... he promised me he would never take on a queen.”

That had probably been the only way for him to demonstrate his feelings for Gina. With this, however, there was no more reason to force himself into anything.

“I’ll try talking to him one more time.”

I was pleased to see that Gina, the girl who had once claimed she never wanted to see her beloved again, had undergone a change of heart.



A few days later, I put on a show to intimidate the soldiers of Salekhard.

“I believe you’ve all heard Farzia’s proposal from King Isaac by now. Henceforth, your king has no choice but to obey my commands.” I was sitting on the shoulder of a Horace-style golem, speaking into an impromptu megaphone I’d made from a rolled-up piece of paper.

Gathered before me were the soldiers of Salekhard. Those who hadn’t gotten the details looked uneasy about the announcement, but the knights closer to Isaac looked like they were trying not to smile.

My golem was gripping one haggard-looking Isaac in its right hand. It wasn’t because of his unhealed wounds that he’d been so worn down; it was because I hadn’t done a great job controlling my golem’s strength when I picked him up, wrenching scream after scream out of him.

The soldiers had mumbled things like, “What a heinous act against our wounded king!” or “She’s merciless!” at the sight of it. Cain, meanwhile, had praised me for it, claiming it worked in my favor since I *was* out here to menace them.

Given that the man had almost killed him once, Cain was pretty hard on Isaac. I hadn’t dreamed that the two of them would become best buddies or anything, but the occasional hint of murder in the knight’s eyes was a bit much.

“I’ve placed a curse on King Isaac,” I declared.

Master Horace, who had been situated atop the golem’s head, started cackling, “Heeheehee! Consider yourself hexed!” I had the golem’s mouth rattle open and closed in time with the line.

I heard horrified gasps from among the crowd of Salekhardians. The impact Master Horace had made on them was immediately clear, some of the men even hugging their nearby comrades in fear.

“By the way, if you don’t follow my commands, *this* is what happens to your king,” I said, then made an earthen Isaac-lookalike in my golem’s left hand dissolve into sand. The Salekhardians went stiff as boards. “I can put the same curse on the rest of you, too. If you want to be spared, you’d better cooperate with the Farzian army until we’ve retaken the royal capital. For the record, if anyone tries to come for my life, be prepared to meet *this* kind of an end.”

My golem crushed several more Isaac-style figures I’d set up nearby underfoot, stomping hard enough to make tremors in the earth. Apparently, the display made some of the soldiers flash back to seeing their comrades trampled on the battlefield. A few men had to avert their eyes, and I was starting to worry if I’d gone in a little *too* hard.

I heard later on that the Farzian soldiers bearing witness took the Salekhardians’ side almost immediately, mumbling, “Lady Spellcaster certainly comes up with some frightening ideas!” or “Even *I’d* be scared to be threatened like that.” I’d left them more terrified of me than ever before.

Regardless, my little show of menacing Salekhard had successfully left its soldiers with the impression of *We can’t let the spellcaster curse us!* I left the remainder of the explanation up to Vasily, a knight acting as an aide to Mikhail

and Isaac, and took my leave for the time being.

I set Isaac down once we had put enough distance between us and the Salekhardian troops.

“You’re a monster! You must really have it in for me,” he griped, looking no less run-down than earlier.

“C’mon, it wasn’t *that* bad! I just put a little too much strength into it.”

Even after everything I’d put him through, Isaac’s attitude toward me hadn’t changed one bit. If it had, the rift between us likely would have ensured I never really talked with him again except to argue, and I certainly wouldn’t have been able to get back at him in such a harmless way. His good sportsmanship was the only reason we could still quip back and forth like this.

Even now, he managed to remind me of the sun.

“Besides, you *are* a hostage, so I figured it’d be more believable if you looked a little wrung out.”

Isaac grinned. “And here *I* was so gentle with you when I had you in my custody.”

He was probably referring to the time he’d sheltered me from Lord Credias. That made me think back to the way he’d bitten down on my neck, and my face grew hot with embarrassment.

“Ugh... I *am* grateful and all, but a bigger part of me thinks you took it too far.”

“Well, given my plans to die, I didn’t expect I’d have enough time to lecture you properly. I resorted to the quickest method I could come up with. It helped you sort yourself out, didn’t it?”

My golem’s leg was big enough to serve as a wall, and he placed both hands up against it, cornering me. The grin had dropped from his face, so I refrained from hitting him back with a spell, instead staring back at him with a serious expression.

“Back then, I knew I was going to have to let you go eventually, so it didn’t matter to me if you hated me. Hell, if you *did* despise me, at least you wouldn’t

have to mourn my death.”

“Then why did you start out treating me so kindly?”

If he hadn’t acted so friendly toward me, I wouldn’t have been so sad over him. It would have been for Gina’s sake alone that I jumped into action.

Isaac flashed me a strained smile. “I already told you why. Are you really going to make me profess my love a second time?”

The words “profess my love” shut me up fast.

That’s right! He basically confessed. Considering he was on death’s door, the situation was too overwhelming for me to feel any of the warm, fuzzy feelings that usually accompany a love confession, so I’d nearly forgotten all about it.

