

## Fixing the Seals on Grimoires

One of the duties of the Seven Sages is to check on the sealing barriers of grimoires, should such a request arise. For particularly bad cases, they disengage the seals and redo them to prevent the books' mana from seeping out and the spells inscribed inside from wreaking havoc. For the rest, they provide simple repair and reinforcement.

SECRETS OF THE

# SILENT\* OVITCH IV-after-

Casebook of the Silent Witch





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Matsuri Isora

Illustration by **Nanna Fujimi** 



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### Secrets Of The Silent Witch IV -after-

### Matsuri Isora

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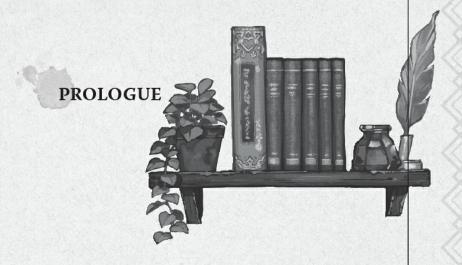
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### The Seven Sages and the Library's Secret

Located in the northwest of the Kingdom of Ridill, the Haymes-Nalia Library is a collection of tomes so historied only the Library of Ascard, the nation's most famous, outclasses it. Many precious books from earlier ages are preserved at the Haymes, and not only its collection, but also the building itself, has great historical value.

Sadly, however, the number of visitors decreases each year thanks to the difficulty of travel to and from the library. With the establishment's lineage of librarian overseers having died out as well, many assumed the Haymes would be closed down in the not-so-distant future.

And just now, at that very library, two girls were having a chat behind the counter.

"Look at this," said the slightly younger girl. "I've been so bored that I drew a flower on the visitor register and added a cute ribbon. I think it's my best work yet—"

"Would you *please* just sit there and try to look intelligent?" the elder one replied. "There are Sages visiting from the capital today."

"Didn't they replace two of them half a year ago? I think they brought in the Barrier Mage and... Wait, who was the other one?"

"Lord Louis Miller is the Barrier Mage, and the other was Lady Monica Everett, the Silent Witch. They're the ones coming, along with one other—Lord Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman."

The Haymes's collection boasted an assortment of many grimoires and shamanic tomes. Managing them was extremely difficult, and some even required sealing barriers. The purpose of the Sages' visit was to repair these and reinforce their seals.

"The Barrier Mage is the former captain of the Magic Corps, right? He's so strong—and yet so gentlemanly and charming. Hee-hee... I wonder if he has a special someone."

"Under no circumstances are you to beg him for an autograph or ask for his contact information, understood? You'd be soiling the library's reputation."

"Yes, ma'aaam!" replied the younger girl with enthusiasm.

Just then, from outside the window they'd left open for ventilation, they heard the clattering noise of something rolling along the ground. It wasn't like the wheels of a horse-drawn carriage—it sounded like something smaller, perhaps just a cart.

The girls exchanged glances, wondering if they'd mistaken the day of their next book shipment, just as the doors leading into the library opened.

The first to appear was a man wearing his chestnut hair in a braid; he had been the one to push open the doors. He had a beautiful, feminine face and wore a monocle over his right eye. Despite it being summer, he sported a robe embroidered with gold thread. In his hand he carried a golden staff, easily as tall as he was, and rested it against his right shoulder.

In Ridill, the length of a mage's staff signified their rank. Only those at the very pinnacle of magecraft—the Seven Sages—were permitted to carry one as tall as a person.

"Good day. My name is Louis Miller, the Barrier Mage. We've come at the request of the library's supervisor."

He flashed a smile, friendly and attractive—but the two girls' eyes were glued to something behind him.

In his left hand, the man was gripping a rope, which was attached to a handcart that had come to a stop outside the library. Evidently, Louis had come all the way here pulling the cart behind him.

The cart itself was quite humble, looking more like a small door with wheels attached. Two others rode on it, each wearing the same robe as Louis, and each lying still as a corpse under the harsh summer sun.

As the girls at the counter glanced back and forth between them, the Barrier Mage put on an even more dazzling smile. "I know we've only just arrived, but would you happen to have a cup of water?"

The elder girl's gaze immediately snapped back to Louis. "It is quite hot today, sir," she replied. "I'll get you some cold water right—"

"No, regular water is fine. And actually, no cups will be necessary. Bring a bucket," said Louis, looking back at the pair of limp bodies on the cart. "I feel like giving these two prunes a splash."

Whether or not they heard his voice, the two prunes in question slowly rose from the cart's surface.

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"Are...are we there yet...?"
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"Ooh... I don't feel so good..."

The first to get up was a young man with purple hair. The second, who rolled off the cart a moment later, was a short girl with her light-brown locks tied in messy braids. Neither of them had any color in their face, and both had their hands over their mouths.

Louis stared at them coldly. "Don't you have anything to say? I was kind enough to drag both of you all the way here, you know."

At his icy remark, the purple-haired man and the girl with the braids looked around, and each made strange moaning noises.

"Ugh, the summer sun, it burns my eyes... The summer refuses to love me... I'm so delicate I'll shrivel up... The shade... Where is the shade...?"

The purple-haired man writhed, covering his eyes. But eventually, scraping himself along the ground like a dried-out insect, he managed to hide behind the shelves next to the counter.

The girl with the braids, on the other hand, grasped her head through her hood and sobbed. "New places are scary, new places are scary, new places are scary... Ah... Waaahhh!"

Now weeping openly, she ran in clumsy, thudding steps to the window and rolled herself up in the curtains. It made her look like an out-of-season bagworm.

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"Ah, shade... Please love me, shade..."
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"Nooo... Waaah... I want to go home!"

As the man begged the shadows for affection and the girl cocooned herself in the curtains, Louis heaved a heavy sigh. "Go back to being human, please," he called to them. "Unless you want me to shove your heads in this bucket of water."

The Barrier Mage's behavior was gentlemanly, but his words gave a very different impression. The two girls behind the counter looked on, dumbfounded.

The Sage continued like nothing had happened, picking up the library's visitor record. "Oh, that's very cute," he said when he saw the ribbon-adorned front cover.

\* \* \*

It happened about a year before Monica Everett, the Silent Witch, was dragged from her cabin and tasked with the second prince's protection. After becoming the youngest candidate ever chosen for the Seven Sages at fifteen, she'd holed up in the mountains, engrossing herself in personal research and jobs involving numbers. It had been a quiet life.

Then, one clear, bright summer morning, Louis, another Sage, came to visit. She'd been sleeping peacefully underneath the table, cradling the essay she'd finished overnight to her breast.

Both the bed and the floor of the cabin were covered in an ocean of books and other documents. The only clear spot had been under the table, so she'd curled up there and gone to sleep.

She was still in the same spot when she heard an exasperated voice calling to her from the entrance. "My fellow Sage," it said. "You're not sleeping there again, are you...?"

"...Mister Louis? If you need a document, please...mm, just take it..."

"Documents are not what I'm here to pick up." Louis deftly moved across the paper-covered floor and physically dragged Monica out from under the table. "I'm here for you. We have work."

That was where Monica's memory came to an end. She'd fallen asleep again.

The next time she awoke, she was in a carriage headed to the Haymes-Nalia Library.

"Good morning, my fellow Sage."

"You'll have to forgive the carriage. Were my spirit here, we could have simply flown. Unfortunately, she's currently on loan to my elder fellow pupil."

Monica thought he should be apologizing for taking her away against her will, rather than their means of transportation. He'd practically kidnapped her.

At a loss for words, she saw that there was someone else riding in the carriage with them—a young man with purple hair wearing a robe identical to Louis's. It was Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman and another of the Seven Sages.

While it had been almost six months since Monica's induction, she hadn't spoken much to the other Sages besides Louis. Ray, in particular, barely ever came to meetings, and even when he did he'd just stay in the corner muttering to himself. This only made him harder to talk to. Even now, sitting diagonally across from her, he had already sunk deep into his seat, murmuring to himself.

Monica tactfully averted her eyes. "Wh-where are we?" she asked Louis, who sat opposite her. "Why am I in a—...? Where is this carriage going...?"

"Our destination is the Haymes-Nalia Library. Or more specifically, the closest town to it. It's called Roah."

Her last question was the only one that got a clear response. Monica had heard of the library before, given how ancient and well-known it was. She'd never visited it personally, though. Why was Louis taking her there?

As if to answer her unspoken question, Louis continued. "The library has requested that we repair its shamanic tomes and restore the seals on its grimoires. And wait until you hear how many—over four hundred!"

They'd never get so many done in one day. It'd take at least two, even if they worked quickly. And depending on what kind of seals they were dealing with, it could easily require still more.

"And my throat would dry out like an old husk if I had to do so much sealing work myself, don't you agree?"

Sealing magecraft necessitated incantations, just like every other kind of magecraft. Certain ones might require twenty or thirty minutes of focused

chanting. Monica grimaced. She knew what Louis was getting at now.

With the look of a clergyman reciting a prayer, the man put a hand to his chest. "But it seems the powers that be have not forsaken me...for I have a very dependable colleague. One who, incredibly, just so happens to be the only person in the world who can use magecraft without chanting."

The witch famous for her unchanted magecraft stayed silent, true to her title. Louis's tyranny had her at a loss for words.

Completely ignoring her reaction, Louis picked up a bundle of cloth from the seat next to him and held it out to her. "It was hanging on the back of your chair, so I brought it."

It was her official Sage robe. She looked from it to Louis and back.

He smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "Anyway, thanks in advance for doing what sealing work can be managed without incantations! I'll handle the more complex barriers."

This man was a total despot. Still, Monica couldn't exactly refuse. She'd been dragged from her home with no time to grab anything, and her pockets were empty.

The Haymes-Nalia Library was in a forest about thirty minutes walking distance from the town of Roah. The trip had once been a little faster, but a landslide the year prior had blocked the road. If you wanted to visit it now, you had to travel a path too narrow for carriages.

By the time they arrived at Roah, however, Monica and Ray were on the verge of collapse from motion sickness and the summer heat. They were obviously not well enough to walk all the way to the library.

Louis Miller, however, was not the type of person to offer his companions time to rest until they felt better. Instead, the man who had managed to read a book throughout their carriage ride and still not get sick went into town, rented a handcart, and rolled Monica and Ray onto it. From there, he attached a rope to the vehicle and started off in the direction of the library, his steps heavy as he pulled the cart behind him.

After hauling them to their destination like luggage, Louis dragged Ray away from his spot in the shade and Monica from her curtains and brought them both to the storage room for books on magecraft located at the back of the library.

The room was pretty cramped. To the right of the entrance were five evenly spaced bookshelves. On the left was a worktable, atop which they found the tools they would need and a list of books to repair.

Louis let go of Ray, and he immediately slumped over the table and began a barrage of discontented grumbling. "You're supposed to let motion-sick colleagues rest in town... But you dragged us here like cargo... You have a gaping hole where your heart is supposed to be..."

"If I'd waited until you two were better, the sun would have gone down. Why do you think I wanted the Silent Witch's help in the first place? So we can wrap this all up before the day is out," explained Louis. He was separating the books based on difficulty of repair, his face a picture of seriousness. "After all, I have a date with my fiancée tomorrow."

Monica and Ray froze and stared at their colleague. The two younger mages looked at him as if they weren't even sure he was human. But Louis continued, unfazed.

"And is there *anything* more important than a date with one's fiancée?" he asked, as though the answer were obvious.

Ray began to bite his thumbnail and moan. "Blast. Blast. I'm so jealous... When I have a fiancée of my own, I'll throw your own words back in your face, I swear it..."

"Ah-ha-ha. Please do!"

"I bet you think I'll never be able to marry! Damn it, damn it all! Do you have any idea how many times I've thought that about myself?! I'll curse you! I'll curse you, damn it! I'll curse you so that the seat of your pants rips during your date and embarrasses you!"

"Oh, my fiancée is quite generous, I assure you," responded Louis smoothly. "If my pants were to split, she would mend them right up." Ray's eyes boggled, and he fell out of his chair. The miserable shaman grasped at his heart and began to convulse. "Countering a curse with words of love... My heart is now dead from the misery... Cause of death: wretchedness..."

Without sparing so much as a glance at his colleague spasming on the floor, Louis pushed one of the piles of books toward Monica. "My fellow Sage, please give these grimoires grade-three seals with added fire-resistance formulae, if you would."

"Um. Right..." Monica glanced at Ray as she took the stack of books from Louis.

In the Kingdom of Ridill, magecraft books and grimoires were clearly demarcated. In general, the textbook-like tomes that explained how to use magecraft or detailed its theory were referred to as magecraft books—and they were specifically categorized as *books*.

Grimoires, on the other hand, merely used the book as a medium. Inside, magecraft formulae were inscribed in special paint so that simply reading a formula aloud would activate the spell. These weren't treated as books, but rather as a type of magical item.

Before the modern advancement of magical items, grimoires were valued as handy tools that allowed anyone to easily use a spell. But the tiny stains and tears the grimoires picked up over time would often lead to their mana leaking out and to the inscribed techniques going berserk. And since their medium was paper, they deteriorated quickly.

About 80 percent of modern magical items, developed after the advent of grimoires, used formulae engraved into a mineral and then imbued with mana. These magical items could be activated simply by adding mana; they didn't require any incantation. A user did not need any knowledge of magecraft—and could trigger the spells with only a tiny bit of mana.

With grimoires, though, you needed to read the contents aloud, and they were more difficult to keep in shape. Those factors had led to their gradual decline.

That put libraries, which often carried many grimoires, in a troubling situation. As they were difficult to handle, both keeping them and having them

destroyed required a significant amount of money and effort. In recent years, it had become regular practice to install sealing barriers on unused grimoires, as this was the safest and least-expensive option.

Let's have a look at the state of this book's sealing formula..., thought Monica, checking one of the grimoires Louis had given her.

If the seal was too far gone, she'd have to remove the formulae entirely and redo them. Otherwise, she could simply restore and strengthen what was there. Finally, she'd record the grimoire's level of deterioration and what she'd done to repair it on a piece of paper, then repeat the process for the next one.

This one only has light wear, she observed. The seal is fraying, so I'll restore that. And now I'll strengthen it... Okay, all done.

As she repaired each grimoire without chanting, she used her free hand to write down the process. Because she didn't need to chant, inspecting each grimoire and recording her work were what took most of her time, rather than the actual placement of the sealing formulae.

"Um, Mister Louis... I'm done, um, sealing this pile," she said, stacking her fiftieth grimoire atop the table.

Louis's feather pen stopped moving. "You truly are an incredibly capable mage in situations like this," he said, profoundly impressed. "To think you've already finished sealing all those books in such a short time..."

Sealing techniques were a subset of barrier magecraft, which was itself relatively difficult. There were some barriers Monica couldn't handle without chanting, but for simple seals, she didn't need to. That meant her unchanted magecraft was very much in demand for tasks involving a lot of such seals.

Meanwhile, Louis was handling the advanced-sealing formulae, which were more powerful and complex. These were generally placed on highly dangerous grimoires, and naturally, activating them took a lot of effort.

As the Barrier Mage, when it came to barrier techniques—defensive barriers, sealing barriers, you name it—Louis was second to none in Ridill. The sealing formulae he placed on the grimoires were as precise as an architectural marvel, calculated down to the smallest detail.

Barrier techniques required both a deep understanding of magecraft formulae and control over one's mana so precise one could use it to pass thread through the eye of a needle. Louis maintained a high skill level in both areas and could thus create an ideal barrier using a minimum of mana. His proficiency was something even Monica couldn't emulate.

As she was absentmindedly watching him work, Louis looked over at the bookshelves. "All right, let's get the books we're done sealing back to their shelves."

"Okay...," she said.

Louis easily lifted his pile of books. Though he was on the slender side, his time with the Magic Corps had left him with arm strength and endurance on a wholly different level from Monica's.

Her frail arms started to hurt after picking up just five of the thick tomes. *Oof, they're so heavy...* She could have lifted them with wind magecraft, but considering the sealing work she still had left to do, she wanted to conserve her mana. Her twig-like arms trembling under the strain, she returned the books one by one to the shelves.

As she was diligently traveling back and forth between the shelves and the table to fetch more books, she heard a voice from behind.

"...Hey."

The gloomy, weak intonation, ready to fade away at any moment, belonged to Ray. For a second, she thought he was speaking to Louis, but his pink eyes were clearly on her.

Monica immediately clutched the books she was holding to her chest and stiffened up. Though the man was also a Sage, she'd never had a real conversation with him.

"Um, yeph?! Um, wh-wh-what do you, um—?"

As she shook with fright, Ray said in a dark voice, "I wanted to ask you something, Silent Witch... People don't generally have a great impression of shamanic tomes, do they?"

Shamanic tomes showed their reader how to use shamanic, or cursed, techniques; the books themselves weren't cursed. Like magecraft books, they were classified as *books* rather than magical items. They were the reason Ray had joined Louis and Monica for this particular job.

The shamanic arts were entirely different from magecraft—even their system of formulae was completely unrelated. As a result, it took someone with special knowledge to repair shamanic tomes. Ray, the only shaman among the Seven Sages, had been brought here for that purpose.

"People find them spooky, right?" he went on. "So spooky they think they'll be cursed just by owning one."

"Um, I'm, um, s-sorry, I don't really... Um, I don't knowmph!"

"If the cover was more like this...do you think it would make girls happier?" he asked, holding up a book.

It was one of the shamanic tomes he'd been repairing. A little earlier, she'd caught a glimpse of its cover. It had been dark red, like dried blood, but now it looked completely different.

Its new cover was light pink and featured a picture of a charming girl holding a bouquet of flowers. The pièce de résistance, however, was the title: The original *An Introduction to the Shamanic Arts* had been changed to *My First Charm*.

What's more, both the paper and the paint used in the new cover were intended for repairing grimoires, meaning they were very expensive, made with plants and minerals imbued with mana. And the cover made use of a *lot* of it. The cute ribbon, the flowers—Monica was at a loss for words.

She stood there, face frozen, as Louis stopped putting away his books for a moment and said in a tone that implied he really couldn't care less, "Are you planning on putting together an exhibition on wasted effort?"

"It's not wasted! It's...it's cute! Right?! I used the library's visitor record as a reference... I figured it might make the book more approachable for girls..."

Apparently, the charming new cover was part of a concerted effort by Ray to improve the shamanic arts' image. But he'd gone well beyond the scope of simple repair—the result was practically a different book altogether.

Nervously, Monica said, "Um, won't the person who wrote that be, um, mad...?"

"I'm the author," replied Ray.

"But it, er, might trouble the library workers..." With a different title, it would no longer match their records.

Ray thought about this for a moment, then pounded a fist into his palm. "Then I'll keep the title *An Introduction to the Shamanic Arts*, but add *My First Charm* as a subtitle... And if I make the real title smaller, maybe people won't even notice... Heh-heh. This should finally put an end to the prejudice against shamanic techniques as 'gross' and 'eerie'..."

Monica took a good look at Ray's new cover. It seemed he had a knack for the artistic; the picture he'd drawn was detailed, precise, and adorable.

...But no matter how adorable the cover was, the book itself was still a primer on the cursed arts.

Louis sighed, exasperated. "Shamanic tomes are about how to make other people unhappy, aren't they? What purpose will it serve to make the front cover cuter?"

"D-don't make fun of them...," mumbled Ray. "I'll have you know one of the curses actually raises a person's self-esteem!"

"Oh, really?" said Louis. "A curse to promote self-esteem? And what does it do, exactly?"

Ray smirked at the question—a suitably wicked shaman's smile. And then, his chest puffed out in pride, he replied, "Listen and be amazed, for this curse to raise one's self-esteem...is a curse that punches holes in someone else's socks!"

Louis sat down without saying a word and quietly resumed his sealing work.

At the other man's reaction, which all but said "This isn't even worth listening to," Ray pounded on the table and wailed, "At least hear me out!"

"Yes, yes," murmured Louis off-handedly.

Ray looked unhappy, but then he turned around to Monica and began proudly rattling off his spiel to her instead. "When you poke holes in the socks of

someone you hate, it makes you think *They're wearing socks with holes in them,* but I'm wearing socks with no holes, which raises your self-esteem... It adheres to the teaching of House Albright that curses exist to make others suffer by raising a person's self-esteem through someone else's pain..."

"Um..." Monica couldn't think of how to respond to that.

Louis, sounding utterly fed up with the whole thing, said, "My fellow Sage, you can be honest with him. Tell him the whole thing is depressing."

"Don't say that!" cried Ray. "There's even a curse that inserts you into your victim's dreams so you can bully them while they sleep! ...Heh-heh. And in a dream, you can say all kinds of things you wouldn't normally be able to..."

"Why not just say those things to their face?" asked Louis.

"I can't! That's what the curse is for!" Ray pounded the table a couple more times, seeming very bitter.

Put off, Louis held down a rocking jar of ink. "Please don't shake the table. You'll spill the ink."

"Girls love charms! So why can't they come to love the shamanic arts, too?!" Ray shouted.

Monica wasn't sure how to respond. *She* didn't care about charms for luck and the like. In fact, she was much more fascinated with the shamanic techniques, since they could be explained with formulae. She fidgeted uncomfortably with her hands.

"Charms, eh?" said Louis, his feather pen moving again. "I remember they were quite popular when I was in school. Really takes me back."

Like Monica, the Barrier Mage was a graduate of Minerva's Mage Training Institution. She was surprised to learn that the students there, all apprentice mages, were obsessed with charms of dubious efficacy.

"So charms, um...were popular...at Minerva's, too?"

Monica was usually holed up in a lab all day, and she'd never participated in any of the school's fads. Since she'd graduated a year early, as well, she had no idea what Louis was talking about.

As Monica crooked her head in confusion, Louis stopped writing and looked at her. "Not just Minerva's," he said. "They're popular with kids everywhere. One might make a charm for good luck by dripping morning dew on a floral accessory or use blue ink to write a love letter to ensure reciprocation... I'm sure even students these days know about those."

Morning dew on a floral accessory? Monica thought. Blue ink for a love letter? Naturally, she'd never even heard of charms like those. Her brow furrowed as she folded her arms.

"Pure water is more efficient than morning dew for imbuing mana," she said, offering her viewpoint on the matter as a mage. "And unless you're writing a mental-interference formula with specialized grimoire ink, using blue ink shouldn't have any effect on someone's feelings. I don't understand the logic."

Louis shrugged a little and grinned. "But it's harder to get morning dew, and blue ink is more expensive," he pointed out. "They're both special—you wouldn't normally use them. And using something special raises your self-esteem. In other words, it's all about feelings. That's the whole point."

"Oh..."

Using a special item to raise one's self-esteem? It made no sense to Monica. Why cling to such uncertainties when you could settle your mind with equations instead?

Charms... I doubt I'll have anything to do with them as long as I live, she thought, slowly getting back to the task at hand.

"Oh, and by the way, my good shaman," said Louis without stopping.

Ray was plastered to the table now. His eyes swiveled over to look at Louis. "My heart is in pieces already... Please, no more of your abuse..."

"You need permission to view shamanic tomes in the first place, don't you? Regular books are one thing, but you're trying to make a restricted book containing specialized knowledge appeal to young girls when barely anyone will read it to begin with. I really can't think of anything more meaningless than that."

His logic was sound. And yet it was worse than abuse—it was outright cruelty

that could have gouged out a person's heart. Ray coughed loudly, as if spitting up blood, then slumped down onto the table and stopped moving.

"Uh, ummm, Mister Louis...," Monica stammered.

"My fellow Sage, could you return these books to their shelves as well?" said Louis, stacking a few more sealed books on the pile. He didn't even glance at the shaman.

Monica shut her mouth, picked up the books, and headed toward the shelves.

"Last one... Phew."

After returning the final book in her arms, Monica looked from one end of the bookshelf to the other and wiped the sweat from her brow. While she had a bad habit of putting books away according to her own personal rules, this time she made sure they were all in order by author name. *I really wish I could reorganize them*, she thought, privately a little irritated as she gazed down at the shelf.

But as she did, she noticed something out of place.

What in the world? This shelf feels somehow different from the last one...

She backed up a few steps to get a view of the entire bookshelf, then immediately located the anomaly. Of the five bookcases on the right side of the room, the first four had ten shelves each, while the one at the back had only nine.

They're all the same size. Why does this one alone have fewer shelves?

If you removed one shelf from a bookcase of equal size, each of the remaining shelves would naturally have a little more space. But the bookcase in the back didn't seem to contain particularly large books.

If it had been crammed full of them, then Monica might have chalked her discovery up to that and left it alone. But since they were in the middle of working on the grimoires, the shelves were mostly empty.

And that was why Monica noticed something else: In the backing of the lowest shelf was an unnatural seam with a small gap. The gap was just about big enough to hook a finger in.

This bookcase is positioned exactly in the right corner of the room. And that means...

Monica put her finger in the gap and pulled. The shelf's backing slid away. She'd been right, and as she moved the board to the side, an empty space revealed itself beyond. It was pitch-black, however, so she couldn't see what was there.

"What are you up to, my fellow Sage?" asked Louis, looking down at her dubiously—she had her cheek to the floor and her arm through the bottom of the bookshelf.

"Mister Louis, look. There's a strange empty space—"

Mid-sentence, something coiled around her right wrist. Before she knew what was happening, it pulled the rest of her in, and she began to fall.

What?! What's this?! What's going on?!

Monica's incredible skill at numbers and her superb unchanted magecraft were useless; she was so confused she couldn't construct her formulae correctly.

What is this?! What is this?! What is thiiis?!

All she felt was the sensation of her right wrist being tugged on—and then weightlessness. She was falling. She couldn't even scream as she plummeted.

She heard Louis chant something from above—a flight spell.

"My fellow Sage!" he exclaimed.

A moment later, someone violently grabbed the back of her robe. Of course, she knew who it was—Louis had used flight magecraft to jump behind the bookshelf and save her.

All around her was darkness. She didn't know what was going on, but she could tell that Louis was hanging in the air, holding on to her robe.

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"M-Mi-Mi-Mister Louis—"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;A little light, please."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yeffer!"

Monica lit a small flame at the end of her finger without chanting. When she did, the thing coiled around her right wrist retreated from the fire and slithered away.

"Was that...a plant vine?" she wondered aloud, making her magical flame bigger to see farther.

The space they currently occupied appeared to be about three stories tall. She and Louis were stopped in the air about halfway down. Her flame was still small, so she couldn't see the whole area, but she could tell it was unnaturally large. Much larger, at least, than the room they'd just been working in.

What's more, plant vines and tree roots covered the entire floor, writhing and squirming. Some of them were thinner, like the one that had coiled around her wrist, but others were thicker than a human arm. The way they slowly squirmed this way and that made them look like snakes blanketing the floor.

Monica swayed in the air, hanging by her robe, until Louis got her under his arm. He clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Plants enlarged by mana... I have a very bad feeling about this. My fellow Sage, could you light this place up a little more?"

Monica nodded and made the flame bigger, widening their field of vision. The space must have originally been a small hidden room—small enough that you wouldn't get hurt falling through the bookshelf. There were traces of manmade structures here and there.

The vegetation, however, had dug out more and more space, resulting in its current size.

"I'll use a detection spell," said Louis. "Maintain the light. If they attack, handle it."

After those brief instructions, he began to chant. In general, a mage could only maintain two spells at once. Since Louis was keeping them in the air with flight magecraft, using a detection spell on top of that meant he wouldn't be able to cast anything else. Because of that, light and defense fell to Monica.

The plants, possibly having registered the two mages as hostile, shot a portion of their vines up toward them. From her unstable position under Louis's arm,

Monica used unchanted magecraft to create blades of wind, easily cutting each of them down.

...The vines are sturdier than I predicted. They must be imbued with mana.

After she'd dealt with a few dozen of them, Louis spoke. "I found it. It's over there—a powerful source of mana located near that tree root."

Whatever it was, it had to be the cause of all this. The problem was that they couldn't attack it recklessly. If Monica's hunch about the source was right, destroying it would make everything worse.

Louis understood that, too; his face was grim as he glared at the clusters of vines. "Now, how should we deal with this...? Let's go back up for now and regroup."

But just then, they heard a yell from above them—from Ray. Monica looked up and realized belatedly that a few of the vines had gotten all the way up to the hole in the library she'd fallen from.

Eventually, bound by vines, Ray was dragged down into the hole. But he didn't fall; he stayed where he was, bounced and rocked in place by the tips of the vines.

"What...what is this...? Have I been loved by plants this whole time...?! Am... am I being loved? Are these plants showing me their love?!"

Monica was speechless. Ray's eyes sparkled in anticipation, but all she could see was a victim about to be made into a meal.

Exasperated, Louis sighed. "He can be quite optimistic at times, can't he? Perhaps he doesn't need to poke holes in people's socks to feel good about himself."

"Ummm...," stammered Monica. "Um, we...we should help..."

As she was about to whip up a few more wind blades, Louis stopped her and called out to the young man. "My good shaman, unfortunately, you are not loved. Those plants wish to make you their meal for the day. How tragic."



"I'm... I'm not loved... I—I—I... You—you played with my heart!" Ray glared at the traitorous vines with hate in his eyes, emitting a low moan. "I thought I was loved... I thought you loved me... I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! How dare you toy with me, you *plants...* I'll curse you, I'll curse you! I'll curse you to the ends of the earth!"

Ray quickly muttered an incantation. A pattern on his left cheek glowed with purple light, then slid away from his body and into the air. It attached itself to the vines binding him, then stretched and crawled over them like blood vessels, eating away at them.

"If you won't love me, then I'll make sure you rot and never bear fruit again!"

The vines around him began to turn brown and wither, losing their hold over the shaman. Eventually, his dangling body fell into the sea of vines below with a *smack*. The cursed seal spread out from his location, eating away at the rest of the plants, causing them to shrivel up one after another. It was like a scene from a nightmare.

"Our good shaman shines his brightest when thrown right into enemy territory, don't you agree?" murmured Louis thoughtfully.

What did this man take his colleagues for anyway? As Monica let out a soft squeal, the mage pressed his monocle to his eye.

"I suppose we should pick him up," he said. "My fellow Sage, would you be so kind as to take care of the rest of the vines?"

"O-okay..."

Thirty percent of the plant life covering the floor had already rotted thanks to Ray's power, and the portion that hadn't now moved sluggishly. Louis, with Monica still under his arm, used his flight spell to begin a rapid descent toward a cluster of tree roots. Though the vines reached out for them in a last, vain act of defiance, they were quickly cut to pieces by Monica's wind blades.

"The two roots in front," indicated Louis.

Monica took aim. She was maintaining the flame lighting up their surroundings, so she could only use one more spell on top of that. She couldn't

afford to waste a shot.

No problems with coordinate axis. Calculating strength from estimated mana levels...

After approximating the strength of the roots from the amount of mana contained in the vines, she adjusted the power of her wind blades to match. It would be simple to use a more powerful spell, but then it might destroy what was underneath the roots.

...There we go.

Her wind blades tore the roots Louis had pointed out to shreds, leaving everything else intact.

The edges of Louis's mouth curled up into a violent grin. "Very skilled," he noted as he plunged his free hand into the remains and grabbed something from inside.

When his hand reemerged, he held a grimoire with a magic circle printed on its black leather cover. It was damaged, as you would expect of something so old, and the circle was faded.

Quickly, Louis chanted a sealing barrier. Mana leaped from his fingertips, then formed a golden chain that wrapped itself around the black tome. Each of its links was a powerful barrier made of its own magical formula.

Eventually, the chains seeped into the grimoire and disappeared. The formulae, however, remained on the book, slightly raised from the rest of its cover.

"And it's sealed," he said. The vines and tree roots all fell back to the ground with a series of smacks, their energy gone. Now deprived of their mana, the rest of them fell victim to Ray's curse, withering in an anticlimactic display.

\* \* \*

After leaving the hidden space now littered with the plants' remains and returning to the previous room, all three of them sat back down. Monica and Ray were exhausted—neither of them had much stamina to begin with. Louis, on the other hand, examined the black grimoire as though nothing had happened.

Ray, his jaw against the table's surface, moved his pink eyes to glare at the tome. "So that book was behind it all. But what *is* it?"

"The lettering is faded in spots, but I can make out the author's name," said Louis. "Rebecca Roseburg."

At the name, Ray and Monica opened their eyes wide.

"That's the first Witch of Thorns!" exclaimed Ray.

"W-wait! Really?!" Monica stammered. "I had no idea it was something so amazing!"

The very first Witch of Thorns, Rebecca Roseburg, was such a legend that everyone in the kingdom knew her name. She had a talent for controlling plants, and her roses came to be known as the Man-eating Rose Fortress. This "Fortress" was said to have massacred a military force of over a thousand in a vicious bloodbath.

The Roseburgs were still an elite mage family in Ridill, and one of the Seven Sages always came from their number. The current Witch of Thorns was the fifth to hold the title.

"Um, Mister Louis...," said Monica in a hushed tone. "Wouldn't a grimoire made by the first Witch of Thorns be really, really valuable?"

"The family who used to run this library must have acquired it back when grimoires were much more popular...," he mused. "And through illegal channels, no doubt."

This gave Monica a good picture of the circumstances. The one who had illegally obtained this grimoire must have hidden it in the library and placed a sealing barrier on it.

Now that the family of librarian overseers had died out, there was no way to know which of them had been its owner. What was certain, however, was that nobody with knowledge of the hidden room and its grimoire was left alive. As the days and months went by, both the book and the sealing barrier continued to deteriorate.

"I assume this grimoire contained spells for controlling plants," said Louis.

"The formulae must have leaked out, affecting the plants near the hidden room." He paused for a moment and shrugged. "The road here was closed due to a landslide, right? I have a feeling we have the plants to thank for that, too. I believe I saw roots poking out here and there."

The hidden room had been significantly enlarged, and the floor dug out pretty deep. It was easy to see how the soil and plant life around the facility could have been affected.

Ray scrunched up his nose and groaned. "Ugh. What an annoying grimoire."

"More annoying is the one who didn't properly care for it," said Louis. "Were they still alive, I'd invoice them for the trouble and cost of resealing it..."

He sighed. There was nobody to complain to. Even if he wanted to demand an extra fee for the unexpected trouble, the grimoire's owner was long dead—and so was the rest of their family.

The first Witch of Thorns's grimoire was not listed in the Haymes-Nalia Library's index. The current owners would probably insist they had no knowledge of it.

Louis ran a finger over the sealing barrier that had appeared on the grimoire. He'd used a short chant, creating a simple seal that wouldn't last long. If the grimoire really was penned by the first Witch of Thorns, he'd need to redo it with a seal of the highest grade.

"I'll have to use one of my best seals on it, then put another seal on the hidden room to keep it intact, and write a whole report on the incident..." As he counted off all the new tasks on his plate, Louis looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost evening, and they still had over half of the grimoires left to seal. "An all-nighter, then. I'll go ask those in charge for permission to stay. You two wait here."

"Wait, why me?" asked Ray.

"Like I told you earlier," said Louis. "I have a date tomorrow."

His monocled eye twinkled dangerously, exuding a powerful sense of pressure. Monica and Ray shut their mouths and got back to work.

Owing to its location amid a forest, mornings at the Haymes-Nalia Library were punctuated by scattered birdcalls. On that particular summer day, in the early hours when it was still comfortably cool, Monica—listening to the avian chorus—let go of her pen.

"That was...the last one... I'm done..."

"And I've finished with all the repairs..."

As she and Ray reported in, Louis finished sealing his final tome as well, then let go of his staff before sitting back in his chair and gazing at the ceiling, bags under his eyes.

"All finished... I should make it in time for my date."

"Um, Mister Louis, when does your date, er, start?" asked Monica.

Louis picked himself back up and answered, "Right at noon. We're meeting at the fountain in Riltaria Park in the capital."

"Hweh?! W-wait, but...that's way too far..."

Even if he took a fast horse, it would be night by the time he reached the royal capital. And a carriage would take even longer.

Louis, however, grinned and chuckled. "I had a feeling this might happen, so I summoned my contracted spirit."

The Barrier Mage was one of only a few who had formed contracts with a high wind spirit. Flight magecraft drained your mana quickly, so humans couldn't use it for very long. A high wind spirit, on the other hand, would have an easy time delivering him to his destination.

Louis took an emerald ring out of his pocket. It was a stone of contract, binding him to the spirit. Holding it aloft, he performed a quick-chant.

"Rynzbelfeid, spirit of wind, in accordance with the contract, be swift to my side!"

In response to his call, a gust of wind, laced with mana, blew in through the window. It brought with it tiny particles of yellow-green light. And inside that wind was...not Louis's contracted spirit, but a piece of paper.

It fluttered down toward them. The note—the penmanship of which left something to be desired—said this:

"I have learned the concept of 'breaks' from human culture, and I am now, as they say, 'taking' one.

I will not be back for approximately one week. Please excuse my absence.

Rynzbelfeid"

Veins rose up on Louis's temples. "That...that useless, good-for-nothing maid!"

He crumpled up the piece of paper and hurled it into the waste bin before gripping his staff and quickly chanting a spell.

When Monica and Ray heard the words, they widened their eyes.

"Mister Louis!" cried Monica. "Th-that's not... You're not, um...using flight magecraft, are you?!"

"That's insane! Even for you!" agreed Ray. "Your mana won't last long enough to get you to the capital!"

Louis opened his robe in the front to make it easier to move around, then set one foot on the window frame. "Insane? Far from it. For the woman I love, this is nothing."

With his long, braided hair fluttering in the wind, he jumped out the window.

Ray watched him grow smaller in the early morning sky. "Damn him," he said. "He just wanted a chance to use that line, didn't he?"

And so, in a feat approaching the national record for long-distance flight, Louis Miller made it very close to the appointed spot. But right at the last moment, his mana ran out, and he plunged into the fountain where he was supposed to meet his fiancée.

It is said that the woman, being very generous, at once scolded him for his reckless behavior and then devotedly nursed him back to health.



### \*\*\*\*\*\* INTERMISSION \*\*\*\*\*\*

### **May the Morning Dew Bring You Good Fortune**

"Ahchoo!"

The Barrier Mage Louis Miller sneezed. He was sitting on a sofa at home now, after attempting to use a flight spell to make his date, only to run out of mana and plummet right into the nearby fountain.

After crawling out, weak from a lack of mana, his fiancée had dragged him home, then stripped him of his soaked robe and made him change before he could say two words.

She handled the situation deftly, like a doctor whose patient refused to listen to reason. And in fact, she *was* a doctor.

Louis sat on the sofa, sniffling, as the woman with dark-brown hair briskly returned. This was Rosalie, his fiancée and the love of his life. She'd come back carrying a dry cloth, and with a firm hand, she proceeded to roughly dry his hair.

"Excuse me, Rosalie, that hurts. Um—"

"Once your hair dries, you should lie down for a while. Mana deficiency can sometimes lead to severe complications—"

"I'll be all right. Even with no mana, I can still run around just fine."

"Would you please just heed your doctor's warnings?"

Louis's fiancée was generous but very strict with her patients. That's how she was looking at him right now—as a patient, not a lover.

Our perfect date, ruined! he thought. And on today, of all days... His eyes flicked toward his fiancée in anticipation.

"You know, it's my birthday today," he said.

"Yes, it is. Happy birthday."

*"…"* 

"My present to you was the handkerchief I just used to wipe you down. Once I wash and dry it, I'll give it to you."

Traditions varied from region to region, but birthdays were generally celebrated with friends and loved ones. Particularly close friends might also bring humble gifts, such as flowers or sweets.

Since this date had been planned for Louis's birthday, he'd been looking forward to an extra-sweet atmosphere, but now his fiancée was treating him like a patient. At this rate, she'd start feeding him like he was some kind of invalid.

As he sat on the sofa with his arms crossed, wondering how to draw the interest of his far-too-serious lover, Rosalie took a seat next to him.

"If you used my lap as a pillow," she said, "your head would be too high to get any proper rest."

So she's telling me to go to bed and sleep, he thought, staying silent.

Then, lowering her voice, Rosalie continued. "But if that's what it takes to get you to lay down—well, then I wouldn't necessarily mind it."

Her ears were very slightly red. Louis had to hold in a sudden impulse to embrace her right then and there. If he did, she'd throw him directly into bed without another word.

"Well, if you insist," he replied.

Having entrusted his head to her lap, he looked up at her and noticed a small hairpin to one side of her head. It was a modest flower ornament, one he'd given her during their school days.

"That hairpin...," he said.

Rosalie didn't respond, instead covering his eyes with a hand. He wanted to believe that, beneath her insistence that he shut up and go to sleep, was an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

He closed his eyes and thought back to when he'd bought the hairpin.

Charms? What an absurd thought, he'd muttered, after picking up a bottle of blue ink at the ink store and shuddering at its price tag. Instead, since he was still just a student, he'd desperately searched for some morning dew—to put it on a floral accessory for a good-luck charm.

"It looks amazing on you," he finished, grasping the wrist of the hand covering his eyes before sliding it aside and grinning.



## The Black Cat Detective's Stray Reasoning

~The Delinquents' Secret Book-Reading Mission~





Felix Arc Ridill, second prince of the Kingdom of Ridill, was seated on the sofa in his room in the Serendia Academy boys' dorm, reading through a pile of documents.

Ninety percent of them related to the festival the school had held two days prior. There had been a few mishaps, such as the accident during the play, but for the most part, the students, faculty, and guests were all satisfied.

Felix had been able to form connections with leading figures from both inside and outside the kingdom who had been invited as guests. His grandfather, Duke Clockford, had apparently given him a passing grade as well.

Of course, even now that it was over, there was still plenty to do—supervising the cleanup, taking care of any lingering issues, reading through thank-you letters, and reviewing expenditures, among other things.

No classes were held at the academy for two days after the festival. During that time, Felix and the rest of the student council had come to school and busily worked on the remaining festival duties. It was now the night of the second day; starting the next morning, classes would be held as usual. Unfortunately, the prince still had a mountain of paperwork to look through before that.

The thank-you letters should be safe in Elliott's and Bridget's capable hands, he thought. The council's two secretaries were well-connected in high society and skilled at dealing with such people. They had been the ones to receive guests on the day of the festival and had composed the invitations and thank-you notes as well.

Elliott had beautiful, showy handwriting, and Bridget was fluent in foreign languages and could handle the guests from abroad. As Felix checked each of the thank-you letters they had written, he could tell they had done an excellent job, working in references to conversations they'd had at the festival as well as topics related to each guest's domain.

Felix then looked over the next batch of documents. *Cyril already put together* all the reports from the club presidents and department heads, I see. He never slows down.

Every year, a few people in charge were late with their reports. Cyril had laid the groundwork in advance, though, and even summarized the information so it would be easy for Felix to review. This was something only Cyril could have managed. The club presidents and department heads were a haughty group, but he had earned their trust.

Neil, the general affairs officer, had written up detailed summaries of any remaining issues, complete with a list. Neil, the son of a baron, was often thought to be too low-ranking for the student council, but as a member of the Lineage of the Mediators, he was skilled in management and negotiations. Very skilled, in fact, and everyone knew it. He was usually the one to quickly notice small details the rest of them had missed.

It's always so helpful having him around. Maybe it would be best to start preparations for his takeover as the next student council president.

Filing that thought away for future consideration, Felix picked up the next set of documents. These were accounting reports, and they were absolutely *packed* with tiny letters and numbers.

"...Wow."

He hadn't intended to make a sound, but this was far more work than could have been done in two days.

The submission deadline had been two *weeks* after the festival, and he knew he'd said as much. But the drafter herself must have become gleefully absorbed in the calculations and finished the whole thing already.

The student council's accountant, Monica Norton, was extremely talented at math and very partial to numbers. She had been the first to ever compliment his body on its adherence to the golden ratio, after all, and she would start chanting equations like prayers whenever she was nervous.

She was an oddball, always much livelier when reviewing accounting reports than when she was chatting with him.

It would be a waste to let her talents go unused.

He wished he could help her, since Count Kerbeck and his daughter both treated her so coldly, but the Kerbecks were a very prominent noble family in the east. Their military strength was second to none in the kingdom, and even a member of the royal family like Felix couldn't easily intervene in their affairs.

I wonder if I can negotiate with his daughter...with Lady Isabelle Norton.

Plenty of people at the academy wanted her as an ally, and Felix was no exception. For the moment, she hadn't backed either prince, deftly maintaining a neutral position.

I feel like I could engage her with talk of our shared personal interest, but...

Their shared personal interest—as he thought of it, he heaved a sigh. He'd been so busy with festival work lately that he hadn't had any downtime to enjoy his hobbies. Ever since the night he and Monica had stayed in Madam Cassandra's establishment in the town of Corlapton, he hadn't read any books of the sort he enjoyed.

Maybe I'll read a little before bed, once I'm finished with all this, he thought, picking up the last few documents to check through.

The final batch wasn't related to the festival. Instead, it was a communication about a famous library in Ridill that would be closing down and donating part of its collection to Serendia Academy.

Felix scanned the list of donations, not expecting much. But then he sucked in his breath and opened his eyes wide.

"Wil! Wil! Wildianu! Emergency!"

In response to his cries, a white lizard poked its little head out of his shirt pocket. The high water spirit looked up at him with faint-blue eyes and asked stiffly, "What is it, Master?"

Felix motioned for Wildianu to climb onto the back of his hand; the spirit did so, preparing for the worst.

The prince traced his finger over the name of one of the books in the list. "One of these donations... It was written by the Silent Witch. By Lady Everett!"

*"…"* 

The white lizard looked at the prince like he wanted to say something but remained silent.

Felix was excited, and his cheeks flushed a rosy red as he prattled on. "And it's the thesis where she talks about quick-chanting, even though she doesn't need to chant at all! She has such a depth of knowledge when it comes to magecraft formulae. She even famously created a few new ones herself. In this book, she writes about how to shorten one of the formulae she proposed. As a fan of the Silent Witch, I *must* read it. Don't you agree, Wildianu?"

"Master... Well, but it's a book on magecraft, and you..."