Now what was I to do? I felt kind of bad. If I confessed my feelings to someone, only to have it completely ignored, I’d be a little hurt, too.

“I’m not the type to try that with a woman I don’t care for.”

“Uh...”

Was he including the kiss and the bite to my neck in “that”? When I thought back to it all, mortification rose in my throat until it nearly came out as a shriek. *How am I supposed to respond to this?!*

If I let that scream slip, people would start flocking to us, turning this into even more of a public spectacle. Once I’d gotten all the silent fussing out of my system, I opted to dodge the issue. “Uh, don’t use vague words like ‘that.’ It makes it too easy to misconstrue what you’re saying.”

“Oh? After everything I did to you, isn’t it a little late to be worried about that?”

“A little late?! Stop saying things people could take the wrong way! You didn’t do anything *that* bad to me!”

Isaac broke out into another grin. “How cold. All this after you forced my hand, too.”

He twirled a lock of my hair around his finger before dropping a kiss on it.

“I, erm, what now?!”

“I didn’t ask you earlier because I planned to die, but I have no reason to hold back anymore.” Before I had time to say anything back, Isaac cupped my face in one hand. “Won’t you come back with me?”

“What, to Salekhard?”

Were his feelings really serious enough to bring me home with him? Just as I was about to ask, someone reached an arm toward me, blocking my view. In the next moment, our mysterious guest dragged me off to the side and hid me behind his back.

“Please refrain from soliciting our spellcaster, Your Majesty.”

It was Cain. He must have come running over when he saw me bickering with Isaac.

“I see your watchdog is here. Later, then.”

Without so much as a gripe, Isaac briskly took his leave. It felt oddly anticlimactic.

Regardless, it was a relief. Considering I didn’t exactly want the others to find out what we were talking about, I hadn’t wanted that conversation to drag out too much longer.

Just as I was thinking that, however, Cain hit me with, “What did he do to you, exactly?”

“Uh...”

Cain turned to look at me, staring down at me with arms folded.

I guess he’s asking me this as my big brother. Or is he asking from a slightly different standpoint, the one I got a glimpse of in Delphion? The answer will change how I ought to respond to this.

“Um, I can’t tell you.”

I decided to keep mum about it. Given how much Cain already hated Isaac, I was afraid it might rain blood if he found out too much. *Oh, I’d better make sure Reggie doesn’t find out, either.*

It was true that he had bitten me to keep me out of Lord Credias’ hands. The

following kiss had been part of a ploy to wake me up to the feelings I'd been so oblivious to.

Isaac had never done anything to truly hurt me, but it was my right as a girl to get mad over that kiss he'd forced on me regardless. Still, that right belonged to me and me alone. The last thing I wanted was for that to sour Isaac's relations with Reggie or Cain; I wanted to make sure we would have no problems fighting together moving forward. Thus, I kept quiet about it.

When I looked back at Cain, filled with determination not to spill the beans, he sighed. "Hide things from me, will you? You've turned into such a bad girl, Miss Kiara."

It seemed Cain was engaging with me as a brother, then. That was a bit of a relief.

If *he'd* started chasing me romantically on top of Isaac, I wouldn't have known what to do. It would be wrong to rely on Reggie for an out when I had yet to give him an answer.

"I'm fine being bad. I have some secrets I'd prefer to keep."

Cain clapped a hand on my shoulder, brought his face close to my ear, and whispered, "I already have a vague idea. He did something even worse to you than Lord Credias, didn't he?"

I jolted. *No, Kiara! Don't give in!* I stood straight and did my best not to move a muscle.

"After your time spent as Salekhard's captive, you behaved a little differently from usual. I got the sense it wasn't *just* the fear lingering from your near brush with assault. It was his fault, then."

I was two steps from breaking into a cold sweat.

Hold on, Cain. Just how far have you seen through me?!

"I-It's nothing like that!"

Since I'd decided to keep quiet about it, there was nothing left to do but refute him.

Cain took a step back, dropping his hand from my shoulder and holding it out

for me. “Alright. I realize you have no desire to accept his advances, so that’s fine for now. Let’s head back to the others.”

The interrogation was over, it seemed. With a nod, I dismantled my golem, retrieved Master Horace, and grabbed hold of the hand Cain had offered. Shortly after we’d begun walking, he muttered something under his breath.

“I know you’ve already made your choice, however.”

His voice was so quiet, I couldn’t quite make out what he’d said.



As I walked ahead, my head filled with questions, I suddenly turned to look behind me. There sat the pile of dirt that remained of my golem, and around it, a grove of trees with leaves turning the colors of autumn.

Rolling hills spread out beyond the woods. The tents of Farzian and Salekhardian soldiers were densely packed over the grass, and bonfire smoke curled into the air. Past all that, I could see a blue lake.

For a moment, the scenery blurred.

“Huh?”

Before I knew it, the calm landscape had vanished. My surroundings were filled with the sounds of metal clashing against metal, as well as soldiers clashing swords with fiendish expressions.

I had no idea what had just happened. The moment I decided to make a run for it, however, I spotted a familiar face.