At the spirit's unspoken implication, Felix lowered his brows slightly and formed a sad smile. "Yes, I know. If I borrow it, there will be a record."

Felix knew that his grandfather, Duke Clockford, regularly checked what books he borrowed from the library. The prince was forbidden to study magecraft, so he couldn't borrow any books on the subject from the school—if he did, the duke would know.

As long as he was under the man's authority, he didn't even have the freedom to choose what he read.

...But even so, I want to read it.

Right here, at this school, within easy reach, was a book written by the one he adored. He thought about standing in the aisle at the library to read it, but it would be extremely bad if anyone saw him.



Could I have Wildianu keep watch while I read? Then he could fool anyone who showed up with an illusion... No, that won't work.

The second library where the book was stored also held several grimoires. Unlike the book in question, which explained ways to use magecraft and was essentially a textbook, grimoires were a type of magical item, imbued with mana of their own. Because of their presence, the library had a barrier to prevent any interference from spirits. As long as that barrier existed, Wildianu couldn't go near the second library.

As Felix was racking his brain over how he might read this book penned by his idol, a certain girl came to mind.

"That's it! I'll ask her for help."

"Her?" asked Wildianu dubiously.

Felix shot him a conspiratorial wink. "A delinquent friend of mine."

\* \* \*

Monica awoke to the feeling of soft, squishy paws pushing on her cheeks.

She lifted her heavy eyelids to see her attic room's familiar ceiling—and a golden-eyed black cat looking down at her. The cat was her familiar, Nero.

He pressed a front paw against her forehead and said excitedly, "'And the culprit...is you!'"

"...What did I do?" asked Monica as she squirmed out of bed.

Ryn, a beautiful woman in a maid outfit, was waiting to one side and bowed to her. "Lady Silent Witch," said the spirit turned maid with the kind of casual tone you'd use to tell someone good morning. "It seems you were the culprit all along."

"Um, so what's my crime?" Monica asked, confused.

Ryn held up a book. The title on the cover read *The Casebook of Famed Detective Calvin Alcock*. "This is a detective novel. It's very popular right now."

So that was it. Nero and Ryn were obsessed with this novel—so obsessed they had pulled Monica into their little detective game right as she woke up.

"Do you have any idea how crazy awesome detectives are?!" asked Nero. "They're way smarter than anyone else, and they can solve even the hardest cases in a flash!"

"Oh..."

The cat seemed to have a very romantic notion of what a detective was, but in Monica's experience, such people were simply information brokers. They did things like spy on potentially adulterous partners or search for lost pet cats—private investigators, essentially. But it seemed the character, Calvin Alcock, in this detective novel, outwitted even the military police to solve cases with drama and flair.

"So this murder happens at a rich guy's mansion," Nero continued. "And the victim is pierced through the heart in a totally sealed-off room. They can't find the murder weapon anywhere!"

Her familiar launched into a fervent explanation of the vanished weapon and the sealed room. As Monica sluggishly got changed, she commented disinterestedly, "Couldn't someone have triggered a wind arrow spell remotely?"

"There were no mages among the suspects."

"The culprit could have escaped using flight magecraft."

"Mages aren't part of the story!"

"Then someone could have used a magical item—"

"There weren't any of those, either!"

"Okay, then my guess would be a spirit—"

"The culprit was human," Nero insisted. "And the trick he came up with was incredible. I was totally shocked!"

But before the cat could explain, Ryn quickly scooped him up. "Sir Black Cat, you mustn't. Revealing a mystery novel's trick robs those who haven't read it of their enjoyment."

"Oh yeah. You're right." Nero put his front paws over his mouth.

Monica didn't care about mystery novels, and she had no plans to read any in the future, so she didn't care if Nero spoiled the trick. "If the culprit couldn't use magecraft, they could have just hired someone who could," she pointed out as she put her arms through the sleeves of her bolero.

Nero looked at her in exasperation. "Look... What matters in mystery novels is that there's a hidden ruse."

"But isn't that kind of illogical? The grander and more intricate the trick, the more illogical it seems..."

"Illogical, huh...?" Monica's familiar shot a glance at her desk as if he had something to say.

Monica ignored him and continued getting ready. She was currently doing her hair. The festival cleanup period was over, so classes were beginning again as normal. She couldn't take her time.

"I'm going to draw some water. I'll be right back," she said to Nero and Ryn, opening the door to the stairs.

After Monica left the attic room, Nero and Ryn exchanged glances.

"That's illogical, right?" asked Nero.

"Yes, it is," replied Ryn.

In the mystery novel *The Casebook of Famed Detective Calvin Alcock*, the detective said this: "Never overlook anything odd in the course of your daily life, no matter how trivial. The culprit's true motives always lie hidden within the illogical."

Nero deftly jumped onto the desk. Two things had changed about this attic room since the school festival. One was the white rose placed in a vase on the desk.

"I have seen this rose before," noted Ryn. "The Lady Silent Witch wore it during the school festival."

"Oh, right. And this ribbon was tied to it."

The de-thorned white rose had a blue ribbon affixed to its stem. After bringing it back on the day of the festival, Monica had put it into a glass vase.

The whole reason she was going to draw water was to change its contents.

As a rule, water produced with magecraft contained mana, making it unsuited for drinking or eating. The same went for watering plants. Monica didn't mind drinking a little, though, and would create her own water to brew coffee.

But now she was going out to draw water specifically for this one rose.

As far as Nero knew, the girl had never particularly enjoyed arranging cut flowers in vases or taking care of them. He'd once picked flowers for her on a whim, but she hadn't admired or appreciated them. Instead, she'd hung them up near the front door to make use of the herbs' bug-repelling properties. If she was displaying a rose in her room like this, something had to be going on.

That wasn't the only thing that was new, either. Near the window, several white flowers had been hung using hemp twine.

"What do you call these flowers?" asked Nero. "I may be amazing, but I don't know the names of many flowers."

"I am not sure, either, but I believe they are wildflowers, rather than ones raised in a flower bed."

Ryn was right—they were plain wildflowers. Though they were all white, they had different shapes. Some had petals growing in a radial pattern, while others were bell-shaped. Monica had picked them during the two days the council had spent cleaning up after the festival.

Nero had asked why she was hanging them up like that, and she'd told him she was drying them out.

"At first, I figured she was hanging them up to ward off bugs. But they don't have the right smell for that."

"I agree," said Ryn. "Especially since winter is approaching, and there aren't many insects around. I find it difficult to believe that's her reason for hanging them up."

After the school festival, Monica had carefully placed the white rose in a vase and hung white flowers by the window to dry. It wasn't like her. It was illogical. What did it all mean?

"I smell a case," said Ryn.

"Yep. Same here."

They knew she'd tell them if they asked, but they wanted to play detective, and for that, they needed a case.

Nero deftly folded his front legs and grinned. "And I suppose that means we need a detective."

"Would you care to have a talented head maid as your assistant, Lord Detective?"

"The black cat detective and his head maid assistant. I like that. Sounds like a crazy-strong combo."

They nodded to each other, opened the window, and headed out together.

When Monica returned a few minutes later with the water, she was confused by the cat and spirit's sudden disappearance. Telling herself they must have gone for a walk, she changed out the white rose's water.

\* \* \*

The first class after the two-day break was an elective. Monica had chosen chess and horseback riding, and this class was the latter. Clad in her riding uniform, which she hadn't worn in a while, Monica practiced her form atop the horse, with Felix supporting her from behind as usual.

"I'm surprised," he said, sounding impressed. "You've gotten a lot better."

The corners of Monica's lips tingled and squirmed in happiness. She couldn't tell whether she'd genuinely improved, but she was no longer as scared of being up so high. I'm glad I practiced flight magecraft.

Recently, Monica had been spending her free time atop a broom, practicing her flying. She still had a long way to go in terms of stability, but it seemed to have honed her sense of balance a little bit.

"You've been practicing in secret, haven't you?"

"...Um, well, I suppose I have," she answered with a smile.

Felix reached around from behind and put his hand on hers as she gripped the reins of her horse. "In that case, why don't we try a little trot?"

"Oof... U-ummm... Okay!"

She wanted to say that she was still too scared to run, but she swallowed the words. There were many things, flight magecraft and dancing included, that required one to learn by doing. She couldn't keep walking her horse around forever.

Felix gave the animal's flanks a light kick to set it into a slow trot, then headed for the advanced course.

W-wait! We're going that way?! Monica had assumed they would be trotting around the basic course for beginners. Her face began to grow pale as she focused on maintaining her balance.

The horse quickly proceeded deeper into the woods. The last time she'd gone on this course, there had still been red and yellow leaves on the trees. Now, though, they'd mostly fallen off, heralding the arrival of winter.

It doesn't look like many flowers are blooming around here... She'd been hoping to pick any she found of a good size, but she kept that thought to herself.

Eventually, Felix brought the horse to a stop along the course. Then he turned it toward a side path—one Monica remembered. *It's his secret walking route...*, she thought.

This wasn't an official course, and given how tight the path was, traversing it on horseback was difficult.

As Felix slowly guided the horse at a walking pace, Monica asked, "Are you, um, going to watch a magic battle again?"

"Well, that, and...I actually had something to ask of you. I—"

Before he could finish, they heard a loud blast from deeper in the woods. It was the sound of flame-aspected magecraft. Apparently, a battle had already begun.

Calming the spooked horse, Felix moved them to a spot where they could view the action. Farther into the woods, there was a slightly more open area. There, a barrier was set up for the purpose of conducting magic battles.

Magecraft attacks couldn't hurt those inside it; instead, they drained the target's mana.

"Cyril Ashley! Today's the day I finally defeat you!"

The cry came from a tall male student with short blond hair. He'd been challenging Cyril the last time they came to watch, too. He was a third-year student in the advanced course named Byron Garrett, and he was also the president of the magic battle club.

Byron chanted rapidly. Monica couldn't make out the whole incantation, but with how short it was, she could tell it was a quick-chant. The boy swung one arm forward, and a fiery spear appeared in the air before flying straight at Cyril.

The aim was off, though. Cyril didn't even have to avoid it; the spear struck a nearby tree and dissipated.

Cyril's opponent doesn't seem very used to quick-chanting, thought Monica. The third and fifth clauses of his formula were wrong, causing a decrease in the mana's density and accuracy.

Still, the boy continued awkwardly quick-chanting, this time creating about ten flaming bolts and sending them after Cyril. While these packed less of a punch, the quantity ensured that a few of them would hit their target. Before they could, though, Cyril created a wall of ice to block them.

Then, maintaining the ice wall, he knelt down and touched the ground. From his finger sprouted slender, ivy-like stalks of ice that traveled over the earth, reaching for Byron—who didn't notice them.

As Byron desperately continued his quick-chanting, the tendrils of ivy reached his feet and touched the tip of his shoes. Immediately, they expanded in size and froze his foot solid.

By the time his opponent noticed what had happened to his legs, Cyril had already cast his next spell. This time, a rain of ice arrows shot down from above. These were also the result of quick-chanting, but they were far more precise.

Lord Cyril has a high mana capacity, as well as solid control... And if he can use quick-chanting without issue, then he must have a good understanding of magical formulae. He could easily work his way up to the level of a high mage if

he learned to use spells beyond ice magecraft.

As Monica mulled this over, Felix started their horse at a slow walk. "Cyril's improved again," he noted.

"Um, yes. It's amazing."

"It is," replied Felix quietly.

His voice was gentle and kind, but Monica heard a twinge of envy in it. *He really does...want to study magecraft*, she thought.

Why would that be forbidden to him? Was it a problem with his constitution? Perhaps his mana levels were extremely low, for example.

"Oh, ummm," she said. "Sir, you said, well, that you had a request for me..."

"That's right."

Felix brought the horse to a stop a short distance from the barrier enclosing the magic battle.

"Monica," he whispered into her ear.

She nearly jumped out of her skin. His hand was on hers where she held the reins, and she could feel it squeezing her fingers.

"I need your help, as a fellow delinquent."

Monica slowly turned around, mouthing the word *lke*. When she looked up at him, she saw how serious he looked—he seemed almost desperate.

Monica gulped and glanced around. Neither Nero nor Ryn should be anywhere near them. After making sure, she began to speak. "What was...your, um, request...?"

"Do you know of the Haymes-Nalia Library?"

Without meaning to, Monica widened her eyes at the unexpected name. Back when she'd first become a Sage, Louis had taken her to the famous library—one of the most historied in the kingdom—to do some work sealing grimoires.

We found the first Witch of Thorns's grimoire and ended up in quite a situation..., she reflected, nodding to Felix. "Um, the Haymes...? I've, uh... I've heard of it, at least."

"They closed down a little while back," he explained. "Part of their collection is being donated to the Serendia Academy library. And one of the books..."

His grip tightened. His voice was passionate and miserable as he whispered to her.

"One of them is an essay by the Silent Witch."

Monica's throat made an odd, guttural noise. She didn't fall off the horse in shock, though, which she figured was worthy of praise. "So ummm... You want me to..."

"The library keeps a record of who borrows what, so I can't read any books on magecraft..."

She watched him as his face took on a rosy, fervid hue, his expression entranced, as though he were talking about someone he loved.

"But I must... I *must* read it. If I'm to do so without leaving my name in the record, though, I'll have to read it right there in the library. Secretly—so nobody finds out."

"So then, ummm..."

"While I'm reading it, I want you to be my lookout."

It had already been several months since Monica had been entrusted with the second prince's protection. How could she ever have imagined *he himself* would ask her to keep watch while he secretly read a book in the library?

"Um, what if I just borrowed it, and uh, lent it to you? Would that...?"

Sub-lending a book to someone was frowned upon, but the situation being what it was... It would be a lot less risky than someone catching him in the act, right?

But Felix shook his head bitterly. "I considered that, too, but you haven't completed a fundamental magecraft class, right? If you borrowed it, someone might suspect something."

He was right about that. Monica was hiding her identity as one of the Seven Sages, so she didn't want to check out any magecraft books and risk leaving a record. If someone was to press her on why she'd done so, she wouldn't know

what to say.

I didn't know the Haymes had one of my essays... I wonder which one it is. Some of them would take a long time to read..., she thought, groaning inwardly. "Ummm, magecraft books are...well, kind of dense, right? Will you...will you be able to read the whole thing while standing there?"

"I'm confident in my speed-reading and memorization abilities."

*"…"* 

Monica wished the prince would put his remarkable talents to use doing something else.

But...he wants to read it that badly, huh...? If Ike, Monica's one-and-only delinquent companion, was this desperate, then she wanted to help.

Squeezing the reins, she looked up at Felix. "When, um, do you want to do it?"

At that moment, Monica was sure she saw his face light up.

"They'll be putting the donated books on the shelves after class today. Fortunately, we don't have a student council meeting, so... Will you help me?"

She nodded. Felix's eyebrows rose in a mixture of relief and glee. "Thank you."

\* \* \*

"Gah! Damn that Cyril Ashley! I can't believe I lost again!"

During lunch break, Byron Garrett, president of the magic-battle club, visited the magic history clubroom to complain. As he lamented his defeat and scratched at his short blond hair, the chubby, black-haired boy sitting across from him busily munched on some baked goods. This was the magic history club's president, Conrad Askam.

While Byron and Conrad were very different—one preferring magic combat and the other historical research—they were both learning magecraft. That had brought them together during their time in the intermediate course, where they'd become friends. They would often go to each other's clubroom to chat.

"This makes twenty-seven losses out of twenty-seven matches since the

beginning of the year," noted Conrad.

"Ugh... He humiliated me! Damn you, Cyril Ashley... Not even of noble birth, but appointed to the student council by the prince on account of his incredible work ethic... He's just...he's just...!" Byron pounded his tightly squeezed fists against the desk and shouted from the pit of his stomach, "He's a real-life paragon!"

Conrad watched his friend out of the corner of his eye as he leisurely sipped some tea. His gaze was on something far in the distance. "You really like the guy, huh?"

"I do *not* like him! But he sets an excellent example for the rest of us! I just think I should learn from him!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Don't you remember the tragedy of our first meeting, Conrad?!" Byron hit the desk a couple more times to stress his point.

Conrad laughed breathily, like his voice was hoarse. "Yes, yes, it was quite the tragedy. You mistook him for a girl, ogled him, tried to flirt with him—and it turned out he was a boy. Heh-heh-heh."

Back when he was in the intermediate course, a transfer student Byron hadn't seen before—Cyril Ashley—had come to one of his electives.

At the time, Cyril was much shorter, and when he sat down, he had the air of a delicate young girl. Plus, since Byron was in a different grade, he hadn't known Cyril's first *or* last name. Since the new kid didn't know right from left, Byron had decided to offer him guidance and spoke to him with pretty clear ulterior motives. But upon learning his target was a boy, Byron had fallen into a considerable fit of despair.

And the tragedy hadn't stopped there, either.

After moving into the advanced course and getting engaged, Byron had accidentally overheard his fiancée talking about Cyril.

"My type? Well... You know. Like Lord Cyril Ashley, I suppose."

A day later, Byron challenged Cyril to a duel—and quickly lost.

"Damn you, Cyril Ashley. Not only did you steal my heart, but my fiancée's, too..." He pounded the desk again and yelled, "You thief! You first-love thief!"

At this point, Conrad's laughter sounded more like strange, inhuman coughing. "Keh, keh-heh-heh... Bfft-heh... Things still aren't going well between you and her, are they? Maybe you should spend more time chasing after your fiancée instead of the vice president."

"I told you: I just want to beat him to a pulp! That will open her eyes!"

Conrad watched his friend as if gazing at a heartwarming scene, then stroked his chubby chin. "If you want your fiancée to pay more attention to you, shouldn't you have given her a flower accessory during the school festival? I'm sure if you gave her a yellow rose with an orange ribbon as a gift..."

Byron knew about the custom of giving a rose ornament to a female student you wanted to dance with. But he kicked Conrad's suggestion to the curb with a sniff. "I've no need of such customs!"

Many of the members of Byron Garrett's family became knights or joined the Magic Corps. Perhaps that was why he had a hot temper and a tendency to obsess over manliness and honor.

"Giving her flowers?" he scoffed. "Weak. I didn't have to do that to dance with her!"

"Right. And how did she react?"

"She treated me as coldly as ever. What of it?!"

It seemed to Byron that, unless he beat Cyril Ashley, his fiancée would never pay any attention to him. Desperate, he'd learned quick-chanting, but his precision left something to be desired. Whenever he did a quick-chant, his spells always came apart somewhere. At worst, they would dissipate before even reaching their target.

Magecraft was a skill only realized through vast and extensive calculations. Even for a single flame spear, you needed to derive its power, shape, speed, flight range, and duration, then work all that into the formula.

If he was being honest, Byron knew quick-chanting was still too much for him.

But he wanted to win. He wanted to beat Cyril Ashley.

As he grumbled, Conrad leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Heh-heh... You may have zero wins against that first-love thief, but I have good news for you."

"You do?"

Conrad gave another loud, breathy laugh as he smiled and nodded. "There are a number of books being donated to the library, and one of them..."

\* \* \*

In order to solve the mystery of Monica's sudden interest in flowers, the black cat detective, Nero, and his faithful assistant, Ryn, split up and conducted their own investigations. Once finished, they reunited at their secret base.

"I understand the term secret base tickles boyish fancies," said Ryn.

"Well, I'm not a little boy or anything, but I totally get that. It's pretty nice."

Nero and Ryn's "secret base" was a building more generally referred to as "the old dormitory." It was located deep in the woods on the grounds of Serendia Academy and was quite a bit more cramped than the current dorms. The structure itself wasn't that old, though; it still seemed perfectly usable.

However, the surrounding land had a very high concentration of mana, which had been deemed unsafe for humans. That had forced the school to abandon the place.

There were magical items that could absorb the excess mana from soil, but certain areas weren't conducive to the process. The land near the old dorm must have been one such example.

Though people with low tolerances who lived for an extended period in such places could suffer from mana poisoning, spirits, for whom mana was basically food, found them most comfortable. Hence Ryn's frequent visits to the old dorm. The wind spirit seemed to have made it into her own little hideaway.

Nero took a look around the building's entrance hall and nodded, satisfied. "Yep, this is one good secret base."

Despite being abandoned, it had clearly been constructed for the sons and

daughters of nobles. The inside was expansive and comfortably decorated. Not bad, in the cat's opinion. He'd have loved it even more if there were a few couches and easy chairs, but he couldn't ask for *that* much. Instead, he—still in cat form—stood up on his hind legs and rested his body against the wall, folding his shorter front legs against his chest.

It was one of the awesome detective poses he'd come up with—leaning against a wall, arms folded. Now if only he had a pipe.

"All right, let's swap information," he said. "Give me your report, my loyal assistant."

"I shall. I investigated the Lady Silent Witch's desk."

During the two days following the festival, Monica had constantly been in her attic room writing. Specifically, she'd been writing magical formulae in between her accounting work.

"In secret, I looked at the formula she has been working on for the past two days..."

"Great! What did you find out?"

"Nothing. Magical formulae are extremely difficult to understand."

Unlike humans, who used mana by constructing magical formulae, spirits like Ryn manipulated it freely based on feeling. Therefore, Ryn hadn't been able to grasp even a tiny bit of Monica's work.

But Nero couldn't exactly blame her. He didn't understand a lick of magecraft, either.

"However," she continued, "next to the magecraft formula were the words plant moisture content. The Lady Silent Witch said she was drying the flowers she hung by the window, so I believe the formula is for drying plants."

Nero used his front paw to stroke his chin in thought. As they'd surmised, Monica was trying to do *something* with the white flowers she'd collected using magecraft.

"What sort of things did you investigate, Lord Detective?"

"Right! I decided to tail her."

After a while, he'd grown tired of it, though. During Monica's elective, he'd sneaked into the kitchen to snatch a few pieces of meat. He left that part out, of course. Still, he had to admit that bone-in meat fresh out of the oven was simply delectable. Chicken was always tasty, whether cooked in stew, fried, or left raw, but when the bone was still in there, *man*, it hit different.

Nero licked his lips; there was still a little grease on them. "And I overheard her talking with her classmate Lana during her afternoon break."

He thought back to the conversation.

"Monica, you don't have student council work today, right? We should have a tea party. I got ahold of some very good leaves."

Lana had smiled as she made the proposal, but Monica had started playing with her fingers apologetically.

"I... I'm really sorry. After school, I have...I have something really important to do."

A really important thing to do—naturally, this was news to both Nero and Ryn. "Suspicious, right?" said the cat.

"Suspicious, indeed," replied the maid.

"We'll need to keep a much closer eye on her."

No one present thought to ask the very reasonable question: What happened to Monica's mission of guarding the second prince?

The black cat detective and his maid assistant, both burning with a detective's sense of duty, nodded to each other and immediately headed for the school building.

\* \* \*

Once classes were over, Monica made her way to the library, fidgeting and worrying about others watching her. Obviously there was nothing she needed to worry about—she was an academy student, and she was just using the library. But the request she'd received made her nervous nonetheless.

At Serendia Academy, the library was housed in a separate building from both the intermediate and the advanced course classes. Each of the three structures were linked by covered walkways.

Felix was waiting for Monica in front of the passage leading out of the advanced course building.

"Hey there," he said, waving casually.

"Um, h-helloph," she stammered.

"Glad to see you... Let's be going, shall we?"

As he looked toward the library building, Felix's blue eyes seemed to somehow sparkle, and there was a bounce in his step.

It was time for their mission to begin.

Magecraft books were highly technical, so they were kept in a separate room from the general-use books. This library kept them up on the second story in Library 2, along with the grimoires. If anyone unfamiliar with magecraft was to go in or out of that room, it would be enough for someone to notice and remember.

The two of them would pretend to be on student council business, there to check if the donated books had been correctly stored and evaluate the librarians' work. That would get them into Library 2, where they'd pretend to check over the list while getting closer to the shelves. And there, Felix would find the book he was after and stand around reading it for a while.

Monica's job was to keep watch in the interim. If anyone came, she was to stall for time—by saying they were currently matching these shelves up to their list, for example—so that Felix could return the book and they could leave with nobody the wiser.

This is so much work just to stand there and read a book... And it's one of my essays, too... Oogh...

She privately pressed a hand to her stomach as Felix said "Here's the list" and passed her a piece of paper filled with the names of books. Naturally, it was the real thing. And judging by the handwriting, Felix had written it himself.

The prince is abusing his authority, using diversionary tactics, and secretly reading in the aisle...

From the intricacy of the plan, you'd think he was trying to steal the book for himself, not simply stand around reading it. The whole thing was almost pathetic.

Once inside the library building, Felix headed straight to the counter and greeted the student in charge. Apparently, he'd told them about the student council's check in advance—he'd laid the groundwork perfectly.

"All right, let's go check this list," he said to Monica.

"R-right..."

Prompted by the prince, Monica took a step forward. But just then, she heard a voice from somewhere beside them.

"...Oh? Now here's an unusual pairing."

They looked in the voice's direction and saw a black-haired noble girl standing there, holding a book to her chest. It was Claudia Ashley, the younger sister of the student council's vice president, Cyril Ashley.

"H-hello," said Monica weakly as the girl's lapis lazuli eyes stared at her.

"Student council work?" she asked.

"Y-yes! We're, checking, um, the newly donated books...!"

"Isn't that the librarians' job?"

Monica's shoulders gave a surprised jolt, but Felix cut in immediately. "We had an incident in the past where a librarian didn't put the donated books on the shelves and instead sold them in secret. We're here as student council members to double-check and deter anyone from doing that again."

"...That happened thirty-eight years ago," muttered Claudia as if to herself. She was suspicious about why the prince would bring up such an ancient matter after all this time.

But something about Claudia's attitude bothered Monica. From the moment she'd caught sight of them, she hadn't spared one glance for Felix. She watched Monica and Monica alone, only responding to the prince's words by muttering to herself.

Is...is it because she thinks I'm m-more likely to give us away? thought Monica, panicking.

Claudia brushed a strand of black hair off her cheek and behind her ear, then glanced around. "I see my brother isn't here with you... Such a boring task would better suit him, I think."

"I do boring jobs sometimes, too," said Felix, smiling at her. The expression was one of familiarity and warmth; most people would have been impressed at how passionate he was about his work.

Claudia, however, didn't even look at him, instead keeping her eyes on Monica as she once again muttered to herself. "Actually, I recall him saying that he didn't have any student council work after classes today and so he would be practicing his magecraft... He implied nobody else on the council would have any work, either. How odd..."

If Cyril found out Felix was doing work in the library, he would immediately insist on helping. And then Felix wouldn't be able to stand around and read. Now Monica started to really panic.

Felix, though, responded in a completely natural tone of voice. "Cyril did a lot to help with cleaning up after the festival. I wanted to give him the day off."

"So you decided to drag around Monica instead," came Claudia's sharp reply.

The prince seemed unsure how to respond, though he kept smiling.

Monica didn't know what to do. At this rate, they'd run out of time for Felix to read the essay.

I have to do something...!

She thought desperately about how to pull Claudia away from the prince. She thought and thought and thought, and eventually she managed to squeeze out a few words. "Lady Claudia! I, um, there's, well, a book I really want to read, so... Ummm, you know a lot about the library, right?! Could you help me find it?"

"That's the librarians' job, isn't it?"

"Oh..." Monica closed her mouth.

Claudia took Monica's cheeks in her white-gloved hands. Then, bringing her face so close their noses almost touched, she smirked. Her next words came out in a whisper low enough the prince couldn't hear.

"...I'm very interested, however, in what it is the prince wants to do while you're buying time for him."

She knows!

With Monica now struck speechless, Claudia stepped away, her skirt fluttering as she beckoned to the girl.

"...Come. You are a precious friend, so I will tell you where to find the book you wish to read."

"Tha...thank... Thank *youph*!" she stammered, shooting Felix a look out of the corner of her eye, her mouth moving up and down without making a sound.

Now's your chance! Go read that book!

Felix nodded slightly as though he understood. "I can finish checking by myself. You go borrow that book you wanted."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Claudia had secret designs to find a hiding spot and see what Felix was up to. It was Monica's mission to stop her and buy enough time for the prince to read the essay. That's what she told herself anyway, forgetting entirely about her original mission to protect him.

I have to figure out a way to distract Lady Claudia...!

As Monica frantically racked her brain, Claudia slipped her arm through Monica's and whispered into her ear. "It will be so entertaining to see how long you can keep me occupied... Don't you agree?"

Monica let out a frightened squeal.

...I'm sorry, Monica. And thank you.

Felix sent his silent gratitude as Claudia dragged Monica away, then hastened up to Library 2. Losing his lookout was a hard blow, but he was good at sensing when others were around. Not many people used the upstairs library, so he'd know right away if anyone approached.

I'd like nothing more than to lose myself in the text, but... That would be asking too much.

Monica was risking life and limb to buy him time. He couldn't waste what few moments she'd stolen for him.

It seems Lady Claudia dislikes me quite a bit. Monica probably hadn't realized that. The noble girl generally treated the prince like he wasn't there, and whenever she replied to something he said, she'd look away and say it as if talking to herself.

Her behavior was incredibly rude considering he was royalty, but Felix didn't intend to criticize her for it. Better not to make enemies of the Lineage of the Wise—said to be the ultimate knowledge keepers in the Kingdom of Ridill.

Felix climbed the stairs to one side of the first-floor hall, heading straight for Library 2. Unlike the first floor, which had a lot of books for casual reading, the second floor held mostly technical volumes, so it usually had few visitors.

But that day, there seemed to be an awful lot of students around.

The libraries were closed during the festival, so maybe everyone decided to come today instead, he thought as he rounded a corner.

That was when he saw it. Library 2, his destination—flooded with people.

*"…"* 

Struck dumb, Felix stood there in the hallway as a pair of male students leaving the library greeted him.

One was a short, stout boy with black hair and round glasses. The other was tall and muscular with blond hair. It was Conrad Askam of the magic history research club and Byron Garrett of the magic-battle club, respectively.

"Ah, my finest greetings, President. How do you do?" said the black-haired Conrad with a breathy laugh. He was carrying several books at his chest.

Felix immediately scanned their titles. All of them were on his list.

The prince was rattled, but he didn't let it show. "Come to borrow some of

the donated books right away, have you?" he asked gently.

The tall Byron straightened up and answered, "Yes, that's correct, Your Royal Highness. Do you know of the Silent Witch, sir? She's one of the kingdom's Seven Sages."

Of course Felix knew of her. He was a huge fan. He wanted to read her essay so badly that he'd gotten Monica wrapped up in this huge stealth operation, just so he could read it in secret. That was why he was here, why he'd done all this.

He put on a classy smile. "Yes, I do know her. The heroine of our kingdom, famed slayer of the Black Dragon of Worgan."

The Silent Witch was the youngest Sage in history. She almost never appeared in public, but about six months ago she'd slain the Black Dragon of Worgan, and her fame had skyrocketed.

But those studying magecraft had been paying her lots of attention even before that. The Silent Witch had been composing original magical formulae ever since her school days. She was a girl genius, responsible for overturning what everyone else considered common sense. Her research had single-handedly forced major rewrites in fundamental magecraft textbooks.

"Obviously, the Silent Witch is known for using unchanted magecraft," continued Byron. "But she also wrote an essay about quick-chanting."

"Did she?" Don't tell me, thought Felix, looking at the books in Byron's hands. Unfortunately, the boy's arms were big and strong, hiding the authors' names from sight.

"You see—er, sir—I've been struggling quite a bit with quick-chanting lately. So I borrowed the Silent Witch's book as soon as I could! Now I'll be able to defeat Cyril Ashley in our next magic battle for sure!"

*""* 

The prince had to swallow the words he really wanted to say—How many weeks do you plan on borrowing it? Tell me when you bring it back; I'll come straight here to read it. But perhaps he could at least find out when the return date was.

As Felix thought seriously about his next move, Conrad gave another low, breathy laugh and put a hand to his mouth. "It's a good thing you borrowed it first, Lord Byron. After all, her books are beyond popular. How many others were on the waiting list? Ten?"

"Ten people on the waiting list...?" repeated Felix.

"And I'm sure the number will only increase," added Conrad. "That's how popular she is, sir."

"...Well, that's wonderful."

It really was wonderful that everyone else held the Silent Witch's abilities and achievements in such high esteem. As a fan, it made Felix happy.

...But he'd wanted to read it. Though he maintained his smile, disappointment hit him faster and harder than it had in a long time.

\* \* \*

"Hey, there's Monica!"

"She seems to be with a friend."

On the sill of a high window on the library's first floor sat a black cat and a small yellow bird. It went without saying that these were Nero and Ryn, currently tailing Monica.

After entering the library building with the second prince, Monica seemed to be searching for a book with Claudia Ashley.

Monica's behavior, however, was suspicious in the extreme. She always acted strangely in crowded places, but right now the color had drained from her face, her gaze was wandering, and she kept moving her hands around for no reason.

Nero and Ryn both had good hearing, so they could make out the girls' conversation from the window.

"So, Monica. What book did you want to borrow?"

"Ummm, well..."

"...There is a book you want to borrow, right?"

"Um, ummm... Yes! I wanted to borrow a book about plants. There's

something I'd like to make!"

"You want to make something?"

Monica nodded several times, then—embarrassed—fidgeted with her fingers and whispered something into Claudia's ear. The two at the window couldn't make out that part, of course. Exchanging glances, they went up to the roof.

"New intel. Monica wants to make something with plants," said Nero, his tail waving back and forth as he thought things over.

The sudden gathering of flowers. The magical formula used to dry out plants. Monica's own remark about wanting to make something. They were all connected. But what was the bigger picture? What was the truth?

"Whenever plants come up in detective novels," he continued, "it's only ever for one thing."

"You're quite right."

The black cat and the small bird said in unison, "Poison."

When plants played an important role in mystery novels, they were usually poisonous. It was quite a common weapon in the *Famed Detective Calvin Alcock* series.

"Calvin Alcock did say that drying out a plant strengthens its poison," remarked Nero. "There can be no doubt. She must be drying them out to make poison."

He figured she was looking for a book to help her extract even stronger poisons.

At Nero's confident declaration, Ryn raised a yellow wing and said, "I have a question, Lord Detective."

"What is it, my assistant?"

"Who do you think the Lady Silent Witch wishes to poison?"

If she was making poison, then naturally, she must want to use it on someone. But she could already put most enemies down with unchanted magecraft. Who would she need poison for?

One person sprang to mind.

"There can be only one possibility," he said.

\* \* \*

Claudia found the book Monica wanted to borrow, and as they were checking it out at the front desk, Felix returned from the second floor. He'd come back much faster than Monica had anticipated. Had he already finished reading the essay?

Choosing a moment when Claudia wasn't looking, Monica trotted over to Felix and whispered, "Sir! Did you...? Um..."

Before she could say *get to read it*, Felix slowly shook his head and looked down at his feet.

"...Thirteen people are currently on the reservation list."

"Huh?" Monica widened her eyes.

Felix looked back up at her with a decidedly frail smile. "I'm really happy the students at our school understand how great she is, at least."

*"…."* 

Apparently, his mission had failed. Monica hesitated, trying to think of something to say to him.

Before she could, Felix plucked the list out of Monica's hands. "I'm sorry for dragging you along."

"Um, what will you ...?"

"Well, since I've already told the librarian I would, I'll have to check the books on this list."

Originally, it had been an excuse to stand in the aisle and read, but apparently Felix now intended to finish the task himself.

Monica's brows lowered, and she stood there, flustered, until she felt a sudden weight on her shoulders. Claudia was hugging her from behind. The other girl's smooth, straight black hair tickled Monica's cheeks.

"Oh? Is your little scheme over with, then? ... That's too bad."

"It...it wasn't a scheme," said Monica. "It was...it was just..."

"I'm sorry we couldn't live up to your expectations, Lady Claudia," said Felix, his usual kindness paired with a hint of sarcasm.

Claudia glanced at him, moving only her eyes. A moment later, she looked away again and said, as if to herself, "I suppose it was a little interesting to see someone get disappointed when he's always so confident and sure everything is going his way."

She then turned around and disappeared amid the shelves like a cat who had suddenly lost interest in them.

Released from the noble girl's grasp, Monica looked up at the prince. "I'll...I'll help you."

"I couldn't possibly ask that of you."

"No! No, I'm...I'm a student council member, so...," she said, sticking out her chest just a little.

Felix widened his eyes in surprise. Then his expression twisted into a smile. "Well, if you insist."

"Yes, sir!"

Felix headed toward a bookcase containing items on the list, and Monica followed him. In silence, the two began to check the entries. Felix was once again wearing his usual confident, gentle, perfect smile. No trace of dejection remained on his face.

But when Monica remembered how disappointed he'd looked a minute earlier, she just couldn't leave him alone. But what should I...? What am I supposed to say at times like these?

She couldn't think of the proper words to cheer him up. In fact, she started to wonder if maybe she'd done something she shouldn't have. Maybe he wanted to be alone with his disappointment. The sudden thought made her feel awkward.

Then Felix, standing next to her, looked up at the shelves and said, "I'm glad... you were here."

```
"...Huh?"
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"It's too bad I couldn't read the essay, but... I feel really lucky to have a friend who will listen when I talk about things I like."

He looked at her. His composed expression had broken into a more mischievous one, but as he smiled, eyebrows lowered, he seemed a little lonely.

"And a friend who would help me in this silly little scheme of mine."

```
"...|—"
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"It's more than a nonexistent ghost deserves."

Monica fought down the urge to say "Ike" and squeezed the list in her hand. The fact that he liked the Silent Witch was enough to give her an ulcer. And yet she didn't want to say anything that would push this kind, lonely young man away.

So instead, the awkward girl chose her words as best she could.

"I'm... Well, I'm a delinquent, so..."

"Yes?"

"The next time you have, um, a scheme... I'm sure I'll help again."

Abruptly, Felix laughed, straight from the heart. Monica was pulled in, and she started to chuckle, too.

The prince hid his mouth with a hand, but his eyes were still smiling. "That's very reassuring. There are thirteen people on the waiting list... So we'll just have to pray it goes back onto the shelf before I graduate."

"Indeed."

"By the way, what did you borrow?" he asked, looking at the book under her arm.

It was the one she'd had Claudia find for her earlier while attempting to buy time for the prince. "Oh, well, this is... I'd like to make——," she answered, smiling.

Ever so slightly, Felix knit his eyebrows and pursed his lips. "... That isn't fair."

Monica began to panic. The prince hadn't been able to read his essay, but she —despite being there only to help him—had gotten exactly what she was looking for. That had been a little mean, hadn't it?

"I— I'm sorry," she stammered. "I'm the only one who got to borrow a book..."

"No, I didn't mean you."

**"**...?"

Felix bent down and whispered into her ear. "I'll return the favor sometime...
You can look forward to it."

\* \* \*

Finished with her work in the library, Monica went back to her attic room with the book she'd borrowed.

Winter was close, so the sun would set early. And she had something she wanted to finish while it was still light out.

She climbed up the ladder to her room. But when she pushed up the door and went inside, Nero, in his black cat form, said something odd.

"Monica Everett, the Silent Witch, the culprit...is you!" he declared, pointing his front paw at her.

"...Are you still playing that game?" She slipped past the cat and set her things on the table.

Ryn was also waiting in a corner of the room in her maid form. "Lady Silent Witch, please allow me to explain."

At the spirit's formal tone, Monica unconsciously braced herself.

Ryn continued in a flat voice. "Lord Louis possesses a truly awful sense of taste and a strong stomach. Even if you gave him rotting meat or fish, he would cook it, put jam on it, and eat it."

Why was she suddenly bringing up Louis? "Oh," said Monica as she took down the hanging flowers and lined them up on her desk.

Ryn continued. "Lord Louis has been known to stubbornly keep going, thrashing about uncontrollably, even after consuming enough poison to

paralyze a bear."

"W-wow..."

"So I don't believe poisoning him will be very effective."

A flower fell from Monica's hand. The conversation had taken quite a violent turn.

"...Poison him?" she repeated, at a loss. What were they talking about?

Nero jumped onto the desk and pointed to the row of flowers with his paw. "You've been gathering flowers and hanging them over there for the past few days, haven't you? And today you borrowed a book about plants."

"Um, yes..."

"And here's the last piece of evidence!" Nero turned to Ryn, who took a sheaf of paper out of her apron and unfolded it without a word.

The pages detailed the magical formula Monica had been working on recently.

"This formula," said Nero, "is for drying out plants, isn't it?"

Monica nodded. "It is, but..."

Her familiar bobbed his head up and down, looking increasingly convinced. "So you've been drying out plants to extract poison. And you were trying to use it to kill your awful colleague, Loun-loun Lountatta!"

"Like I've said many times, it's Mister Louis. Please try to remember."

"Your motive is your grudge against him for forcing you to take this ridiculous job," said Nero, ignoring her. Then, like a human might clap a friend on the shoulder, he used his front paw to pat Monica's upper arm. "The evidence is all right here... Now confess, Monica!"

But there was no crime, she thought. What am I supposed to confess to? And what an awful claim, saying that she was plotting to kill someone with poison.

"Listen. This book..." She held up the volume she'd borrowed from the library and flipped to the page she was after. As Nero had said, the book was all about different ways to process plants. It most definitely wasn't for making poison.

"I borrowed it to research how to dry flowers," she explained. "That magical formula is for removing moisture from plants."

Monica glanced at the book's description of how to dry out flowers. She'd never once been interested in the topic, and she'd initially figured she could just remove the moisture and that would be that. But according to the book, leaving them in direct sunlight could change their color.

In other words, she shouldn't dry them by the window, where the sun would hit them. She sighed with relief, glad she'd done a test run on ones she didn't care about.

Now, let's see... "To create beautiful dried flowers, it's important to remove the moisture quickly while their color is still vivid." ...Right. In that case, I can probably make them look prettier by removing the moisture with magecraft instead of letting them dry naturally.

Monica lifted up one of the wildflowers she'd picked, then, without chanting, she cast a spell to remove its moisture. But she must have gone too far, because it turned brown, withered, and crumbled. She picked up another one, this time taking more care.

Nero and Ryn watched her, mystified. "Hey, Monica," said Nero, "when you say *dried flowers*, you mean like dried meat, right? What do you want with stuff like that?"

"I don't know about dried meat... But if I do this, I can preserve the flowers so they stay pretty for a while."

Monica picked up the last flower and used the spell again. This time, she dried it perfectly, leaving its whiteness intact.

Good, she thought with a nod, picking up the white rose she had in the vase. With still greater focus and concentration, she very carefully removed its moisture.

The fresh, vibrant rose shrank somewhat as it dried, but almost all of its white coloring remained. When the stem shrank, it caused the blue ribbon to loosen, so—with careful motions—Monica retied it. Dried flowers tended to fall apart with the slightest impact.

Once she had the ribbon looking good, she put the rose in a glass jar with a large mouth and sealed it with a cork. Finally, she cast a spell to preserve the jar's contents, and then she was done.

"I did it..."

One of the Seven Sages had just poured all her knowledge and technique into making this dried flower jar. Monica held it aloft in both hands and smiled, satisfied.

Nero groaned. He sounded frustrated. "So your goal was to make a dried flower specimen... This case just got a lot more complicated."

As the black cat detective balked, Monica held out the jar with a little bit of pride. "This is a charm that will make me just a little bit stronger," she said, opening her locked drawer.

Inside were her father's coffeepot, the comb she'd bought with Lana, Lana's letters, her father's book, the peridot necklace, and the embroidered handkerchief. Monica gently placed the white rose jar inside her drawer of treasures.

She smiled, happy to have another.



## \*\*\*\*\* INTERMISSION \*\*\*\*\*\*

## **The First-Love Thief and I**

When Byron Garrett was around ten years old, his uncle—who belonged to the Magic Corps—once said this to him: "Byron, you need to work on observation. Always take time to observe your opponent. If you do this, your next move will come to you naturally."

When he was fourteen, he finally realized the truth in his uncle's words.

He was attending class for his elective, Introduction to Magecraft, when he laid eyes on a girl he'd never seen before. She had silvery hair tied back behind her neck. From the side, her face was beautiful and delicate, transient as ice that might melt at a single touch. And yet her clear eyes were focused straight ahead, giving the impression of inner strength. The way she sat was beautiful, too—straight-backed, with proper posture.

He couldn't help but stare, and soon his friend Conrad, sitting next to him, spoke up. "Oh, that's the transfer student," he said. "I think you're in a different class, though, Lord Byron."

"Transfer student? Then I bet she doesn't have a table of magicules. We'll be using it in class today."

The table of magicules was the first thing students were made to memorize in introductory magecraft classes. They had also been tasked with creating an individual table of the element they were suited to.

Byron, thinking the day's lecture would be difficult for the new girl if she didn't have one, stood up from his seat, textbook in hand.

"I'm gonna go talk to her," he said.

"...What?" asked Conrad, confused.

Byron didn't notice. Instead, he strode up to the transfer student and called out to her. "Hello there," he said. "You're a transfer student, right? Did you get

a table of magicules already? Or the individual elemental tables?"

"I checked beforehand," she said, "and came prepared. But thank you."

For a noble girl, her tone was brusque. But her sincerity came through at the end.

What man would ever be displeased to receive thanks from such a cute girl? None would. *Absolutely nobody*, he thought, his mouth itching.

No, no, he told himself. I'm a man of honor. I can't start grinning over something like this. He barely managed to keep his expression in check.

"You do seem well prepared," he agreed. "I'm Byron Garrett. If there is anything you have trouble with, feel free to ask me."

"Thank you. I believe I will. My name is Cyril Ashley."

".....What?"

He could have sworn that Marquess Highown's daughter—of the Lineage of the Wise—was named Claudia Ashley. Was this girl her relative?

Actually, the problem wasn't her family name. It was her given name. Sounds like a boy's name, Byron noted, looking down slightly. Then he opened his eyes wide. The transfer student was wearing a boy's uniform.

His uncle's words came back to him.

Byron, you need to work on observation.

Ah, he thought. You were right, Uncle.