It was Reggie, the man who I knew shouldn’t have been standing there.

He gave a wave of his blue cape and brandished his sword. An advancing group of defective spellcasters had him surrounded, crazed expressions on their faces and ice clinging to their bodies. No sooner had he parried a sword of ice than he was assailed by flame. He dodged the assault by the skin of his teeth, only for a blade of wind to slash him down.

When he crumpled to the ground, no one moved to help him. Felix and Groul had likewise fallen, and more people lay scattered on the ground nearby, charred such a deep black I couldn’t tell who they had once been.

The defective spellcasters who had attacked Reggie dissolved into sand and died. Trampling over their remains came Lord Credias, his hand wrapped tightly around my neck as I dangled there limply. Behind us, Cain had been skewered by multiple lances.

My legs began to tremble.

Lord Credias guffawed, then tossed me away to reach out for Reggie. When the prince moaned and tried to get to his feet, the viscount tapped him on the shoulder. The next moment, he crumbled away into sand.

“Why?”

What’s happening?! Why am I seeing this? Why did Reggie die?

“No way!”

I covered my face, falling to my knees.

“Miss Kiara?”

I heard Cain’s voice. He was calling out to me, even though I’d seen him dead just moments ago.

“What’s wrong, Miss Kiara?”

He grabbed me roughly by the shoulders, and I snapped back to reality. I took my hand from my face and looked up, only to see Cain staring down at me with a concerned expression.

I looked around one more time, and the same peaceful scenery from before spread out before my eyes. Once I was sure where I was, I looked back at Cain and murmured, “You’re alive.”

Cain breathed a sigh of relief. “What happened? Did you remember something again?”

This wasn’t the first time I’d been disoriented by a daydream. Cain had assumed this must have been a similar situation.

What I’d just seen was different from usual, though. It wasn’t a continuation of the story where Kiara died. This memory had clearly branched off somewhere along the path we were meant to follow.

It made me terribly anxious not to know what was happening to me. But if there was one possibility...

“Am I looping?”

The vision I’d seen just now would have been a distinct possibility if Reggie hadn’t had any spells at his disposal. It was only due to his own magic that he hadn’t turned to ash when Lord Credias touched him the other day.

Had I repeated my life as Kiara several times over? Was I looping again and again? Between the time when I was an enemy spellcaster, and the version of myself closer to the girl I was now, it had to have happened at least twice.

Still, why had I remembered the villainess scenario so many times, yet I’d only just now recalled the version of myself who had witnessed Reggie’s death? Either way, there was one thing I just knew. We had overcome yet another possible future where Alan was the only one left alive.



Was it the effects of her magic that had spurred her awake, or was it the peaceful birdsong? A gentle, pale-blue sky and the green of the nearby trees flooded the girl’s vision.

Once she was awake, she took a gulp of water from her canteen, then dyed her silver hair in the river. After soaking it in dark brown powder, she tied it neatly into a braid. With that done, she hopped onto her horse tethered nearby.

As she proceeded down the high road, she eventually arrived at a spot atop a hill where she could see the scenery unfurl in all directions. The shores of Lake Luxia were tranquil as ever; however, the scenic beauty of the past was gone.

Land that had once been meadows had been ruined and trampled, and she could see telltale signs of trees cut down and burned. Perhaps that was the source of the burning smell that drifted her way.

As he spurred her horse even further down the small road, she happened upon a farmwife who called out, “My, my! Did a young girl like you travel all the way out here all by her lonesome? There was a battle raging here not too long ago.”

The woman's eyes were wide with surprise, but she seemed rather calm despite her claim of a recent battle. The lady didn't seem particularly taken aback by the color of her hair, either, so she assumed the dye had done its job.

She asked the farmwife, "When did the battle end?"

"About a week ago. To everyone's surprise, Salekhard surrendered. The army marched back to Delphion Castle just yesterday, so we were able to return to our homes quickly enough. The soldiers led by the new baron of Delphion chased out the Llewynian remnants in the area, so it should be safe... but why is a little girl like you riding all alone on horseback?"

"I have some business at a relative's house. Did Farzia make it out of the battle alright? The prince wasn't slain or anything of the sort, was he?"

The farmwife laughed. "Ahaha! He had a hard time of it, apparently, but the prince annihilated Llewyn's reinforcements with his lightning sword! I could see the beautiful light of his strike from miles away, clear as day. Plus, the spellcaster was there, too. The trampled fields have already been leveled and cultivated, so it should be easy enough to sow our seeds come spring. The rotting corpses of enemy soldiers are usually such a pain to clear away, but even those have been taken care of."

"I see. Thank you for telling me." With that, she spurred her horse on once more.

Once she'd put enough distance between herself and the farmwife, she heaved a sigh of relief. "So nobody had to die this time."

Under normal circumstances, Kiara would have suffered burns during her captivity in Trisphede and been unable to return to the army straightaway. Farzia would have been driven into a corner in her absence.

Even if Kiara *had* made it out unscathed, they would have failed to combat Lord Credias and retreated in the face of Llewyn's reinforcements. When Kiara was captured by the viscount, Reggie would have stepped in to save her and died for his efforts.

The future she knew was creeping forward little by little... hopefully, to a world where neither of the two would have to die.

Thus, she had to track them down.

“Wait for me, Kiara. I promise this will be the last time,” she murmured, her lips drawn into a thin line.

Side Story: The Yearning After the Kiss

The day the Thorn Princess showed up in Trisphede, Reggie evolved. He grew into a magic-wielding prince.

At first, I had to wonder why this was happening. I'd become a spellcaster to protect Reggie; it was demoralizing to know that I'd pushed him onto such a dangerous path despite my efforts. However, it was while we were traveling to Eirlain that I finally came to terms with his decision.

From then on, I began accompanying him to his training sessions.

"Not good enough! You've gotta send it farther!" Master Horace demanded. Reggie silently followed his instructions.

Whether he planned to channel his lightning through his sword or not, Master Horace had suggested that practicing unleashing it from his own hands would make him better at wielding his magic. It produced less output than when he used a sword, and the sound wouldn't travel too far, so it was a much more convenient way to train.

Still, it seemed that controlling the lightning with his bare hands was much harder without the help of a sword. Every other attempt, the charge would fizzle out not far from his fingers.

The majority of magic needed to be supplemented with imagination. For someone like me, who remembered many different writers' renderings of magic in manga and video games, it was easy to envision. However, it was much more difficult for people who had grown up in this world.

There weren't that many religious paintings or storybook illustrations to reference. If someone needed to imagine a bunch of different forms for their magic to take, it would take a lot of artistic creativity to think those up on the spot.

And so, I was doing my best to convey my ideas to Reggie in words. Reggie, meanwhile, was slowly but surely working down the list of Master Horace's

assignments.

As I watched him practice, I considered that Reggie was probably always like this when he was studying. He was diligent and persistent—a genius who backed up his natural talents with hard work.

He almost never complained. No matter how many times his surprisingly spartan teacher made him do something over, he never showed signs of weariness.

Master Horace didn't seem to like that. "Tch. Considering you're out here trying to take my daughter away from me, can't you have the good grace to lose to her dad at least once?" he grumbled under his breath. He then said, loud enough for Reggie to hear from his spot a little ways away, "That's it for today, little prince. If you don't get some rest, you won't make it through your next training session!"

It was only moments later that Master Horace started to kick up a fuss, pleading with me, "Hey, that dog is back again! Tell your knight to get me out of here, little disciple."

"Alright, alright."

When I spotted Lila plodding through the woods toward us, I handed Master Horace off to Cain and told him to return to our army lines.

Ever since yesterday, Lila had gotten in the habit of stopping by whenever Reggie's training was nearing its end. I had initially assumed it was the magic drawing her in, but seeing as Reynard and Sara never showed up, it seemed possible there was a different reason behind it. Each time it happened, Master Horace would throw a fit and demand to be carried off by Cain or one of the other knights.

Once I'd seen him off, Reggie and I stopped for a break, sitting side by side against a nearby fallen tree.

The royal guard never knew where Reggie's spells might go flying next, so they were keeping ample distance. I could tell that they were taking care not to stare at us too much.

Seeing as Reggie was a prince and all, he wasn't allowed to go off on his own,

and his surroundings always had to be tightly guarded; there would always have to be *someone* watching us. More recently, however, I was getting the sense that his guard was willing to look the other way more and more frequently. They made sure the rest of the knights looked elsewhere as often as possible, too. Was it because of something Reggie had said to them, perhaps?

My curiosity had been piqued, but I set that aside to examine the flow of Reggie's mana.

"Can I touch your shoulder?"

"Of course."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. I couldn't feel the heat of his body from over his cape, but his mana was a different story. Thanks to the path the Thorn Princess had forged, the flow wasn't as turbulent as it could have been, but it had clearly been triggered into motion. I used my own mana to even it out.

After some time, Reggie eventually said, "I'm fine now. It never feels much different from the exhaustion of a good workout, but once you patch me up like this, it makes it clear that it's all my mana's doing. Whenever you touch me, I can feel the heat draining from my body."

"I'm glad I can be of *some* help, at least."

If I didn't have a part to play in supplying him with mana, I wouldn't be able to do anything but watch him practice. It was a relief to have there be something I could actually do.

Reggie, however, responded with a conflicted smile. "You needn't concern yourself with that. I'm doing this because I love you."

My heart leapt in my chest. It was only just the other day that he'd professed his love for me. So much had happened on the heels of that that it was almost soothing to hear him say it again. Of course, my own misgivings meant that I was still withholding my answer. Thus, while it made me happy to hear it, deep down, part of me felt that it was wrong to delight in it so.

Reggie didn't care about that, of course. Still, I felt guilty keeping him waiting like this.

While I got caught up in my thoughts, Lila came by my side.

“What’s up, Lila?” I asked.

Does she want me to pet her? I wondered, but she declined to acknowledge my question, instead nudging the two of us from behind.

I got to my feet alongside Reggie, still clueless as to what she was after, and Lila sprawled herself out over the tree, prodding us with her snout and tail to urge us to lean against her.