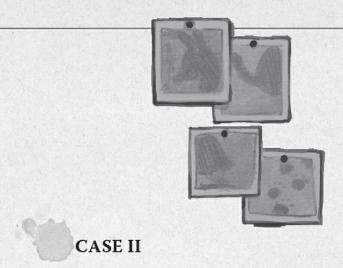
He'd been looking only at the transfer student's face. Now he staggered back, fully aware of his own foolishness.

Behind him, Conrad gave a guttural, breathy laugh that sounded a bit like a pig.

Cyril looked up at Byron, relieved.

As Marquess Highown's adopted son, Cyril was in an odd position. Not many students would take the initiative to talk to him. In fact, his classmate Elliott Howard bullied him whenever they met.

Byron Garrett..., he thought. I bet we can become great friends. Now in high spirits, he rearranged his writing utensils and decided to talk to the boy more after class.



## The Struggle of the Icy Scion and the Butcher's Son

~The Meat Thief and the Lost Girl~



Cyril Ashley, vice president of the student council, had a condition known as mana hyper-absorption.

Humans all possessed a vessel for storing up mana, and when it was full, they wouldn't absorb any more. In Cyril's case, though, he would keep absorbing the mana past that limit and end up contracting mana poisoning.

For this reason, he always wore a magical broach wherever he went that would convert any excess mana in his body into cold air and expel it.

Though his condition made things difficult, he wasn't spreading chills at all hours of the day. While it depended partly on his physical condition and emotional fluctuations, he could generally eliminate the need to expel mana by expending some, thus ceasing the spread of cold air, too.

The break for cleaning up after the festival was over, and it was the second day of normal classes. There had been no student council work the day before, so Cyril had been able to focus on practicing magecraft after school.

Perhaps because he'd consumed a good deal of mana, he wasn't letting off much cold air that day. This improved his mood somewhat.

It wasn't like he emanated chills because he wanted to. In fact, he was privately worried that the people around him would suffer more because of it as winter set in.

Oh, I know, he thought. Before I go to the student council room, I'll make some tea for the prince.

Instead of heading straight to his council duties after class, he took a detour to a smaller room on the same floor to prepare some tea and snacks. The room was equipped with the latest in magical heating technology; you could now boil water without the need for flames.

At Serendia Academy, tea prep and other such daily tasks were jobs for servants. The more well-off students brought people from home and had them live in the servants' quarters located next to the dormitories.

These servants would enter the dormitories or the school itself as needed to take care of their masters or prepare tea. It cost a lot to use the servants'

quarters, so even having such people was a status symbol at school.

As the noble son of Marquess Highown, Cyril had been assigned a servant by his adopted father—but he didn't often ask for help. Cyril was a former commoner; he could take care of himself, and he wasn't very enthusiastic about hosting tea parties. At most, he'd have the servant deliver letters to his mother and adoptive father or request minor things be brought to him.

Cyril liked preparing drinks, so unless he was attending a party, he always made his own tea.

I'm not giving off too much cold air today, so I should be able to relax and simply focus on brewing.

When he was producing chilled air, he needed to be careful about several things, such as staying far enough away from the work area to avoid cooling off the tea or the cups.

He put some water in the kettle, then placed it atop the metal plate next to the counter. The silver plate was rectangular and about twice as wide as the bottom of the kettle. A magical formula was engraved in it in a circle around the center, with a layer of special paint used for magic items.

The front right corner of the plate had a red jewel set into it. If you fed the jewel a little bit of mana, it would heat up whatever was on the plate. It was a brand-new piece of technology—a magic burner.

You couldn't adjust the heat yet, and the flames were too weak to use for cooking, so most kitchens didn't have one. But for someone like Cyril, who couldn't use fire-aspected magecraft, it was a *very* handy tool to have around.

Whenever he got to use top-of-the-line tech like this, it reminded him of how amazing Serendia Academy was.

Even the school's water supply was incredible. A former member of Ridill's Seven Sages, the Aquamancy Mage, had made great strides in the field of waterworks, placing the kingdom ahead of its peers. Every home had running water these days, though few had it for the second floor and above, even among nobles.

But Serendia Academy had water supplied to pretty much every floor. I

suppose that's to be expected of a school attended by royalty...

And Cyril was permitted to personally prepare tea for one of their glorious number: Felix Arc Ridill. Could there be any greater honor?

As he was proudly picking out tea leaves, he heard a quiet voice from behind him. "U-ummm, Lord Cyril..."

He turned around to see his junior, Monica Norton, fiddling with her fingers at the door. "Accountant Norton," he said. "What's the matter?"

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"I, ummm... I'll help you!"
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Cyril was making tea because he wanted to, so she needn't bother. But being the serious girl she was, she probably felt bad letting an upperclassman prepare it. And he did think it was a good sign that Monica, who was so socially awkward, had volunteered to help.

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"All right," he said. "Could you put the cups on that tray?"
"Yes!"
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Seeming somehow relieved, Monica walked over to the cupboard...but she couldn't reach the cups.

"Aw...," she moaned sadly, one hand outstretched. Even among other girls in the advanced course, Monica was pretty short.

Privately annoyed at himself for assigning her the wrong task, he gave her a different instruction. "I'll get the cups. You pour water into them to warm them up."

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"...R-right."
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"The metal plate is hot, so don't touch it," he added, turning the little dial next to the gem. That would cut off the mana and stop it from heating up any further, but it would take a while for the plate to cool down. He'd touched it once by accident the first time he'd used the device and been burned.

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"Lord Cyril," said Monica, "is this a magic item?"
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"Yes. When you channel mana into this gem here, it heats up whatever's on top."

"They don't have one of these in the, um, the preparation room on the first floor..."

Cyril was reminded that the girls here had tea party class. Monica had probably used the room to prepare tea as well.

"Magic items are valuable. We don't have that many. This is the only room with a magic burner."

"Oh..."

Monica moved the kettle a little and stared at the pattern engraved on the plate. She was usually so nervous, but when it came to equations or a chessboard, she went totally blank, as if her emotions had disappeared. And here she was, doing it again right in front of him as she observed the kettle.

"A miniature magic item that can be used continuously, made by the Luxure Workshop in Ambard...," murmured Monica. "Wow, this must be really expensive..."

"You seem to know a lot about it," replied Cyril.

Monica began flailing around in a panic. "Ummm, a long time ago, I, well, I saw one, just for a moment."

Cyril had heard that Monica Norton was taken in by the countess of Kerbeck and now served as an attendant to Isabelle Norton, the current count's daughter. He wasn't surprised she'd seen a magic item or two in Count Kerbeck's estate. The Kerbecks were one of the most influential noble families in the kingdom, so there was nothing strange about them having an expensive magic item.

As he thought about this, he laid out the cups. Just then, Elliott Howard, one of the student council's secretaries, poked his head in from the hallway.

"Oh, there you are. Hey, Cyril!" he called. "You should get to the kitchen. It's kind of urgent."

"Did something happen?" Cyril asked. He was often called upon in situations that required ice magecraft—like fires. He privately tensed.

But Elliott didn't seem very nervous. He answered smoothly, "There's a

student who caused some trouble. I think you know him." Then, as if just remembering something, he looked at Monica. "Oh, and you might want to go with him, Lady Norton."

"Is it someone...that I know, too?"

Elliott nodded and told them the student's name.

\* \* \*

"I'm telling you! I'm innocent!"

There, in the kitchen, surrounded by clearly troubled cooks, second-year transfer student Glenn Dudley was making a fuss—a loud one. Though Cyril was in a different grade than him, he'd ended up teaching the boy how to dance while helping Monica for her class. Ever since, they'd been running into each other with uncanny frequency.

After arriving at the kitchen with Monica, Cyril excused himself and took a look around. "I'm on the student council," he told the staff. "I hear Glenn Dudley is causing some kind of trouble?"

Glenn's worried expression immediately brightened. "Vice President! Monica!" he shouted, waving at them.

Monica, having hidden herself behind Cyril, peeked out and nervously said, "Um, Glenn, what...what happened?"

"Well, everyone's saying I sneaked into the kitchen to steal a snack," he explained sulkily. He brushed back his dirty-blond hair and glanced around at all the cooks encircling him.

None of them appeared openly hostile. If anything, they just seemed upset. The most senior among them, a big man who served as head chef, looked at Glenn with worry. "We want to believe you," he said. "But the situation being what it is, well..."

The son of a butcher, Glenn was in the kitchen fairly often. Apparently, he'd been receiving extra food and helping them develop new meat-based recipes. He and the staff were on such good terms that Glenn's family had even provided meat for the festival.

That might not be proper behavior for a Serendia student, but perhaps

because of Glenn's friendly attitude, those working in the kitchen were quite fond of him. That was why, now that he was suspected of food snatching, the chefs weren't sure what to believe.

Cyril nodded, then asked the head chef, "Could you tell me the details?"

"Yes, sir. It happened yesterday morning. One of our cooks was preparing some bone-in meat over there." He pointed to an oven and workstation near the back of the kitchen.

Next to the oven was a brick wall to keep the heat away from the counter, making the area impossible to see from most of the other workstations.

"He removed the cooked meat from the oven to let it cool," the chef continued. "They were bone-in pieces, about the size of my fist—twenty of them, I'd say... And in the fifteen minutes they were sitting there, all of them were eaten. Only the bones were left."

Cyril listened to this, his arms folded over his chest. Then he exhaled through his nose. "An impossible crime. Nobody could eat twenty pieces of chicken straight out of the oven in just fifteen minutes."

"What? I could do that easy," insisted Glenn. "You mean you can't, VP?"

Cyril fell silent. His tongue burned easily, and he was generally a light eater. If they were pieces of bone-in meat the size of an adult's fist, he was sure just two of them would have filled him up.

He cleared his throat, then pressed a little further. "How did you decide this student was the prime suspect?"

"Well, if someone other than a cook had come through the door, it would have been noticed. But over by that oven, there's a high window."

As the man said, there was indeed a small window high up on the wall near the oven. It was even higher than Cyril was tall, in fact. The kitchen was on the first floor, but if you wanted to get in from the window in question, you'd need a step stool.

"...I see. Flight magecraft," Cyril mused.

Flight magecraft was extremely hard to use; even most high mages couldn't

do it. Nor could Cyril. In fact, the only one at the academy who could was Glenn Dudley, a mage's apprentice. Though Cyril hadn't seen it personally, it was well-known that Glenn had used the skill in front of a big audience during the school festival play.

He drummed his arm with his fingertips, summarizing his thoughts. "It's highly likely the culprit used flight magecraft to get in through the window. And the only one at the school who could do such a thing is Glenn. He also loves to eat meat and has a huge appetite. And so he checks all the boxes... I see."

But without any clear proof, it was too soon to accuse him. In Cyril's opinion, they needed to investigate the matter a little more thoroughly.

"You said the crime was carried out before noon. Do you remember what time it was, exactly?"

"Oh, well...," said the chef. "It was right during elective classes."

"Then if Glenn was in class, he has an alibi."

Cyril had been in advanced practical magecraft at that time the previous day. Glenn would have been in his own elective—the lower level of practical magecraft. If they checked with his teacher and found out where he was, they could prove Glenn didn't do it.

Cyril sighed in relief. It looked like he'd be able to prove his underclassman's innocence, after all.

But then Glenn made an uncomfortable face. "Actually... I'd left a smoker I made on the other side of that window, and..."

Cyril wanted to yell Why would you bring that to school?! but managed to hold himself back—he had a sinking feeling that what the boy said next would only make him want to yell even more.

And he was exactly right.

"I was smoking a ham yesterday," explained Glenn, "and I started to worry it wasn't ventilated well enough, so I kind of hopped over here with flight magecraft during my elective..."

"So you sneaked out of class to check on the smoker outside this window?"

said Cyril.

Cringing, Glenn nodded. His big body suddenly seemed very small.

"What did you go and do that for?!" Cyril yelled. "Of *course* they all think you stole the meat!"

"H-how was I supposed to know there was a crime going on...?"

"If you were serious about your classes, this wouldn't have happened! I hope this makes you rethink some of your decisions!"

Cyril's mana hyper-absorption syndrome tended to worsen the higher his emotions ran. Now was one of those times. A chilly air began to drift around them as if to mark the vice president's anger.

A few nearby rubbed their arms, and Monica sneezed.

Whether because of the scolding or the cold, Glenn sniffled, tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry I skipped out on class, I am! But I really didn't take any food! Honest!"

Cyril's brow creased deeply as he paused to think. Glenn was a headache-inducing problem child to be sure, but though he was always running in the hallway, wearing his uniform improperly, and cutting class, Cyril knew he wasn't a bad person.

Most importantly, he was a terrible liar. If he'd really grabbed that meat, he would have been acting far more suspiciously.

"...Can you swear that you didn't steal the food?" Cyril asked him.

"Yes, I swear! I swear to God I never took any food!" cried Glenn.

"Would you swear it before the prince himself?"

"Of course!"

"That's enough, then."

The cooks nearby looked on, murmuring "Are you sure?" but Cyril didn't hear them. Instead, he leaned backward, puffed out his chest, and declared, "If you can swear with all your heart in front of the prince, then I will do my utmost to prove your innocence!"

In his moment of despair, suspected of a crime by the kitchen staff he'd gotten to know so well, Glenn was reminded of his master Louis Miller's words.

"Listen to me, Glenn. You are young, and many difficulties still lie ahead of you. When you encounter one, remember what I am about to say."

His master had placed a hand at his breast, and with the voice of a saint reciting scripture, said this: "Most troubles can be solved through money or violence."

"Is that what the Seven Sages are all about, then? Money and violence?" He'd asked in return, earning him a hard smack on the head. He still remembered the exchange clearly.

But now, as Glenn confronted this new difficulty, his upperclassman, Cyril Ashley, said: "We'll begin by reviewing the scene of the crime. The most important thing to do when confronting trouble like this is to simply work hard at solving it!"

Glenn felt his chest grow a little warmer. To his eyes, the student in front of him was a hundred times cooler than his master, who told him to solve problems with money and violence.

"VP, you're so cool! I'll join you!" he cried out, overcome with emotion.

Cyril widened his eyes slightly, then he sighed and grinned. "With me, then, Glenn Dudley!"

"Yes, sir!"

Already, his master's dubious advice had disappeared from Glenn's mind without a trace.

As they began to reinvestigate the scene of the crime, the Silent Witch, Monica Everett, was privately panicking.

Wait, wait, wait... No, it... I think I know who did it...

A big eater who could lick clean a plate of smoking-hot meat in a few minutes? Someone who could jump in from the window without using flight magecraft? Monica knew just the person—or rather, the cat.

Oh, please let this be another case of me overthinking things, she prayed.

Cyril was using a step stool to look at the window when he suddenly called out, "Footprints! They're faint, but... They probably belong to a small animal."

Nooooo! Monica went white in the face and started trembling.

Glenn and Cyril, not noticing her, looked around for any other prints.

"You mean a small, meat-eating animal got in?" asked Glenn.

"We can't be certain, but it's possible. Still..." Cyril climbed off the step stool, his face turning grim. "A carnivorous creature that can eat that much meat in such a short time? It may be dangerous. We'll need to capture it to ensure the students' safety."

A pinched squeal escaped Monica's throat.

Cyril glanced between her and Glenn. "For now, let's head outside and look around. There may be other footprints. Accountant Norton, you go back to the student council room and—"

"No! I'll...I'll come, too!"

At this point, she only had one option: Follow Cyril and Glenn, and if she spotted any of Nero's footprints, swiftly remove them using unchanted magecraft. She'd erase all the evidence.

Unfortunately, Cyril didn't seem to think much of her coming along—probably because he believed the beast would present a danger to her.

She balled her hands into fists, then said as loudly as she could manage, "I'm part of the student council! Just like you!"

"...I see," said Cyril at last, filled with emotion at his junior's display of personal growth. Then he turned to head outside, the hem of his shirt fluttering gallantly. "Then let us be off, Accountant Norton, Glenn Dudley!"

"Yepphir!"

"Yes, sir!"

\* \* \*

Monica and the others went out and looped around the school building. They came to the spot just outside the kitchen where the dine-and-dasher had gone in through the window. By the wall was a large metal box about as tall as

Monica.

"What's this...?" she asked, tilting her head in confusion at the unfamiliar item.

With pride in his voice, Glenn exclaimed, "It's my homemade smoker! I put it together with scrap wood. I'm actually in the middle of making some improvements, and—"

"You do know that this is a school, for the sacred purpose of learning, right?" demanded Cyril in a low tone, glaring at him.

Monica began to feel cold air drift over from beside her. This was the chill that came three steps before an outburst. Frantic, she looked between the two boys.

Glenn opened the smoker's lid. "Ahhh!" he cried. "The ham I hung here is gone!"

There was a hook dangling from the top of the tall smoker. Apparently, you were meant to hang meat from it.

Seeing the contraption empty, Cyril frowned. "The fire is out, too. Do you leave the ham in there after dousing the flames?"

"It depends on what kind of meat you're cooking. But in general, letting it get some air and dry out makes it taste better than eating it right out of the smoker."

According to Glenn, he'd doused the flames that morning and left the ham to air out. That meant it had disappeared sometime afterward.

Cyril bent down and inspected the ground. "Small prints next to the smoker, too... Looks like they lead into the woods. The animal must be hiding somewhere in there."

Ahhhh... Monica didn't know what to do. Where was Nero right now? If Cyril found him munching on the ham in the woods, it would be no laughing matter.

"Let's follow and check for more traces," said Cyril.

"Yes, sir!" replied Glenn.

Cyril headed for the trees with big strides, and Glenn followed suit. Monica trotted along after them, trying to think of how she'd cover up Nero's tracks.

The woods around Serendia Academy were used for classes on horseback riding and practical magecraft, among other things. Excluding one dangerous area, students were generally allowed to come and go as they pleased. Not many did outside of class time, though. Pretty much the only people there after school hours belonged to the riding club or the magic-battle club.

As Monica and the others ventured into the woods, they spotted members of the latter practicing their offensive magecraft.

Magecraft was part of every noble's general education. The academy had even more facilities for teaching it than Monica had originally thought. For example, some libraries didn't have any grimoires or books on the subject, but Serendia Academy's had quite a few.

Handling the barriers used for magic battles was difficult; maintaining them required at least two mages, plus a suitable area and magic items. You couldn't stage battles like this just anywhere.

To be honest, Monica had never expected to see such activities at Serendia. When she had, she'd been privately surprised.

"Ashley!"

The boy leading the magic-battle club's activities noticed them and called out. He was tall with yellowish-blond hair. His bright eyes were orange like the sky at sunset.

This was the magic-battle club's president, Byron Garrett—who, when facing off against Cyril during class the previous day, had failed at quick-chanting and lost to him handily.

Byron trotted over to them, seeming somehow restless as he spoke to Cyril. "It's not every day you show up at our club. I know—you want to have another round with me, right? I know I'm right. I'll make preparations for an official duel—"

"I'm on student council business," Cyril interrupted. "That can wait."

"Oh. Well, can't argue with that. I'll talk to you about it tomorrow and then submit paperwork for the duel."

Byron backed down surprisingly easily. He was quick-tempered but earnest.

In Monica's subjective opinion, the students at Serendia Academy were far better mannered than those at Minerva's. *Back there, my upperclassmen would drag me out to the magic battle arena whether I liked it or not...* Monica grew dejected, reminded of days gone by.

Byron stroked his stern, sharp jaw and asked, "What is the student council doing in this neck of the woods?"

"We're investigating a possibly dangerous carnivorous beast that may have fled here," explained Cyril. "Any ideas?"

The tall boy frowned in thought but then shook his head. "No, not a one."

"I see," said Cyril. "If you spot any animals like that, let me know."

"Will do."

After this short exchange, Cyril moved on. Then, as they walked, he seemed to remember something and looked at Glenn. "You are a mage's apprentice, yes, Glenn Dudley? Not interested in honing your combat skills in the magic-battle club?"

Cyril must have noticed Glenn's interest in the club's activities. The latter was still glancing back at Byron and the others even now, but at the vice president's words, he faced forward and scratched his head uncomfortably. "Magic battles, huh...? Hmm. They don't conjure up very good memories for me but...maybe one day."

"I see. Well, I won't insist."

Glenn was the Barrier Mage Louis Miller's pupil. Despite being the man's colleague, Monica didn't know what had brought about the arrangement.

Mister Louis doesn't seem like the type of person to go out and find a pupil... I wonder if he had some special reason, thought Monica.

Meanwhile, Glenn slowed his pace somewhat. Normally, the young man had a long, energetic gait. Now, though, his stride had shortened so that even the

petite Monica could catch up.

"Why are you studying magecraft, VP?" he asked.

"To help my father."

The reply was immediate, and Cyril kept his eyes forward, not even turning around.

Glenn grinned wryly. The smile wasn't typical of the endlessly cheery boy—it looked like he'd just swallowed something bitter. "Anyone who can answer that quickly is super cool in my book. I'm an apprentice, but I'm still not really sure why I'm doing it."

Those words hit close to home for Monica. She was the same. She hadn't had any clear goal in mind when she began studying magecraft. She just didn't want to be a nuisance to her adoptive mother.

While Monica had turned out to have a natural aptitude, learned unchanted magecraft, and become one of the Seven Sages, she had accomplished all of it without any larger goals in mind. She'd continued to drift along life's currents, and the next thing she knew, that was who she was. It wasn't something she was very proud of.

As Monica thought, Cyril spoke again, still facing forward. "Even if you don't have a goal right now, you might one day. And then all the skill and knowledge you've acquired will help. Glenn Dudley, you can use flight magecraft, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's no easy feat. It requires a lot of practice, and such practice comes with scrapes and bruises. You must have learned it through a lot of hard work. Why can't you be proud of that?"

His words came as a tiny shock to Monica. She had no goal—she was simply being pulled along, always looking down. Would the day ever come when she could feel proud?

...I hope so, she thought, suddenly surprised at herself. Such an idea would never have occurred to her back when she'd spent the days holed up in her cabin. She was astonished at how much she'd changed.

It seemed Cyril's comment had also affected Glenn. "...I get told a lot that I still have a long way to go," he said.

"Then improve yourself until you can be proud of what you've accomplished," Cyril replied.

It was very like Cyril to say that. Glenn's eyebrows lowered into a gentle smile. "Heh-heh." He widened his gait a little to catch up with Monica, then whispered in her ear, "Man, the VP is really cool, huh?"

Monica looked up and flashed him a small smile. "Yes," she said with a nod.

As the two of them walked after Cyril, Monica watched him from behind. He was pretty slender for a man. Delicate, even.

How was it that he came across as so dependable?

A moment later, Cyril's reassuring figure suddenly disappeared with a loud rustle.

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"Gyah?!"

"Lord Cyril?!"

"VP! Noooo!"
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It seemed he'd tripped and tumbled down the hill. It wasn't a cliff, but it was still pretty steep.

Monica and Glenn looked down the hill and saw Cyril almost a story below, buried in dead leaves.

"Didn't realize you were so accident-prone, VP..."

"I'm not! I didn't trip on anything," yelled Cyril, scattering dead leaves all over. "Something ran into my foot!"

At that point, his face twisted in pain. He tried to stand up, but he staggered and fell back to his knees. Clearly, something was wrong.