“Okay, I’m lost.”

“Well, if she’s offering, we may as well lie back against her,” Reggie suggested with a laugh. He threw an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close, sitting me back down on the ground with his cape spread out underneath us.

While I was busy panicking over this turn of events, Lila curled herself around the two of us—which served to push me even closer up against Reggie. After shooting me a soft gaze that made her look oddly like she was smiling, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Her little foxy sleeping face is a sight for sore eyes, and it’s cute to see her “smiling,” but hold on just a second... What the heck is going on?!

Despite my confusion, I was hesitant to shake a slumbering animal awake.

As I sat there fretting over what to do, Reggie said, “Oh good, now I can blame everything on Lila. I’ll be milking that excuse for all it’s worth.”

He then placed a light kiss on my forehead.

“Uh, Reggie?”

Groul and the rest of the knights were still watching. When he saw me starting to panic, Reggie bumped his forehead against mine and said, “I’m well aware how easily embarrassed you are. I promise I won’t go any further than that in public. But even if you’re reluctant to give me an answer, I’d prefer it to be clear that you aren’t *averse* to me.”

Of course I wasn’t averse to him. I *loved* him.

He was willing to wait for me while I dragged my feet about coming out and

saying it. In return, I granted his desire to nestle up like a pair of lovers, holding still in his embrace. Sandwiched in both Reggie's and Lila's body heat, I felt perfectly warm and cozy.

Besides, I *did* want to be close to Reggie. If it weren't for all the people watching us, I'd love having the chance to cuddle like this. It was hard for me to come out and say that, so I was glad that Reggie had asked for it himself.

Since Reggie was a prince, though we did a lot of things as a pair, we rarely got the chance to be alone together. There were times when that had been a little hard on me; whenever I felt scared, I couldn't just reach out and hold his hand if there were too many people around.

Now that he'd said that he loved me, I could feel myself wanting to rely on him more and more. I'd made it *this* far on my own. One big squeeze for Master Horace, and I'd always pulled myself together enough to stand on my own two feet. Why was I letting this happen *now*?

Had falling in love made me weak? Feeling pathetic, I hung my head low.

That was when Reggie suddenly asked, "By the way, Kiara, did you ever court anyone in your previous life?"

"Huh?! Of course not! I was only fourteen!"

"Oh, is that right? But if I recall, that's the same age you were when you met me. Are you going to tell me that you didn't feel the slightest inkling of affection for me at the time?"

When I looked up at his face, I saw him staring back at me with a cheeky grin. Was he *that* confident I'd felt at least a little something for him while we were staying in Évrard?

He wasn't wrong, of course, but I wasn't about to admit that. I couldn't imagine anything more embarrassing! Considering I'd assumed it was a one-sided crush of mine for so long, it would take a lot of courage to put it into words.

As my eyes darted from left to right in a panic, Reggie cornered me further. "Hmm, perhaps I slipped up somewhere, then. Remember how right after we first met, I demanded that you either hand over what you were hiding on your

person or show me what was under your skirt? I did have the option to strip you myself, but I would have felt terribly guilty, so I opted to give you the chance to disarm yourself willingly. Did you resent me for that?”

“What?! I mean, well... I knew what your aim was there. I wasn’t upset with you!”

As a matter of fact, I’d thought it was pretty kind and respectful of him not to tear off my clothes while I was out cold. It hardly would have been uncalled for, given the situation.

“Was there something else that bothered you, then? You *do* forgive me for keeping mum about my true identity, don’t you? I realized quickly enough that you would make for a poor liar, but I did need to exercise some caution.”

“I’ve never had a problem with you, then or now! You were willing to trust me almost immediately, too.”

“Oh? So you *liked* me?” he murmured into my ear.

I whined, “I didn’t *dislike* you.”

Reggie giggled, appearing satisfied with that answer. His reaction stoked the fires of rebellion inside of me, and I threw his question back at him in a desperate bid to get the upper hand.

“What about *you*, Reggie?”

“I think I loved you from the very start,” came Reggie’s smooth reply, not a trace of embarrassment to be found. “You piqued my interest from the moment I found you in our carriage. Once you’d tumbled out of the bed, I was so interested to see what you were going to pull next that I couldn’t take my eyes off of you. And when I found out that you shared so many of my own sentiments, I found it comfortable to be around you.”

He slid his hand away from my shoulder, wrapping it loosely around my neck. He felt so warm.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I wanted nothing more than to keep you by my side all the time—but that wasn’t an option back then, unfortunately.”

Reggie talked about how he had hated having to go home, since he couldn’t

very well bring me back to the royal palace with him.

“I didn’t want to bring you to war, either. I didn’t want to see you hurt—physically or emotionally. Still, I knew that without your power... without the power of a spellcaster, we would have to make significant sacrifices to win. Hence, I couldn’t refuse your offer. It wasn’t *just* that I wanted to respect your will; there was an element of calculation to it, too. Does it bother you to know I was thinking about it that way?”

I shook my head. “I just wanted you to need me. In fact, I’m glad you’re telling me this now.”

I was relieved to know that he’d never thought of me as a burden, nor gotten fed up with my obstinacy. Yet apparently, that more calculated aspect of his decision had been bothering him all this time.

“Do I really deserve your forgiveness on this?” he asked.

“Of course. Really, *I’m* the one who’s always making trouble for you, or testing your patience.”

“Patience? My patience for what?” he asked curiously.

Maybe I had been too vague there. I rushed to elaborate. “I mean the whole, err... ‘withholding my answer’ thing. I know this has to be a pain for you.”

That was when Reggie suggested, “In that case, why don’t you tell me a secret of yours nobody else knows?”

“A secret?”

“It can be anything you like. An anecdote from your past life, perhaps? Did you really, truly never have a boy you fancied?” he prompted me.

Ugh... It’s so awkward to talk about fancying someone.

“It could be someone from your current life, too.”

From my current life? That one seemed easier to bluff my way out of. If I just named someone I thought of like a father, I was pretty sure he’d accept that answer.

“But if you *are* interested in someone besides me... well, that won’t do at all.

If you told me his name, I'd run off to assassinate him as soon as this war is over."

"Whoa! Assassinate?!"

Reggie, that's an alarming thing to say! The look in your eyes is just as terrifying to boot! I know you told me that you were going to be more forthright, but it's pretty scary when you say everything you're thinking!

Nope, cut! No way I'm throwing a real, living person under the bus! God, I'm glad I didn't name Lord Évrard as "the ideal father type." Alan would have held it against me for the rest of our lives.

"Guess I should go with someone from my past life, huh? Ahaha..." Laughing, I steered the conversation back around. If I stuck to Japan, I wouldn't have to worry about getting anyone killed no matter what I said.

"So there *was* someone. What was he like?"

I couldn't help but wonder why he wanted to know so badly, but given that I'd steered the conversation here myself, I had no choice but to answer.

"As long as a crush counts, I guess you could say that."

There had been a boy I'd found charming, at the very least. I'd never really thought of him in a romantic light, though.

"I had this cousin who was a lot older than me. He was good at looking after kids, so he would come play with me every once in a while when I was a little girl. He was actually the one who got me into games like the one based on this world."

Farzia: Kingdom at War—that game was the whole reason I knew that Reggie was destined to die and that Alan would go on to fight his own war. It was the RPG where I died a villainess.

"My cousin was the one who came up with the plot. Somebody else tied all the story threads together and put it into a format that could be distributed to larger audiences, but I heard that he was credited for the original concept. I was still just a kid at the time, so I was amazed when I found out that he had made one of those 'RPGs' they sold in the stores."

Since my cousin was the one who made it, my parents never got mad about me sinking so much time into that particular game. Besides, that cousin had made me promise that I'd spend just as much time studying as I did playing the RPG.

"Do you think, perhaps...?" Reggie's expression took a turn for the serious, and I nodded in response.

"Thinking back on it, I bet the person who used to live in this world, only to be reincarnated in the world of my past life... was that cousin of mine."

That would explain why he'd known all the most minute details of the war. He'd claimed that it all just came to him in "a flash of inspiration," but I figured that the *real* explanation came down to the memories sleeping deep in his heart being subconsciously awakened.

"Do you remember who he was?"

"Not very clearly, no. There's a good chance he might be an Évrard soldier or knight. Which means there are way too many candidates to narrow it down."

If only the story had spent a little more time exploring me or Reggie, there *was* someone I would have suspected right away. That didn't seem right, though. If it were Cain, he wouldn't have known about all the things that happened after I killed him. Thus, I figured it was someone who had survived to see the end of the war alongside Alan.

He did give me similar vibes to Cain, though.

While I was mulling it over, Reggie said, "I must say I'm surprised, Kiara. So *you* haven't the least bit of interest in whether I've been in a relationship before?"

Though he was the one who had brought it up, he seemed surprised that I hadn't bothered to ask him the same question. He looked almost like he was pouting a little. Did the thought of being the only jealous one bother him?

"I guess... I kind of don't want to hear about it? If you were courting someone, it'd have to be a girl who could wander in and out of the royal palace. I bet she'd be someone really tall and pretty. No way I could measure up."

Beyond being a spellcaster, I didn't have any particular talents, nor was I of a particularly high rank. You couldn't exactly consider me a knockout beauty, either, and I sure wasn't cute enough to warrant any flattery.

When I confessed that I was too scared to ask, Reggie's mood seemed to improve. "Don't worry, Kiara. I've never been as interested in anyone as I am in you. Nobody's ever understood me the way you do, either."

If he'd just left it at the first comment, I would have been a little dubious. However, the part about understanding him made everything click into place. If we combed the whole world looking for someone else who fit the bill, we could probably find one. However, back when I first met him, we were the only ones who had ever really understood each other. It was easy to believe that the sentiment still lingered between us.

"Okay. I believe you," I said.

Reggie smiled back at me, truly pleased, and brought his face close to mine.

Hey, wait a second! Your knights are looking!

Or so I'd feared, but Lila lifted her tail to keep our faces hidden. Thanks to her efforts, no one was able to see the moment Reggie pecked me on the cheek... or at least, that's what I told myself.