"Lord Cyril?!" Monica cried. "Are you hurt?!"

"Monica, let's go check it out," said Glenn. "It's easy to slip, so hold on to me!"

Glenn chanted a flight spell, then picked up Monica under his arm and floated into the air.

The way he flew was so much more stable than her own sorry attempts. If Monica ever needed to carry someone under her arm like this, she'd definitely lose her balance and fall.

When the two of them landed next to Cyril, he frowned uncomfortably. "...
Twisted my ankle a bit," he said.

It was clearly more than a bit. From his multiple attempts to stand, it was obvious he was in pain.

Realizing that he was trying to play it off, Glenn turned around and squatted down. "I'll carry you on my back. Hop aboard."

"... Thanks. Sorry about this," said Cyril, anguish written on his face.

Glenn grinned happily, showing the whites of his teeth. "Looks like my flight magecraft is helping out already. I'm feeling a bit more confident!"

"...I see...I see," said Cyril. He looked slightly conflicted.

Then they heard a rustling from the nearby brush.

Glenn and Cyril glared in the direction of the sound, faces filled with tension—on guard for the savage thief who had devoured the bone-in meat and ham. Monica was on guard, too, readying herself to cast an unchanted spell at any moment.

The brush rocked to and fro again. But this time, something burst out of it, low to the ground. A small hand. A *child's* hand.

The hand pushed away the brush, revealing a girl of about three or four, her blond hair in pigtails.

She placed both palms down on the ground and pushed herself out of the underbrush, before looking up and seeing the three of them. And then a film of tears formed in her big, round eyes.

"Ahhh, wahhh, waaahhh..."

Cyril and Monica cowered at the sudden cries of the girl on the ground.

"She's, uh, c-crying...," stammered Cyril.

"She is...," agreed Monica.

Their voices were stiff as they simply described what they were seeing. They weren't used to children of such a young age.

Cyril, still sitting on the ground, cautiously asked the girl, "What, um...? Wh-where did you come from? What's your name?"

"Uggggh, waaahhhh...!" The girl started crying even louder. Her face was bright red, and the wails seemed to rip through her very throat.

Cyril was thrown into confusion. "D-did I do something?! Did I make her cry?!"

"VP, just calm down. I think she's lost," said Glenn, easily scooping up the girl in his arms and patting her on the back.

Her wails only got louder.

Cyril looked at him uneasily. "A-are you sure you should be picking her up like that? Now she's crying even harder... Maybe she's afraid of heights?"

"No, she's crying because she's relieved."

Glenn was right. Though the girl was bawling at first, she quickly calmed down. Monica and Cyril looked up at Glenn with respect in their eyes.

"That's amazing, Glenn...," said Monica.

"You seem used to handling children," agreed Cyril.

"I've got two little sisters," explained Glenn, as if it was nothing special. "I've also babysat once or twice." Then he spoke to the girl in a calm voice. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Ahhh... Eah, not here..."

"Eah?" repeated Glenn, crooking his head to the side.

But the girl kept on sniffling and repeating the word Eah.

"You're looking for someone named Eah?" asked Glenn. "Hmm. I'm not sure I know anyone called that. Do you want to see Eah?"

The girl sobbed mournfully, simply repeating the word Eah.

"We can't leave a lost child here," said Cyril. "We should take her to the faculty room."

He stood up, then immediately groaned and fell back to his knees.

\* \* \*

"...We found this girl after going into the woods to locate the meat thief," reported Cyril. "We wanted to bring her to the faculty room, but they're in a meeting right now, so we decided to look after her here in the student council room until they're done."

"I see," said Felix. He was sitting in the president's seat, looking at the girl the others had found in the woods.

She neither cried nor yelled; she simply stayed put, gripping Monica's skirt.

They estimated her age at around three or four. She was cute, with her bright-blond hair in pigtails. She also wore a coat, indicating that her family was relatively well-off.

She'd been bawling when she first emerged from the brush, but now she had clammed up. Despite Glenn's and Cyril's attempts to talk to her on the way here, she'd stayed quiet the whole time.

Incidentally, the reason she was holding on to Monica's skirt wasn't because she'd grown attached to her—the skirt was simply at the exact right height for her to grab onto.

She must be so scared with all these strangers around, Monica thought. I probably would have passed out already.

Aside from Felix, Elliott and Bridget were in the room as well. They'd stopped their work to observe the girl. Only Neil, the general affairs officer, was absent.

"Right, so..." Elliott rested his cheek on his hand, narrowing his droopy eyes in exasperation. "Why are *you* being carried around and not the girl?"

"... I was injured while investigating in the woods."

"Really? And so you had an underclassman give you a piggyback ride. Said underclassman being the prime suspect in the meat theft, no less."

Elliott was being openly malicious; Cyril and Glenn shot him sulky looks.

Rank was everything to Elliott, so he didn't think very highly of commoners attending Serendia Academy. To him, Glenn—who never acted remotely like a noble—was a particular eyesore.

He scoffed and opened his mouth to speak. He was probably a moment away from saying something mean, but before that could happen, Felix interrupted.

"The faculty meeting should wrap up in thirty minutes or so. I think the student council is more than capable of showing our little guest hospitality until then."

The prince's calm deflection earned a snort from Elliott. "Babysitting isn't our job," he objected. "We should just call a servant."

Cyril glared at him. While Elliott considered rank to be most important, in Cyril's mind, the prince was paramount. Elliott had disagreed with Felix, so Cyril addressed him in a sharp tone. "The meeting will be over in thirty minutes. It's not much time. We should be the ones to handle it."

"Really?" said Elliott. "Then I hope you do a good job babysitting. Oh, but our great and powerful vice president is already getting a piggyback ride, isn't he?"

Veins appeared on Cyril's temples as chilly air began to waft around him. Glenn, who was still carrying him on his back, cried out. "VP! It's cold! That's really cold! You're gonna freeze me!"

"S-sorry. You can let me down now."

Cyril climbed off the boy's back, then took a seat. They'd treated his injury already, but standing up was still causing him significant pain.

Next, he turned to the girl holding on to Monica's skirt and said, "My name is Cyril Ashley. I'm the vice president of the student council here at Serendia Academy. Can you tell us your name?"

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"....."
"Or how old you are?"
""
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"Uh, or the name of your guardian?"

*"…"* 

Cyril's face grew more and more stiff while the girl's expression became increasingly clouded.

Elliott sniffed in exasperation. "Now you're just interrogating her."

"What else would you have me say?!"

"I don't know. Something a kid might like to hear?" Abruptly, as though he'd come up with an idea, Elliott looked at Monica with a mean-spirited grin. "Perhaps the little squirrel has babysitting experience."

"Huh?!"

"You're both children, after all. I, for one, think you'd get along great." Elliott looked between the young girl and Monica, still grinning. He was teasing her for looking younger than her age.

"I... I'll, um, be seventeen next month...," she objected weakly as she thought about what he'd said. She didn't have any babysitting experience. But she did want to help as a member of the student council.

Something a child would like to hear... Something fun... Fun... I know! "Old Man Sam's Pigs"! Monica was sure that would be fun. So, balling her hands into fists, she began to speak rapidly.

"I can, um, explain the proof for the periodic nature of remainders in the numerical sequence used in 'Old Man Sam's Pigs'!"

A stunned silence filled the room.

Monica gave a proud harumph and declared, "I am positive she will enjoy it!"

Glenn had a big heart and almost never pointed out the faults of others, but this time he made an exception. "Monica, wouldn't it be better to just sing the song normally?"

"Ooph, I'm... I'm not so...good at singing, so... If it's just the numerical sequence, I can recite it forever... But singing in tune, I can't really...do that..."

"This'll never work," mumbled Elliott, shaking his head.

Perhaps affected by the uneasy mood around her, the girl's face clouded to the point where she was just barely holding back tears.

Elliott grimaced, then looked to Bridget for help. "You have a little sister, right?" At this point, anyone would do.

Bridget responded, never stopping her work, "Yes, one I only talk to a few times a year."

It seemed they weren't on good terms. Elliott put a hand to his forehead and looked at the ceiling. "God. Why did Officer Maywood have to be absent today of all days?"

Cyril, too, pressed his clasped hands to his forehead in an expression of anguish. "Ugh. Yes. If only he were here..."

Even Monica was thinking it. If Lord Maywood were here, he'd know what to do...!

It wasn't as if Neil Clay Maywood had shown any skill at babysitting in the past. But anyone could see he had a gentle personality. As a member of the Lineage of the Mediators, he could surely mediate with children, too. He'd be able to do something about this—or so everyone believed. Such was their trust in him.

But right now Neil was absent. Currently, he was meeting with the club presidents, helping to tie up any loose ends from the festival. He wouldn't be back for a while.

Glenn picked up the girl clinging to Monica's skirt and tried to soothe her, but tears had already started to form in her round eyes. It was only a matter of time before she started crying again.

Everyone watched her like she was a bomb about to go off.

Then Felix got up and took out a handkerchief.

What is he doing with that? thought Monica.

At first, she thought it was for wiping the girl's tears, but then he folded it up and made it into a ball. After a series of steps, he pulled out the edges, and suddenly the white handkerchief had become a rabbit hand puppet.

The prince went up to the girl in Glenn's arms and immediately started using the puppet to talk. "Hello, little lady."

"Eah!" The girl's face lit up.

Felix smiled warmly, then brought out a cookie he'd been hiding behind his back. "Here's a treat for you."

"An-hyooh!" said the girl—it sounded like *thank you*—before putting the whole cookie in her mouth. As she munched on it, her eyes were glued to the rabbit puppet. Felix made it hop around, and the girl's small hands followed it.

Cyril appeared deeply moved by the vivid display of skill. "That's wonderful, sir...! Your kindness has touched even this little girl!"

"I think you were just doing a terrible job," murmured Elliott.

Cyril glared at him, cold air spreading. "Some nerve coming from the one who did nothing at all."

"I made the reasonable suggestion to call a servant, remember?"

Elliott shrugged as Cyril gnashed his teeth.

Neither of them made any attempt to hide their hostility, and Felix gently chided them both. "Children can sense when those around them are upset. Can't you two get along?"

At the prince's warning, Cyril immediately straightened up. He then looked Elliott dead in the eye with a serious expression and said, "Prince's orders. I give you temporary permission to refer to me as a friend."

"Why, you..."

\* \* \*

Held in Glenn's arms and pacified by Felix, the girl began to nod off after eating three cookies. Glenn sat on the couch with her and rubbed her back.

The girl pressed her cheek to his shoulder, her right hand reaching out for something. "Eah..."

As she groped, Felix put the rabbit puppet he'd made from his handkerchief into her hand. She then put its ear in her mouth and, appearing relieved, began to breathe softly.

"...Is she asleep? She's asleep, right?" said Elliott quietly to Cyril.

"...Yeah. Looks like it," Cyril replied to his temporary friend before they both put their heads down on their desks.

Despite the exhaustion on their faces, they hadn't done much. It had been Glenn and Felix who had kept the girl happy until she went to sleep. Elliott and Cyril—and Monica, too—had merely watched with bated breath.

Bridget, however, had maintained her aloof attitude the whole time and continued drafting paperwork. Now finished, she picked up the pile of it and stood.

"The faculty meeting should be ending soon," she said. "I need to submit these documents, so I'll talk to one of the teachers about her."

"Oh?" said Felix. "I was planning to go there myself."

Bridget shook her head. "You have a meeting after this, don't you? About the academy bazaar next week."

"Ah yes. In that case, thank you," he replied with a soft smile.

Bridget narrowed her amber eyes at the rabbit puppet in the girl's hand. Since it was made from a handkerchief, it had started to come apart a little, but it still looked like a rabbit.

"You're quite good at pacifying children," she noted. "I must confess I had no idea."

"Is it not the responsibility of royalty to care for the people?"

"...It is, indeed."

That was all Bridget said before leaving the student council room behind.

Felix got his own papers together and stood up. "I do have a meeting now, so I'll be heading out. Cyril, can you handle the rest?"

"Yes, sir! Of course!"

"Thank you," said Felix. "After you find her guardian, get yourself to an infirmary and have your foot checked, all right?" His tone was gentle but uncompromising. Then he left the room.

The four remaining students—Monica, Glenn, Cyril, and Elliott—fell silent. A few minutes passed like that before Monica heard a quiet sound.

What's that? It sounds like it's coming from...around my feet, maybe...

It resembled the sounds Nero made when he walked on her bed—that of a small creature moving about atop fabric.

The others seemed to notice it, too; they all had their eyes on the floor. Cyril was the first one to realize what was making the sound.

"A rabbit?" he said.

Following his gaze, Monica saw a rabbit with white fur underneath the table. Not one made from a handkerchief, but an actual rabbit.

"Wait, what's a rabbit doing in here?" asked Elliott, frowning suspiciously.

Everyone watched as the creature jumped out from beneath the table and rammed into Cyril's left foot—the one he had sprained—as he sat in his chair.

"Guh!" he groaned. Perhaps out of consideration for the sleeping girl, he covered his mouth with his hand—though his face twisted in pain as he looked down at the animal. "That felt like... Wait, were you the one that struck me in the woods?"

Monica then remembered Cyril's insistence after he'd fallen down the hill that something had hit him in the leg. It wasn't strange for a rabbit to be wandering around the forest, but the student council room was on the fourth floor.

How in the world did it get in...?

The rabbit's long ears twitched as it looked up at Cyril. Eventually, it deftly jumped right into his lap.

Cyril jolted. Was it Monica's imagination, or were his lips—usually sharply pursed—now a bit more unsteady?

"What's a rabbit doing up here?" he wondered aloud, swiftly removing his gloves and petting the rabbit's back. Happiness was clear on his face as he stroked its fluffy fur.

Glenn adjusted the sleeping girl in his arms and grinned. "Capture it, VP. I'll

strangle it and dress it real nice!"

Cyril opened his eyes wide and stared at Glenn.

The butcher's son began to eagerly explain. "When you wring a rabbit's neck, you have to chill it right away. But we can just have you do that, VP! It's perfect!"

With a face devoid of all expression, Cyril picked up the rabbit, then set it gently down on the floor. It quickly dashed away, escaping into the hallway through a small gap in the door.

"What did you let it go for?!" demanded Glenn.

"M-my hand slipped!" said Cyril, obviously lying.

Monica watched the two of them and hesitantly stammered, "Um, ummm, t-try to keep it down, or..."

The two of them suddenly stopped cold and looked at the girl. Thankfully, she was still asleep.

As the entire group breathed a sigh of relief, a short elderly man in a robe peeked around the door the rabbit had just left through. It was Professor Macragan, teacher of fundamental magecraft, his eyes and mouth eternally buried under his snow-white eyebrows, beard, and mustache.

"I'm sorry for barging in," he said. "I heard from Miss Greyham that my granddaughter is here."

Macragan didn't have the best vision, and he used his staff to poke around as he approached the sofa. Once there, he took a close look at the face of the girl in Glenn's arms.

"Ah yes, that's Lucille, all right," he said. "She's been staying near the academy since yesterday. Visiting me, you see. She must have become separated from her parents. Were you all looking after her? Thank you kindly."

Elliott, who had in no way contributed to the babysitting, immediately put on a face that made it look like he'd done it all. "Yes, Professor Macragan. I'm sure Miss Lucille's parents must be worried. Are you able to contact them?"

"I am," he responded. "Well, my son—he's a mage, and he always keeps a

mid-level spirit at her side. I can have the spirit send him a message. It shouldn't take any time at all."

Spirits were classified into high, mid, and low ranks. The mid-level category, however, spanned the widest range of abilities. While some mid-level spirits could understand human language, others couldn't. As a whole, though, they were not all that intelligent, nor could they assume human form. Most of them took the shape of animals.

Oh, wait, thought Monica. Does that mean ...?

Her prediction was confirmed a moment later by Macragan. "Its name is Istreah, an earth spirit. It normally takes the form of a rabbit."

Everyone aside from the professor immediately looked at Cyril. The vice president's face was pale, and his mouth hung open.

Macragan stroked his beard and continued. "But Istreah has a rowdy disposition. It isn't that intelligent, so it'll often play pranks as soon as you take your eyes off it. Despite looking like a rabbit, it is still a spirit, and rather strong, so it is difficult to handle. If you find it, please catch it for me."

Cyril, who had let the spirit get away, rose from his chair with the miserable air of a man on his way to die.

"This is my responsibility. I'll catch it...!" he said, starting off, dragging his left foot behind him.

Monica frantically grabbed his shirt. "Lord Cyril, y-you mustn't stand up!"

"Don't try to stop me, Accountant Norton. I...I let it escape not moments ago..." With an anguished expression, Cyril continued, still dragging his left foot.

Seeing this, Glenn laid Lucille down on the sofa and said, "I'll go look for the spirit!"

Monica immediately raised a hand. "I'll...I'll go, too! You stay here and rest—p-please!"

Cyril fell silent in the face of his juniors' insistence.

Eventually, he quietly muttered, "... Thank you."

After exiting the student council room and heading into the hallway, Monica and Glenn decided to split up.

"I'll go right," said Glenn. "You go left! If you find it, just call for me, and I'll fly right over!"

"Okay!" Monica nodded, then took off down the hall with thudding, awkward steps. Ordinarily, Cyril would scold her for running in the hallway, but this was an emergency.

Just as she was about to turn the corner, a black cat jumped down from a hallway window.

"Heya, Monica. Seems like you've got a lot going on today, eh?"

"Neeerooo...," said Monica, squatting and glaring at him. "Was that bone-in meat tasty?"

"Yeah! Man, you really can't get anything better than the stuff with the bones. Oh, but I left them like I was supposed to. Didn't eat them. I'm so smart!"

"...Hmph." Still squatting, Monica grabbed the cat's front paws and forced them all the way up. His soft feline body stretched into the air.

"Hey! What the heck are you doing?!"

"Glenn and Lord Cyril got in a lot of trouble because you ate that meat without asking, Nero!"

It had been a lot of trouble. Glenn had been suspected of stealing, and Cyril had fallen down and sprained his ankle.

"And it wasn't just the bone-in meat, either, was it? You ate Glenn's ham, too."

Nero, still stretched out, tilted his head a little, seeming confused. "Ham? What are you talking about?"

"The ham hanging in the smoker. You ate that, too, didn't you?"

"Heh. I may be a big eater, but I only took the bone-in meat."

"...Huh?"

Just then, Nero's nose twitched, and he glanced at something behind Monica. "I smell ham from over there."

She then heard a sound like something being dragged. In utter disbelief, she turned around. There it was. The rabbit—or rather, the spirit Istreah—was dragging the remains of the ham in its mouth.

Nero's golden eyes grew large. "Hey, is that a spirit? Guess they eat meat, too, huh?"

"...I've heard earth spirits enjoy the fruit of the land as offerings, but..." Apparently, for some spirits, that extended beyond grains and vegetables and included meat.

Nero hissed to threaten it, but the rabbit ignored him and continued chowing down on the ham.

"Hmph," said Nero. "Not a very *smart* spirit, if you ask me. Doesn't even have much mana. That maid lady is *way* stronger."

The maid lady—Ryn—was a high spirit. They were incomparably more powerful than mid-level spirits. But the latter still had a good amount of magical power. You couldn't let your guard down around one.

"Nero, go outside," said Monica. "I don't want someone seeing you."

"Call me if you need anything."

"Okay." She nodded, letting the cat back out the window.

The rabbit confidently continued ravaging the piece of ham as if to imply Monica presented no threat to it at all. Its round eyes were orange—a color never seen in wild rabbits. Though spirits could take on human and animal forms, they could never change their eye color.

If I want to catch it, my best bet is to block off its escape...

Without chanting, Monica cast a sealing barrier. Shining golden chains emerged all around the rabbit; each chain was a series of small magical formulae.

Seal!

The chains contracted, but just as they were about to wrap around the rabbit, it jumped out of the way. The spirit could jump far better than a normal rabbit; it leaped clear onto Monica's head, where it started pulling on her hair with its front legs and front teeth.

"Ow, ow, ow! Waaahhh! No, stop!" she yelled.

"Monica, are you okay?!"

She heard footsteps running toward her—it was Glenn, who had heard her scream. He tried to grab the rabbit yanking her hair, but it used her head as a foothold to jump again. Then it bounced off Glenn's nose with its hind legs and landed back down on the ground.

"Agh!" Glenn grunted, reeling backward.

The rabbit picked up the ham off the floor with its mouth, then turned away from the two of them and exhaled. While it couldn't speak human language, judging by its behavior, it was clearly making fun of them. It seemed to think they couldn't lay a finger on it. Full of confidence, it began running down the hallway, ham stuffed into its mouth.

"So that's the meat thief! ...Argh, now I'm mad! I'll catch it and turn it into rabbit stew!"

"G-Glenn, it's not a rabbit, it's a spirit..."

He didn't seem to hear her, though. Rubbing his kicked nose, he quick-chanted a spell.

Monica immediately cringed when she heard the incantation. It was an attack spell—one to make a fireball. Using fire magecraft indoors required very fine mana control. Glenn's fireballs were powerful, but his formulae were unstable and dangerous. It would have been one thing if they were outdoors, but indoors, he was liable to cause a disaster.

"Glenn...!"

She wavered. Should she used unchanted magecraft to interfere with his spell or put up a defensive barrier around them?

Before she could act, however, Glenn stopped chanting. The fireball taking

form in his hand dissipated with a whoosh of air.

"Crap," he said, smacking his cheek. As Monica looked at him wide-eyed, he grinned in embarrassment. "Difficult situations call for plain old hard work, right?"

"...! Right!"

Monica and Glenn exchanged glances and laughed, imagining Cyril saying those words, arms folded in front of his chest.

"I can't blow up the school," said Glenn. "It'd cause trouble for the president and VP. Let's go after it the old-fashioned way." His face was full of enthusiasm as he rolled up his sleeves.

"Sure, but..." Monica fidgeted as she made a suggestion. "I have a plan to, um, lure Istreah to us instead."

"Ham? In that case, I can go get some, and..."

Monica looked at him with a pained smile and shook her head. The spirit seemed to love ham, but there was something else spirits found even more attractive.

"I think the spirit got close to Lord Cyril...because he has a magic broach. Spirits really like clumped-up mana..."

Cyril's mana hyper-absorption syndrome and the excess mana he emitted must have made him even more attractive. He'd probably seemed like an irresistible treat. Monica didn't want to be the one to tell Cyril that, though—he'd looked so satisfied with the rabbit in his lap.

"Then should we borrow his broach?" asked Glenn.

"No, then we'd just be bothering him... But I know what we *can* use," said Monica, looking toward the small room meant for brewing tea.

\* \* \*

Istreah, the earth spirit turned bunny, was sitting in one corner of the hallway, having its fill of ham.

Spirits needed a supply of highly pure mana to remain active for long periods of time. While the world had been filled with it long ago, now there were only

so many regions spirits could inhabit.

To broaden their area of activity, spirits began forming contracts with human mages, who would supply them with a stable source of pure mana. Istreah was one such example.

Unlike high spirits, however, Istreah—as a mid-level spirit—couldn't stay apart from its contractor for very long.