It was later that night. We were camping outside, so I was heading back to my tent with Gina after finishing up dinner.

The moment I was about to step inside, however, I heard whispers from behind the tent. Wondering who it could be, I tiptoed closer to the source of the voices.

There, I saw Lila sitting on her haunches next to Master Horace.

"Keep it up, you mangy mutt! Boy, have I gone soft if I'm wasting my time worrying about this."

Lila bobbed her head in a nod, which seemed to put Master Horace in a good mood. "Oh, so you *do* get it! Not bad for a dumb dog. It's all thanks to you that I can get rid of the pests and let my daughter have some alone time with the man

trying to woo her.”

I had to stop myself from crying out in surprise. *Master Horace* was the one who had sent Lila our way? Sending Cain elsewhere had been part of his plan, too?

“Just as she finally stopped having so many nightmares, she had all those brushes with death and got put through enough hell to make her *wish* she were dead. Now they’re back in full force. I thought I ought to let her have a little treat. On that note, you’re doing a great job. Make sure to give them more and more chances to talk, you got that?”

Lila nodded once again. I could have sworn she briefly glanced over at me past Master Horace. The reason I couldn’t tell for sure was, most likely, because my vision was blurred with tears.

“I’m tired of hearing all her moaning and teeth-gnashing at night! That’s the only reason I’m bothering with this!”

I rubbed my eyes against my sleeve to keep my cheeks dry, doing my best to hold back sobs.

Oh, Master Horace. I love you so much!

I wanted nothing more in that moment than to run up to him and squeeze him tight, but I didn’t want him to know I’d been eavesdropping, either. I curled my hands into fists to hold myself back.

It had always been so painful to live this life without a family, and once I’d finally found someone I felt I could rely on, it was someone I had no real claim over. Lonely girl that I was, it was because Master Horace had stood by my side that I’d been able to keep trucking along for so long.

Still, given the way I acted like a child always seeking out the warmth of another person, I had to wonder how Master Horace had felt as he watched over me, unable to do so much as hold my hand.

And yet, he had continued to stay by my side and protect me.

I quietly walked away, somehow managing to bite back my tears. I couldn’t let Master Horace see me crying after he’d gone to such lengths to cheer me up. I

needed to prove that his efforts had brought a smile to my face.

My face had to look pretty red, though. It would take some time for my eyes to get less puffy; was Master Horace going to be worried about me being gone for so long?

As I stood there fretting, I noticed someone drawing close to me. It was Lila, who had just finished up her conversation with Master Horace. In a eureka moment, I had her blow some snow on a handkerchief for me; I remembered that Gina had used that trick once before to cool my puffy eyelids. With that, my eyes were back to normal in no time.

“Do I look okay?” I asked Lila, and she nodded back. Reassured, I headed back into my tent.

Master Horace was there waiting for me, having the time of his life rolling around on the floor of the tent for reasons unknown. Of course, it didn’t take long for him to get to nagging me.

“How long were you planning to wander around in the dead of night, you naughty girl?”

“I know, I know. But I’m here now, Master Horace.” I flashed him the biggest smile I could muster.

“You’re giving me the creeps,” he responded, but even his snide remarks were enough to bring me joy.

“What can I say? I’m in a really good mood.”

“You’re a weird one.”

Though he kept on talking smack, I never stopped smiling for him until the moment I fell asleep. I wanted him to see just how happy he’d made his daughter.

Afterword

Kanata Satsuki here! Thank you for reading *I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Vol. 5*.

I can hardly believe the series has finally reached its fifth volume. We made it all the way to the battle against a certain fateful enemy who's driven the story to this point. Given that I cut off the last volume at a point where everyone was probably thinking, *How could you end on such a cliffhanger?!*, I'm glad I managed to get the next installment out without issue. I appreciate all my dear readers sticking with the series for so long.

In the fifth volume, Kiara finally dukes it out with Lord Credias. When she first ran out on her fiancé, she certainly never guessed he would come back as such a fearsome opponent. The viscount drives our protagonists into a tight corner, leaving them no choice but to flee for their lives, until Kiara is ultimately taken captive.

The battle against Isaac likewise reaches its conclusion in this volume. I started showing glimpses of the character back in volume two, so as the author, it was exciting to finally reach this point after so much buildup. His story had a much softer conclusion than I had originally planned, but I hope you all found it to be a satisfying one.

Kiara finally comes to terms with her feelings here, too. If it weren't for Isaac, the weird attitude we saw toward Reggie in the last volume probably would have carried over into this one.

The print version includes several additions and edits to what was originally posted online. The side story follows the journey from Trisphede's Fort Liadna to the shores of Delphion's great lake. Now that he's taken his first big step, there's no way Reggie wouldn't try *something*, but who's pulling the strings behind the scenes? That's the short version of it.

Moving on, I would once again like to extend my thanks to my wonderful editor and all the rest of the editorial staff.