Having been separated for a while now, it had already lost over half the mana composing its body.

It had recovered somewhat by ingesting meat—a fruit of the land—but a direct supply of mana would have been preferable.

In that sense, the silver-haired human it had seen in the forest was a convenient option. He was always exuding excess mana. He even wore a magic item, which was itself a mass of mana. Spirits were drawn to such items, and Istreah was no exception.

It had just decided to return to the mana-emitting human once it was done eating the ham, when something made its ears twitch.

A clump of mana was approaching—a magic item.

Istreah thought at first it was the human with the chill about him, but this mana was different—it was fire-aspected.

Raising its little head, Istreah heard the sound of footsteps—and saw a girl with braided light-brown hair slowly coming closer.

She gripped a small, silver plate in both hands, holding it out in front of her like a shield. A red gem was embedded in the plate—the source of the mana Istreah had sensed. The silver plate was a magic item.

"O-over...over here!"

The girl's timid expression tensed as she thrust the magic plate toward the spirit.

Istreah respected its contracted human, but it was still an animal, its brain programmed to steal what it could. Its animal instincts were telling it one thing: that the human in front of it was not very powerful.

She'd used a sealing spell earlier, which meant she was a mage. But her physical abilities were extremely poor. In short, she was clumsy and slow.

Istreah hissed, then jumped for the magic plate. It wanted to steal the item away from the girl.

The girl, clearly faint of heart, let out a frightened squeal but didn't let go of the plate.

"Now put your hands up, Monica!"

"Right!"

As Istreah clung to the silver plate, the girl lifted it into the air.

A boy with dirty-blond hair, hidden behind the girl, came running out. Apparently, the girl with the magic item had been a decoy.

The boy had his blazer off, and he unfolded it and wrapped it around Istreah.

"Got it! Monica, that was sure smart of you. Using a magic burner to draw the thing's attention and all that."

"Eh-heh... I, um, only recently learned how to use it."

Istreah struggled inside the blazer, putting up one last vain show of resistance.

As an earth spirit, Istreah could control earth and sand to an extent.

Indoors, this ability was limited, but fortunately, a nearby window was open. It decided to call some sand inside to momentarily blind its captors.

But the sand was quickly caught by a strong gust of wind. And not just any wind. It was magecraft—extremely precise and powerful.

As Istreah peeked through a gap in the blazer, it noticed the girl with the light-brown hair was staring straight at it with no emotion on her face.

She put her index finger to her lips and said quietly, "None of that, now."

Istreah understood instinctually that it was not the most powerful one in the room. That honor belonged to this human—the one who could use advanced magecraft without even chanting.

Cyril had his head down on his desk, cradling it with both hands. The color had drained from his face.

"Not only did I get hurt and force an underclassman to carry me, now I'm having two of them fix a mistake I made..."

He deeply regretted not realizing the rabbit was a spirit and letting it run away. And all because he'd trusted its warm fuzzy coat!

He would have loved to go running after it right this instant, but putting even a little weight on his twisted left ankle made it cry out in pain. Thanks to the emergency treatment he'd received, he could manage a slow walk, but running would be difficult.

As Cyril cursed his own helplessness, Elliott shot him a mean-spirited smirk. "At least you have underclassmen willing to clean up your messes, eh? I suppose fellow commoners have to look out for one another."

That was a stab at all three of them—Glenn and Monica, who were obviously commoners, and Cyril, who used to be one. The personal dig angered him, but more than that, Elliott had just made fun of their underclassmen. Cyril's expression turned serious.

"I won't have you insulting my juniors," he said.

"Insult? I'm just telling the truth."

As the two of them glared at each other, they heard a drowsy voice murmuring from the sofa. Macragan's granddaughter, Miss Lucille, had woken up.

Cyril and Elliott looked away from each other and reined in the hostile air that had begun to arise between them.

Lucille was sprawled on the sofa, looking sleepy. But when she noticed her grandfather, Mr. Macragan, sitting next to her, her face lit up. "Grappah!"

"That's right, it's Grandpa," said the old man. "Did you come here by yourself, Lucille?"

Lucille held up the rabbit-shaped handkerchief in her hands. "Eah! Eah, too!"

"I see. Istreah was with you, too, hm?"

Finally, Cyril put two and two together. The *Eah* word the girl kept repeating referred to the rabbit—to Istreah. Toddlerspeak was so difficult to understand.

Macragan stopped playing with Lucille for a moment and looked up at Cyril. "On that note, what about the two who went searching for the spirit? Will they be all right?"

"They're both my underclassmen," Cyril replied. "I'm sure they will take responsibility and complete the task at hand."

Though leaving the job to Monica and Glenn was risky, Cyril reminded himself that if he, their senior, didn't believe in them, who would?

Macragan turned down his eyes, hidden behind his white eyebrows, and muttered. "...Are you sure about letting that Dudley boy loose?"

The phrasing of Macragan's question frightened Cyril a little, and he frowned. It was as if the man was saying there was some major issue with letting Dudley do as he pleased.

"What do you mean, sir?" he asked. "His conduct leaves much to be desired, true, but..." He thought back to the boy's behavior—running in the halls, not wearing his uniform properly, cutting classes, smoking meat when he wasn't supposed to.

Macragan spoke again, his breathy voice emanating from beneath his beard. "Oh, so you trust him?"

"Yes," answered Cyril immediately. "He is my underclassman, after all."

The older man fell silent as though thinking about something. Then he began to stroke his beard. "Well, you see, at Minerva's, he—"

"We're back!"

The door to the council room burst open, and a boy's loud voice completely cut off the rest of Macragan's remark.

Glenn had opened the door, and Monica was next to him. The tall boy eagerly held up the blazer in his hands. A rabbit's ears were poking out of the plump, balled-up fabric.

"VP, I caught the meat thief! I'll strangle it, so please stand by to freeze it for

me!"

"Do not strangle the spirit!" yelled Cyril immediately. "...Wait. Meat thief?"

"This little guy was the culprit! There were pieces of ham all over the hallway. It was really going to town!"

Cyril widened his eyes in surprise.

Macragan nodded to himself. "Istreah is a heavy eater. Perhaps it ate some food it wasn't supposed to? I'm quite sorry."

Cyril was shocked but didn't let it show. You're telling me that adorable, fluffy bunny was the meat thief all along?

But whatever the case, they'd finally put a cap on everything that had happened that day. They'd located the lost girl's guardian, caught the runaway spirit, and learned the identity of the meat thief.

As their upperclassmen, Cyril knew he had to praise Glenn and Monica for a job well done. But just as he opened his mouth...

"Yikes!" Glenn cried out.

...the rabbit poked its head through a gap in Glenn's blazer and bit him on the wrist. The blazer fell to the floor, and the creature escaped. After glancing around, it launched itself toward Monica for some reason, biting her on the hand.

"Gyah!" Monica yelped pathetically. "Ow! Ow, th-that hurts! Stop, please! Wh-why me...? Please...please don't eat me!"

In desperate straits, the spirit had launched a last-ditch effort to do as much damage as it could to its most powerful enemy.

But to Cyril and the others, it appeared to be attacking the weakest among them. Eventually, Elliott said what they were all thinking.

"...The little squirrel is being eaten by a rabbit."

Ten minutes later, the rabbit was recaptured. Monica and Glenn, both covered in tooth marks, were sent—along with Cyril—to the infirmary.

On one side was Monica, covered in bite marks, sobbing and whimpering. On

the other was Glenn, his shoulder under Cyril's; the silver-haired boy was st dragging his foot. All told, though, they'd made it out in one piece.	till



After watching them go, Macragan said to himself, "I'm glad to see they have good friends and upperclassmen."

"Grappah?" His granddaughter looked up at him, Istreah in her arms.

"Oh, nothing," he said with a smile, leading the girl by the hand. "As long as the youth are growing up nice and healthy, all is well."

\* \* \*

The following afternoon, during the midday break, Cyril took a stroll through Serendia Academy's rear gardens. The previous day, they had tracked down the meat thief, sent the lost girl home, and captured the spirit.

What an awful day that was.

Cyril had disgraced himself in front of his underclassmen and forced them to clean up his own mess. On top of that, he'd be unable to run for a while thanks to his sprained ankle. Not one good thing had happened.

He'd been told to stay on the sidelines and observe during combat magecraft lessons for the time being, too. And Byron, who had made quite the fuss about dueling him, was extremely disappointed.

He really does seem to love magic battles. Cyril started to feel guilty about it as he continued his walk through the rear gardens, limping.

Occasionally, you could find small creatures back here, like cats. And out of sheer coincidence—that was most certainly all it was—he happened to have sneaked a few small pieces of dried fish into his pocket. Since it was there anyway, he figured that if he saw a cat, he could share some.

The previous day's incident concerning the meat thief had genuinely frightened him. The thought that a vicious, starving carnivore might start attacking the cats in the rear gardens had worried him to death. But they'd caught said vicious carnivore—an earth spirit named Istreah—so he figured there was no longer any need for concern.

Coming to a stop, he scanned the gardens for a place with good sunlight. A certain black cat liked to lie about in the area, but Cyril didn't see it today. Maybe it would come around if he took out the fish.

Just as his hand moved to his pocket, though, he heard an awfully loud voice from overhead say "Hey, Vice President!"

He looked up. Glenn was floating in the air using flight magecraft and waving at him. In his hand, he held a large plate.

The boy gently touched down in front of him, then held out the plate. On it was a pile of smoked, amber-colored chicken. It was practically glowing.

"I made this to thank you for yesterday. I hope you like it! Oh, this is the kind of smoked meat you only put in for a short time, and—"

"I don't need any," Cyril interrupted. "I already ate lunch."

"But you're so skinny, VP. You need some meat on your bones."

Cyril frowned and glared at Glenn; that was something he was rather selfconscious about.

After seeing the fish in Cyril's hand, though, Glenn's face lit up like he'd just figured out something. "Hey, VP, is that fish for—?"

"N-no, it is not. It just...it just happened to be in my pocket. That's all," Cyril stammered.

"Hey, there's no need to hide it." Glenn nodded several times as if he now understood everything. "You really like fish, right?"

*"…"* 

"Enough to go off alone and eat it in secret, huh?"

"Um. Right. Yes, that's it." Cyril nodded awkwardly, still holding the fish.

Glenn flashed him a toothy smile. "I'll smoke some fish next. It'll be great, promise!"

"Go to class!"

The icy scion's angry voice rang out under the clear blue sky.

## \*\*\*\*\*\* INTERMISSION \*\*\*\*\*\*

## **The Power to Oppose Injustice**

Dust and sand whirled and whipped in front of Glenn. Beyond it he saw a fire dragon, covered in reddish-brown scales. By his estimate, the creature was a little bigger than a bull. While this type of dragon was considered lesser, that didn't mean he could be careless. One swipe of its claws could easily prove fatal.

And as its name implied, it could breathe fire.

"Snap out of it, Glenn."

Something poked his cold, sweat-covered back—it was the staff of his master, Louis Miller. As part of his combat training, Glenn had joined the Barrier Mage on a mission to slay this very beast.

Before becoming one of the Seven Sages, Louis had been the leader of the Magic Corps. He was one of the top-five dragon slayers in the kingdom. A fire dragon or two were easy prey for a man like him.

Glenn was just an apprentice, however, only fifteen years of age. A fire dragon was too much for him to handle—on his own, at least.

But reality, like his master, was cruel.

"Start chanting already. Or do you plan to charge the dragon unarmed? Because if so, I can simply throw you at it."

The man's tone made this sound like a joke, but Glenn knew his master would do it. Frantically, he began to chant a spell. Unfortunately, his nerves tied his tongue into knots, preventing him from reciting the words properly.

How close was the dragon? What was the ideal angle to the center of its brow—its weak spot? This was a moving target, so the optimal solutions kept changing. Doing all those calculations in such a hurry and using the answers to weave his mana was more difficult than he'd imagined.

The fire dragon, noticing his presence, stomped toward him.

"Ah... Ahhh!"

Glenn cried out in fear, but his master's staff prodded him in the back again. "Don't stop chanting."

"B-but it noticed me!"

Louis sighed in annoyance, then uttered a brief chant. There was a loud, shrill noise.

The fire dragon stopped as though an invisible wall were blocking it. Louis had put up a barrier.

As the man's title implied, Louis excelled in barrier techniques. His favored tactic was to pin down his targets with a barrier, then hit them with all the attack magecraft he could muster.

"It stopped moving, see? Now chant."

"B-but if I attack it now, then..."

When attacking something through a defensive barrier, you needed to work a remote formula into your attack spell and set it to trigger on the other side. Otherwise, the barrier would simply block it.

But Glenn couldn't use remote formulae. They were too advanced. And if he simply fired something, it would hit the barrier, not the dragon.

Louis sniffed as though he saw right through Glenn's hesitation. "I'll disengage the barrier when you attack."

Hastily, the boy resumed his chant. A large ball of fire appeared in front of him, just about big enough to wrap your arms around. He took careful aim, then unleashed the fireball.

"Gooo!"

The flames shot straight for the dragon's brow. With perfect timing, the barrier holding the dragon in place dropped, and the fireball struck the beast right between the eyes.

While Glenn's accuracy still left a lot to be desired, his power did not. A clean

hit to the brow was enough to deal a mortal blow.

The fire dragon shuddered, then collapsed to the ground.

Louis, already done chanting a second spell, waved his staff. A spear of ice appeared above the creature, then lanced down, skewering it through the brow.

"And that's that," he said.

Glenn threw out his arms and legs and sat down on the ground. "I'm exhaaausted..."

"You used one attack spell. What do you mean, you're exhausted?"

"We just took down a dragon. That was a lot of work. And pretty scary, too, you know." The boy frowned.

Louis looked down at him like he was a senseless toddler and shook his head, sighing. "Listen to me, Glenn. You are young, and many difficulties still lie ahead of you. When you encounter one, remember what I am about to say."

He put his hand to his chest like a saint reciting scripture.

"Most troubles can be solved through money or violence."

Louis seemed like a very classy man—right up until he spoke. He said things like this with absolutely no sense of shame.

Glenn stayed where he was and narrowed his eyes at his master.

"Is that what the Seven Sages are all about, then? Money and violence?" he asked.

Still smiling, Louis brought his fist down on Glenn's head.

He might be elegant in appearance and slender in build, but the Barrier Mage was awfully strong in a fistfight. Glenn was certain his punches hurt more than some attack magecraft.

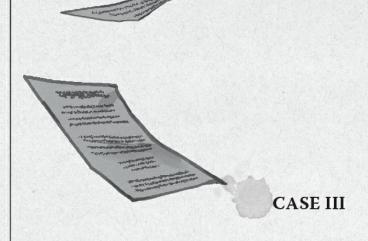
Louis looked down at his apprentice as the boy rubbed his head. "If you don't want to accept such injustices, then build your strength. Injustice swoops in without warning. It won't give you any opportunity to negotiate."

These were the words of a strong man who had already faced countless

injustices and repelled them. And Glenn knew all about injustices. They'd battered him like a storm would a ship—until the next thing he knew, he was Louis's apprentice.

In a way, this very situation was an injustice in Glenn's eyes. "So if I don't want to lose to a totally unfair master, I should either win him over with money or outdo him in violence, right?"

The bringer of injustice smiled at him and raised his staff. In a panic, Glenn quickly fled the scene.



## The Cynic's Melancholy

~The Musician Playboy and Rumors about the Old Dorm~

"Ah, what beauty graces mine eyes! To you, I dedicate this song."

Benjamin Mording began to play the violin in his hands.

The piece, originally composed for the piano, had been written as a blessing for lovers everywhere. Performing it on a violin demanded a high level of expertise. Some would play it in a different key so they could use open strings, but Benjamin purposely stuck to the original key.

The graceful, gentle melody drifted through the advanced course second-year classroom. Everyone present stopped their conversations and work to listen to its notes.

When the wondrous performance was over at last, the beauty to whom the song had been dedicated—the second-year student and daughter of Marquess Highown, Claudia Ashley—clapped closed the book she'd been reading. Her head lazily fell to one side, as if it was too heavy for her to hold up.

"Even the finest music is just noise to those who don't want to listen...," she said. "You understand, yes?"

\* \* \*

The rain was pouring hard that morning as Elliott Howard lay in bed, grimacing and groaning. He hated rainy days. They got his clothes wet, made his hair frizzy, and muffled his violin. There was nothing good about them.

"It's morning, Lord Elliott."

He heard his servant speak just before the blanket was yanked off him in one brutal, merciless motion. All the servants of House Howard knew that if you showed Elliott any mercy, he'd never rise in the morning.

Still only half awake, he sat up and mumbled, "Granny, could I get autumnpicked lignum leaves and milk in my tea...?"

"'Granny' isn't here. I'm her son."

"And put the milk in first..."

"Yes, yes. I must say, you are an impossible young master."

Such an impossible young master—that was what the old woman known as Granny, who looked after Elliott when he was at home, liked to say. Lately, the

phrase seemed to have infected her son. The apple never fell far, did it? The "I must say" he'd added to the front gave it a nice length, too.

"Pull yourself together, now," the man continued. "You wouldn't want to be late for class."

Class. Right. He had classes today.

This wasn't his bed back home. It was his dorm room at Serendia Academy. His half-awake mind understood that, but unfortunately the *other* half was still in a dream world. His body, meanwhile, sought out his warm blanket, and his hand reached out to grab hold of it. But the servant quickly snatched it away.

"Come, get changed. You'll be late for breakfast."

"...Right."

"The bazaar is after school today, yes? Aren't you going?"

"...No."

As his servant helped him change, he heard Cyril's piercing voice from out in the hallway.

"Glenn Dudley! No drying fish in communal dorm spaces!"

"But it's raining! I can't do it outside. This spot has the best airflow."

Stupid commoners and their stupid morning energy, thought Elliott idly, yawning.

\* \* \*

Elliott had never been a morning person. He just couldn't get his brain to turn on—or his body to not feel heavy. Nevertheless, by the time he'd cleaned himself up and made his appearance in the dorm cafeteria, he'd woken up a good amount—by his standards anyway. In reality, his droopy eyes were still half closed, and when he moved, it was as though he were wading through mud.

He yawned, tearing his bread into small pieces for no reason, as someone took the seat across from him. It was his old friend Benjamin Mording.

The color of melancholy was all over the boy's fragile, delicate face as he raised his arms toward the sky and cried out, "I'm in a slump!"

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"...Oh," said Elliott.

"A slump, I say!"

"...Right."
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They went on like that, Benjamin exclaiming he was in a slump and sleepyeyed Elliott mumbling back. Once they'd repeated the cycle over ten times, the latter finally began to wake up for real.

Elliott washed down his bread—which was now in tiny pieces—with some tea and stared at the boy across from him as he cried out in lamentation. "Why do you have to be so loud in the morning? Anyway, what? A slump? Don't worry. You're a genius. All your music sounds sublime."

"Oh, Elliott, my friend! Imagine, if you will, the delight of awakening amid spring sunlight and the sound of snow melting into water and flowing away! Think of the warmth! The emotion! I couldn't express any of that with my music... My performance couldn't conjure a sun to melt the winter snow!"

"...What exactly did you do this time?"

Elliott chose those particular words because he'd known Benjamin for many years. Whenever the boy fell into a slump, it was usually because he'd stirred up trouble with a girl. He was always flitting from one leisured woman to the next; in fact, he'd been with three such women during the school festival.

They probably found out he triple-booked them or something, thought Elliott.

Then Benjamin looked up sorrowfully toward the heavens, his flaxen hair swaying. "I performed for Miss Claudia Ashley to...shall we say *less* than rave reviews."

*"…"* 

Elliott immediately looked around. Fortunately, neither Cyril nor Neil were within eyeshot.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Miss Claudia is *engaged*! Her foster brother is *on the student council!* You've got a lot of nerve, telling me that!"

"But I can't help it, Elliott... Whenever I see a beautiful woman in love, my musician instincts demand I offer her a performance."

The problem with Benjamin was that he loved beautiful women who were already in love—and it didn't matter whether he was the target of their affections.

In the end, he'd fall for a woman who already had someone, make a huge fuss about it all on his own, and get his heart broken. After that, until he found someone or something else to devote himself to, he'd never break out of his slump.

"You've heard my case," said Benjamin. "I've come to ask your help in getting out of this slump, my friend! You have a responsibility to come to my aid."

"I really don't." Elliott scowled.

Benjamin brushed back his flaxen hair and flashed Elliott a subtle, meaningful smile. "Heh-heh. You don't seem to understand, Elliott. The winter recital is next week. The academy's pride will be riding on it. And I am the solo violinist."

"You... Why, you..."

Guests from outside the academy would be attending the recital, and the student council sponsored it, so a half-hearted performance would surely embarrass them all.

Watching his friend grimace, Benjamin plucked a grape off Elliott's plate and winked.

"Don't you think a student council member has a certain responsibility to ensure the recital's success?"

How has it come to this? thought Elliott, hanging his head in despair.

\* \* \*

"Hey, Monica, when's your birthday?"

Lana spread open a book as she asked the question. They were on break between classes.

"Um, it's the first day of the first week of Shelgria..."

Monica's friend nodded, then flipped through the book's pages.

It seemed to be a book on astrology, though not a technical manual detailing how to read the stars. It was a book for entertainment, geared toward the masses, purporting to deduce your fortune from your birthday. That was Monica's perception, at least.

"If you were born on this day, you are a kind person," read Lana. "But you tend to get swept up in the affairs of others, assigned difficult tasks, and find yourself in a lot of troubling situations."

Monica—who was only here because she'd been roped into a challenging infiltration mission by her colleague—was dumbstruck. *This astrology book is so right it's scary,* she thought.

"Your good luck charms are coffee, white accessories, and violets... That's what it says."

Monica's jaw was on her desk at this point. Lana grinned mischievously.

"This is one of the books that was recently donated to the library," she explained. "Everyone's been saying it's very accurate."

"Is the author...by any chance...?"

"Lady Mary Harvey. The Starseer Witch herself. You know, of the Seven Sages."

Monica couldn't believe it. So it *was* her. This book had been written by the foremost prophet in the kingdom. No wonder it was so accurate.

If it was donated recently, I wonder if it came from the Haymes... My thesis was donated, too, after all... She smiled bitterly, remembering the failed mission to read it.

"Hey, Monica." Lana closed the book and looked at her friend. "Did you hear about the bazaar being held after school today and tomorrow?"

"Um, yes."

A few times every year, Serendia Academy invited merchants and held a bazaar on school grounds. Being a transfer student, Monica hadn't experienced one yet. But according to Lana, they sold all sorts of things, from clothing and accessories to sundries, books, baked goods, and tea leaves. Apparently, even tailors set up shop there and would measure you on the spot and take orders for clothing.

"I can't go today, but... Would you like to go together tomorrow?" Lana asked.

Monica's eyes sparkled at the invitation. There was nothing she particularly wanted to buy, but the idea of going shopping with Lana made her heart leap.

"Yes... I'd love to!"

"Then it's decided," Lana said, smiling. "According to this book, my good-luck charm is a pearl. I have a few pearl accessories already, but if I find a really nice one at the bazaar, I'd like to purchase it."