Isaac gets to make his first appearance on a volume cover! I just knew I'd need my artist to draw Isaac for me if we ever made it all the way to this part of the story! Thankfully, my wishes came true, and now I can go cheer in my own little corner. He never even made one of the color inserts until now! I hope you all appreciated the Isaac party this time around. He looks so cool, and Kiara and Reggie look like they walked straight out of the story's climax! My deepest thanks to Mitsuya Fuji for such a perfect color illustration.

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 an additional note, I'll be publishing a short story online as a thanks for purchasing this volume. I'll be uploading it to my blog on *Shosetsuka ni Naro*. I hope you enjoy it.

—Kanata Satsuki, February 2017

Bonus Short Story

His Perspective

At the Battle of Liadna, I—Isaac—had every intention of taking Kiara captive. It would have been good to take a spellcaster out of the running, naturally, and Salekhard having no mage to its name was making it hard for us to put our foot down against Llewyrne.

And, well... frankly, I was worried about her.

Ever since we first put our battle plan together, I'd found that frog-faced viscount an unsavory fellow. Whenever Kiara came up in conversation, he would insist on capturing her himself, and there wasn't a soul in the world who could talk him down. I was certain she would be better off in my hands. See what a generous man I am?

I was lucky enough to track her down, but spellcaster that she was, she of course had a bodyguard by her side. That knight of hers was pretty strong. If it weren't for his injuries, he very well may have bested me. I must admit he had me sweating there.

In any case, Kiara certainly seemed to care for him. Her face was deathly pale, her breathing was heavy—why, she could barely stand on her own two feet—yet she pleaded with me to spare *his* life. It was enough to make me think, *Hold on now, are you in love with him or something?*

Based on their exchange, however, they were more like brother and sister. Though, the knight seemed rather smitten with Kiara... and, well, I got the sense he was just playing along with what she wanted, but they appeared to be quite close.

He was on death's door, and it was no skin off my back to let a dying enemy go free. I stuck him on a horse and sent him off, granting Kiara her request. Of course, given his wounds, he was liable to kick the bucket before he even made it back to his allies.

I knew that if he died, there was a good chance Kiara would come to despise me for real, but it was too late to do anything about that now.

However, the minute I thought I'd gotten my hands on Kiara, *she* started dying, too. The bizarre doll she was always carrying around started raising a fuss, so I went to work tending to her wounds as per his directions. Eventually, she recovered enough to wake up. It was in times like this I couldn't help but wonder if spellcasters were more trouble than they were worth.

What happened next was even *more* of a hassle. That viscount came along and abducted Kiara. I hadn't expected him to bring out defective spellcasters to snatch her up while she was bedridden and powerless. To top it all off, that lady of a spellcaster tried to put Kiara out of her misery when she couldn't think up a way to save her. It left me thinking, *Come on, I know some women would rather take that way out, but you already called for my help, so just hold your horses!*

It was her fault I had to douse myself in water and rush into a burning building. It certainly felt like I'd gotten the short end of the stick there.

When I managed to get her out safely, I *had* thought—surprisingly calmly, I might add—that it was strange to see the burnt remains of thorns lying around the shed. But given how much nonstop trouble I'd been dragged into, and how many times I'd had to rush to her rescue over the past few days, I'd simply set it aside, assuming that one or two bizarre things were bound to occur whenever a spellcaster was involved.

Meanwhile, given what she'd just gone through, I figured that even a girl like Kiara would start crying and begging to be kept off the battlefield. Though she *did* appear to have developed a fear of men, she went in the other direction entirely, more insistent on fighting than ever.

I knew there had to be a good reason the war always came first for her. Perhaps there was someone she wanted to protect at all costs.

Kiara, of course, was completely oblivious to her own feelings. I worried that if anything like this ever happened to her again and she lost her chance to tell this mystery man how she felt, she would surely come to regret it.

If I had to guess... the reason I cared about it so much was because I was planning to leave this world behind in the not-too-distant future. I wanted to

protect Salekhard. Given that I had fought all this way prepared to lay down my own life the moment it became necessary, the two of us were kindred spirits.

I didn't hate Kiara, however. I'd only taken her captive because she was an obstacle to my goal. In fact, I'd say I was quite taken with this girl who claimed to be suffering, yet fought on through her tears. If we'd met under different circumstances, perhaps we would have become real friends. Oh, if only Llewyne hadn't invaded Farzia, and, to keep Salekhard from meeting the same fate, we were left with no choice but to join in the assault.

There was nothing more to be done on that front.

For the time being, I was going to open her eyes to who it was she loved and make sure she didn't die without saying her piece to him.

Honestly, I probably could have just told her all that straight out. No matter how stubborn she was, if she had something explained to her enough times, the lesson was bound to stick eventually. The next time she saw him, having that conversation fresh in her mind ought to clue her in to her feelings.

That kiss was nothing more than my service fee, really. Surely I'm allowed to ask for *that* much, no? I could never be the one to bring her happiness, so that would just have to do. As for the rest? Considering that the prince had come all this way to rescue her, I assumed he could handle it.

I had only one regret: I really wanted to get in one good punch on that prince. Of course, that would only serve to make Kiara cry, so I let that dream die quietly. Besides, the look on his face when I told him about my meddling was priceless.



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I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Volume 5

by Kanata Satsuki

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