Monica nodded along excitedly, but part of her mind turned to her mission to guard Felix. Intruders had gotten into the campus posing as merchants before, and the school would be putting more effort into checking those attending the bazaar and bolstering security in general.

Ewan, the man Monica had confronted at the chess competition and again at the school festival who had used body-altering magecraft, had been cursed by the Abyss Shaman, Ray Albright. According to Ray, the curse would last a month, so Ewan wasn't likely to attack again during that time. Nonetheless, they still had to be careful, and she intended to remain vigilant.

I don't think the prince was planning to attend the bazaar...

In that case, it shouldn't be a problem to have Nero and Ryn watch Felix.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Lana. "My next class is in another room, so I'd better get going. I'll see you later, Monica!"

"Okay," Monica replied, nodding back.

She picked up her own textbooks and rose. Her next class was one of her electives—chess, which she enjoyed almost as much as math. That and the thought of her plans for the next day put a spring in her step.

I can't wait for the bazaar... Maybe I'll take a look at some paper and ink or something.

Her mind racing with ideas about the upcoming event, she opened the door to her next class...

"…"

...only to stop cold right at the entrance.

In the middle of the room stood Benjamin Mording, his right hand at his forehead and his left at his hip. His entire body was twisted so his legs were crossed, and he had his head thrown back so he was looking at the ceiling. He wasn't moving. Nearby, Elliott was busy lining up pieces on a chessboard, clearly annoyed.

Monica wondered if it was all right to call out to them. She was finding the situation a little awkward.

As she hesitated, Benjamin tilted his head forward. Their eyes met.

"Ah, good day to you, Miss Norton. If you're wondering why I'm striking such a pose, well, I'm attempting to use my entire body to express my agony. And yes, for a musician such as myself to express his agony using his own body and not his music can only mean one thing—that the music hath dried up!"

"Take a seat, little squirrel," said Elliott. "Class is starting."

Professor Boyd had just entered through the other door, so Monica rushed to her desk and sat down. After a glare from the teacher, even Benjamin settled down into a seat next to Elliott.

"A...slump?"

Monica tilted her head in confusion as she rearranged the chess pieces.

Chess class was split into several ranks based on skill. Students from the same rank would play each other, so Monica frequently played against Elliott and Benjamin, who had both taken part in the chess competition with her.

Her first game today had been with Benjamin, and his plays had clearly lacked their usual vitality.

In his own words, his chess represented the "versatility of music itself." In essence, he wasn't attached to any specific way of playing. Sometimes he would set up a strong defense, while other times he would boldly go on the attack. His games were, well, varied, just like he claimed.

That day, however, his efforts seemed half-hearted, whether he was taking a defensive position or moving in for an attack. When Monica pointed this out

during their post-game review, Elliott—who had watched the game—sighed and explained, "He says he's in a slump."

Benjamin shook his flaxen hair wildly, using dramatic motions and gestures to help evoke his distress. "The darkened skies shadowing the music in my heart must have manifested in today's game. Ahhh, how I would love to express this sadness with my violin—but now even the notes of my performances are as clouds blocking out the sun... Should this state of affairs continue, my next recital shall have me playing even the lightest, cheeriest music lamentabile!"

"Um..." Monica couldn't understand most of the words pouring rapidly from Benjamin's lips. All she knew was that he was troubled. Awkwardly, she said, "That must be, um, difficult."

"Oh, it is! And so I would very much like your assistance in this matter as well, Miss Norton."

"Huh?" she said, her mouth hanging half-open.

Elliott grinned, looking exhausted. "He claims the student council has a responsibility to make his next recital a success—so you're in this whether you like it or not, little squirrel."

"But um, I don't...I don't know anything about music... What am I supposed to...to...?"

"Don't worry. I understand music, but even I have no clue what's going on with him."

Didn't that mean they had no way to help?

As Monica mumbled nonsense through trembling lips, Benjamin placed his hand on his chest and declared, "The way to break out of this slump is love! Yes, love! Butterflies in my heart! It must leap; it must soar! That is the key to breaking free!"

Love was a topic Monica found particularly difficult to understand. In her case, she'd have to start from the very beginning—defining the word itself. What was love, exactly? She folded her arms and thought hard.

Elliott lowered his voice. "Pipe down, Benjamin. Mr. Boyd's glaring at you."

"Ah, my mistake."

Benjamin put a hand to his mouth, then let out a lonely sigh and stared into nothingness. Was he visualizing the one he was in love with?

"Ahhh, Miss Claudia Ashley. Whenever I think of you, my heart cannot help but tremble."

"Hwah?!" yelped Monica.

Immediately, she covered her mouth with her hands. The stern-faced Professor Boyd was now staring right at her.

Speaking more softly, she asked Benjamin, "Um, the one you're in love with... It's, um, Lady Claudia?"

"Insane, right?" Elliot interjected. "I thought so, too."

Perhaps because of how long he'd known Benjamin, Elliott's words were even more scathing than usual.

Claudia Ashley, the daughter of Marquess Highown, was considered one of the three most beautiful girls at the academy. Though she was already engaged to Neil, it seemed there was no end to the boys after her hand. Benjamin must have been one of them.

"And why *now*?" asked Elliott. "You've been around her before. You had chess class with her last year, didn't you?"

"Oh, I've always considered her quite charming. She's a beauty, but even more than that—she's a beauty in love."

Benjamin's statement only confused Monica.

Elliott filled her in. "Benjamin falls for beautiful people who are already in love. And only if they have pretty faces, so you can rest easy."

He'd meant that as a mean-spirited jab at the plain, unattractive Monica, but she didn't particularly care about such things, so she just nodded vaguely and said, "Oh."

Benjamin ignored their exchange, and his expression grew more and more enraptured as he continued. "She has always been charming, but on the day of

the school festival, the flower of her love was in full bloom. I could tell. When a woman is in love, her beauty grows. And that beauty blinded me."

Sudden blindness could point to an eye disease, thought Monica in all seriousness. Shouldn't he see a doctor about that?

Elliott wearily translated. "In summary, Benjamin is head over heels for Miss Claudia. Without thinking, he dedicated a song to her, and she hated it. That sent him spiraling into this slump."

"Oh. I, um...think I get it?"

"I can think of three possible solutions." Elliott held up three fingers in front of Monica as seriously as if he were explaining chess strategy. "One, Miss Claudia returns his feelings. Two, he falls in love with some other girl. Three, he becomes obsessed with something other than love. Frankly, the first would never work out—and would be reckless besides. So we'll have to go with one of the other two."

He paused there, then leaned forward a little and lowered his voice again.

"And don't tell any of this to Cyril or Officer Maywood. If word gets out that Benjamin is in love with Miss Claudia...well, Cyril would go berserk. I can promise you that."

It was hard to imagine how the congenial Neil might react, but Cyril's reaction was easy to envision, even for Monica. The ever-serious vice president would probably say something like *My sister is engaged, so you must cease courting her immediately.* Then, when Benjamin refused to back down, Cyril would grow infuriated and yell at him, scattering cold air in every direction. In the worst case, the whole classroom might wind up covered in frost.

"And if that happens," Elliott continued, "we'll have no choice but to get the prince involved."

"...Yes."

In other words, they had to get Benjamin out of his slump without letting Cyril or Neil find out. To do that, they needed him either to fall for some other beautiful person in love or to become obsessed with something else entirely.

Monica couldn't think of any beautiful people in love, so she decided to pursue the other possibility instead.

"Ummm, then why not have him try to find solutions for unsolved problems in mathematics?" she suggested. "When I get focused on something like that, I can stay up for three nights straight! I recommend trying to prove the twin prime conjecture..."

"Look, Miss Norton..." Elliott groaned, narrowing his eyes.

Benjamin brushed back his bangs with a theatrical flair and said, "Heh-heh. Not to brag, but my grades in everything but music and chess are at rock bottom!"

"You're right, that really *is* nothing to brag about, so cut it out. You're embarrassing me as your friend."

It seemed like it would be pretty difficult for Benjamin to become obsessed with math. If that and magecraft were out of the question, then Monica didn't have any other suggestions... But just as she was about to give up, something came to mind.

"Oh, I know... There's, um, a bazaar after school today and tomorrow, right?" she said, remembering how her heart had leaped when Lana invited her. "Maybe if, um, you can find something wonderful there...something you can really become obsessed with...it would help get you out of your slump?" Her last words came out as more of a mumble.

Elliott frowned. "Shopping? He can just have a servant do that."

"No, that's a wonderful idea, Miss Norton!" exclaimed Benjamin. "Both of you, meet me at the entrance hall after school today!"

Elliott rose from his seat, flustered at the one-sided proposition. "Wait just a minute, Benjamin. You can't decide this all on your own."

"Am...am I going...too...?" asked Monica.

Theatrically, Benjamin spread his arms wide. "Ah, my beloved friend, my underclassman. Pray be not so cold, so unfeeling. Shopping alone would be far too sad. Musicians are fragile creatures. Why, loneliness is lethal to us."

The self-professed fragile creature then started lining up his chess pieces, gleefully humming to himself.

Elliott put a hand to his forehead and sighed. "Well, crap. Benjamin stops listening when he gets like this... It was your suggestion, so no running away, little squirrel."

"Aw..."

Elliott's droopy eyes burned with resolve. He was not going to let her escape.

\* \* \*

Had the weather been clear, the bazaar would have been held outside on the school grounds. But it had been raining without pause since morning, so they'd set up in the hall used for ceremonies and balls instead.

Monica arrived at the meeting place a little early and took a peek inside. She widened her eyes at the lively crowd.

There's more people than I thought...

Students weren't the only patrons, either—many of those currently shopping were their servants.

The higher a noble's rank, the less they tended to shop in person. Elliott was one such example. In general, such nobles would either have a servant go in their place, or they would call the merchant to their own home.

But unlike bazaars in the city, Serendia Academy permitted only those affiliated with the school to enter. That removed the worry of getting kidnapped or having things stolen by a pickpocket. And the shops taking part were all handpicked and first-rate, ensuring worry-free shopping. Maybe that was why a few highborn students were visible here and there among the crowd.

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, Monica noticed a white handkerchief lying on the floor nearby. She glanced around, but nobody seemed to be searching for it.

Not wanting someone to step on it and get it dirty, she picked it up. It was made of high-quality linen, but when she unfolded it, she didn't see any name or initials embroidered into the fabric. Instead, the only embellishments were

flowers—lily of the valley.

Monica didn't know much about embroidery, but the stitches used in the flowers were very intricate, filling a whole section of cloth with lines. The fact that the maker had depicted the pretty lily petals without leaving any gaps spoke to their skilled needlework.

On a whim, Monica turned it over and noticed something strange about the underside.

The backside of embroidery, too, revealed a person's skill. To an extent, talented embroiderers could keep their threads looking clean even when viewed from underneath.

That was how the handkerchief she'd gotten from Casey had been. While the yellow flower embroidery wasn't *exactly* the same on the underside, the threads had been kept neat and near to the intended shape.

The embroidery on the handkerchief Monica had just picked up, though, was pretty rough on the underside. You could see white and blue threads sticking out where the green leaves were.

But it looks so neat from the front...

The perfection of the front made the sloppy work on the underside all the more curious. Monica doubted an artisan had made it—a hobbyist had probably embroidered it. Some noble girl's practice cloth, perhaps. Embroidery was a common interest among noblewomen; Serendia Academy even had a club for it.

I'll bring it to the faculty room later...

As she put the handkerchief in her pocket, she heard Elliott and Benjamin behind her. The former's voice was clearly unhappy, while the latter's was as fresh and joyful as a clear blue sky.

"Ugh. Why do I have to go out walking on a rainy day...? And to go shopping..."

"We're not *out*, my friend, for the hall is indoors. And besides, the sound of rain is a form of music unto itself. A melody played out by nature—why, we

should enjoy it to our heart's content!"

"I don't know how you're so enthusiastic when you're supposed to be in a slump...," grumbled Elliott, sounding not only displeased but also exhausted.

"Hello," Monica said, bowing slightly.

Benjamin, seeming to be in a very good mood, spread his arms and exclaimed, "Why, hello, Miss Norton! So good of you to come! Let's not waste any more time. Shall we go enjoy the bazaar? Oh, is this your first time attending, Miss Norton?"

"Y-yes."

"Then I shall be your personal guide! Our first port of call simply must be the clothiers. I recommend Magnowah, an old standby. I always have them make my recital wear. If you want more original clothing or accessories, you'll want the Rottheim Workshop. Their hats are especially divine. They strike a perfect balance between playfulness and the practiced skill of artisans with first-rate knowledge of haberdashery!"

Benjamin practically danced from shop to shop, his footsteps light as a feather. One moment, his eyes sparkled at the sight of a velvet hat, and the next he was absolutely focused on a foreign-made porcelain vase. Then he was at a bookseller's, eagerly looking through their new releases. They were moving so fast that Monica was beginning to feel dizzy.

"Courtlie's collected poems are also a must-have. Oh? It's the new *Famed Detective Calvin Alcock* book. How wonderful!"

Benjamin had just picked up the detective novel Nero and Ryn were so obsessed with.

Ummm, if I remember right... That's a story where someone tries really hard to commit a complicated crime, even though it would be easy to do with magecraft or magic items...

As Monica mentally summarized the story in a way sure to earn Nero's wrath, Benjamin had already moved on. He was holding a gemstone up to the light, gazing at it as if in a trance.

Elliott heaved an exaggerated sigh. "You've always been so moody..."

"Heh-heh. With my heart stolen away by such beautiful, radiant gems, I feel myself a butterfly flitting about the fields, kissing each flower in turn..."

"If you're attracted to shiny things, wouldn't that make you a moth?" quipped Elliott.

"No! Moths are not beautiful!" cried Benjamin shrilly, bending backward. A moment later, he sprang upright and headed over to a shop dealing in seasonal cards. "Ah yes. I must purchase my Shelgria cards as well!"

"I guess it's almost that time of year again, huh?"

These days, the word "Shelgria" usually referred to a calendar month, but it came from the name of a mythical ice spirit.

According to legend, there once was a spirit named Shelgria. The King of the Ice Spirits said to Shelgria: "This year, let us call forth winter earlier than usual."

Shelgria thought about this. If winter came sooner, wouldn't that cause trouble for humans? They might not be finished harvesting their crops. They might not be done preparing for the cold.

So she decided to write letters to the humans to inform them of winter's arrival. She gathered lots of autumn leaves and wrote a message on each of them.

"Winter will come early. Please hasten your preparations."

The humans saw her messages and completed their winter preparations ahead of schedule, allowing them to endure the early onset of winter.

From this myth sprang the tradition of sending message cards from the end of fall to the beginning of winter. People usually wrote messages of gratitude to family or loved ones living far away, perhaps detailing their plans for winter break.

Shelqria cards... I don't think I've ever written one..., thought Monica.

Her eyes were drawn to the pretty cards lined up in one of the shops. Shelgria cards were generally simple with white backgrounds and featured illustrations of seasonal flowers, birds, or small creatures. Some had more elaborate details,

such as foil stamps and paper cutouts.

Benjamin chose a card with a daffodil on it and an envelope with a flower watermark, then asked the shopkeeper, "Oh, might you have any blue ink?"

"Yes, we do. Would you like to test it out?" said the shopkeeper, offering him a bottle of ink and a feather pen.

Benjamin took a backing sheet from the man and wrote several musical notes in blue ink with the pen. While it was technically blue, it wasn't a vivid sapphire color. It was somewhat darker, closer to indigo, and depending on the light, it could appear slightly purple. Blue was one of the most expensive colors of ink available and cost almost ten times what black ink did.

Elliott looked at the bottle and asked, confused, "Why blue ink?"

"Oh, but don't you know, Elliott? Writing a love letter in blue ink guarantees that one's love will be returned. It's a famous charm."

"That's weird," said Elliott. It seemed like he'd never heard of such a thing.

Monica, however, had. Somewhere. Not recently, though. She was pretty sure it had been quite a while ago.

A love letter in blue ink... Where have I heard that before...?

She had only the faintest recollection, which meant she probably wasn't very interested at the time. In fact, she was impressed she remembered it at all.

"Um, Benjamin," said Elliott. "Don't tell me you're going to use that ink to..."

"Why, of course! I want to pour my feelings onto the page and offer them to Miss Claudia."

Even after her scathing review of his music, it seemed he still hadn't given up.

Elliott grimaced and groaned. "She'll throw it away. Won't even read it. I would bet money on it."

Monica agreed. The best he could hope for was that she'd open the envelope. It was more likely, however, that she'd throw it out without even breaking the seal.

"Look, Benjamin," Elliott continued. "I'm not trying to insult you, but you

should give up on her. You know how reckless you're being, don't you?"

"Oh, I do. And yet I cannot stop. That's how love works, Elliott." Benjamin brushed his bangs up and away with a dramatic motion. Elliott looked ready to scream.

Just then, they heard a voice from behind.

"I don't usually see the three of you together."

Elliott groaned despite himself, and Monica inhaled with a squeak. They turned around to find Cyril Ashley standing behind them—the elder brother of the girl Benjamin was in love with.

"Benjamin, please, *please* don't say anything unnecessary...," Elliott whispered like a prayer.

Unfortunately, his prayer went unanswered.

"Hello, my brother!" greeted Benjamin, raising a hand cheerfully.

"...What?" Cyril frowned.

Elliott whispered into Monica's ear, "Do whatever you need to do to get Cyril away from him. I'll handle Benjamin."

"A-all right!"

If Cyril found out Benjamin had eyes for Claudia, it would cause a disaster, for sure.

Monica pattered up to Cyril and stammered out a question. "L-Lord Cyril, aare you on p-patrol?"

"That's right. I want to be nearby in case of any trouble..."

"Um, is it okay if I go with you to learn how to do it?!"

Cyril widened his eyes a little in surprise. But then he smiled and nodded. "That's the spirit. With me, then."



"Right!"

While Monica spoke to Cyril, Elliott grabbed Benjamin by his collar and dragged him away.

The two of them had just pulled off a miraculous feat of perfect coordination.

\* \* \*

No one from the student council had been assigned to patrol the bazaar—Cyril was doing this voluntarily.

"I can't allow any potential trouble to bother the prince," he explained, expression sharp and alert.

Monica wondered how he'd react if he knew that she and Elliott were treating him like potential trouble. Not to imply that he was at fault or anything —but if he ran into Benjamin again, they'd end up fighting.

And that's the one thing we need to avoid, she thought, clenching her sweaty palms.

"Ummm, Lord Cyril," she said. "Is your foot...doing okay?"

"I have no problems walking on it. I'm forbidden from running, however. And I was ordered to sit out of magic battle practice for a while."

About a week ago, Cyril had gotten hurt during the incident surrounding the earth spirit Istreah and the lost girl; he'd sprained his left ankle. The following day, he was the same straight-backed, energetic Cyril he always was, but Felix had warned him not to push himself and get hurt again. And so the silver-haired boy had been avoiding running or taking part in magic battles.

Elliott seemed to think Cyril would be moving around like normal if the prince hadn't told him not to. And if she was being honest, Monica was pretty sure he was right.

"What about your...?" said Cyril, glancing at her gloved hands. "The spirit bit you, right? Are you okay now?"

"Um, it wasn't really that bad, so... Yes, I-I'm fine."

At the very end, the spirit—in the form of a rabbit—had gotten out of control and stubbornly chased Monica for some reason she couldn't guess. It had bitten

her a bunch of times on the arms and hands, but the marks had mostly faded away by now.

"...Good," said Cyril, sounding relieved, before suddenly stopping and looking at something ahead of them.

In their path was a tall male student with yellowish-blond hair and orange eyes.

Isn't that the president of the magic-battle club...Lord Byron Garrett?

The hot-blooded young man had challenged Cyril to a duel before. But at the moment, his tall frame was bent over as he wandered around, staring at the floor.

"Club President Garrett," Cyril called out. "Is something troubling you?"

Byron jerked upright in surprise and looked around frantically. "Oh, it's you, Ashley... Well, I dropped something, and..."

"Then we'll help you. What did you drop?" asked the vice president. His tone all but implied it was the student council's utmost responsibility to help students in their time of need.

For some reason, Byron began to stammer uncomfortably. "It's a h-handkerchief, and... Uh, it's made of white linen..."

A white linen handkerchief. Hadn't Monica picked up something like that near the entrance?

Oh, then maybe...

Realizing why Byron was acting so awkwardly, Monica took the handkerchief out of her pocket. Making sure the lily of the valley embroidery was facing down and out of sight, she held it out to him.

"Um, I picked this up at the door... C-can you check to see if it's yours, please?"

He took the handkerchief and immediately spun around, turning his back. He probably didn't want Cyril seeing the needlework. After looking at it, though, his expression brightened.

"Yes, it's mine. Thank you. Uh, you're Ashley's underclassman, right?"

"My name is...Monica Norton." She was nervous, and her voice came out stiff. But she didn't trip over her words, which brought a little bit of joy to her heart.

As she mentally rejoiced, Byron's sharp glare softened slightly, and he bowed to her. "Thank you, Miss Norton. This handkerchief is very important to me. You've helped me a great deal."

The boy's musculature and height suggested he was from a military family. He wouldn't want anyone to know he was carrying around a cute handkerchief with lilies of the valley embroidered on it. Byron had thanked her so politely because she'd made sure to hide them when handing it over. While he had a rough face that made him hard to approach, he seemed similar to Cyril deep down—earnest and sincere.

"I'm glad...that I could help," replied Monica.

Byron put a finger to his stern jawline and asked awkwardly, "You've already helped me once, but could I ask something else of you? Have you seen a shop selling Shelgria cards around here? I don't usually come to the bazaars, so I don't know how these things work."

Monica had just seen such a shop on her way here. Immediately, she said with gusto, "I can take you there!"

Byron widened his eyes. Cyril smiled a little at Monica's enthusiasm but then hardened his expression into something more dignified. "I see," he said. "Then I will leave it to you to be his guide."

"Okay! Lord Garrett, ummm, over here!"

With a confident huff, Monica took the lead. Secretly, she was proud of being a good student council member. And she hadn't forgotten about keeping Benjamin away from Cyril, either.

Lord Howard already brought Benjamin away, so it should be fine... Just to be sure, though, she kept one eye on her surroundings as she took the two of them to the seasonal card shop.

Byron gulped, seeming overwhelmed at the sheer number of cards on display

there. "I...I didn't know there were this many kinds..."

He didn't seem accustomed to this sort of shopping. As if to distract from his trepidation, he changed the topic.

"Have you bought Shelgria cards yet, Ashley?"

"I've already sent them," came the reply.

"...You're always so quick when it comes to things like this." Byron frowned, then stared at one of the cards.

They were separated roughly by what plant or animal featured in their design. The boy's eyes had stopped on one with roses—the most common variety in the flower section. He looked at versions in red, white, and pink, then groaned, ultimately deciding on a plain white card.

"I'm sorry for making you come shopping with me," he told them. "Anyway, Ashley, when can you duel me?"

"The doctor said it would be all right starting next week. The prince has given his permission as well."

"I see. In that case, I'll formally challenge you then!" declared Byron.

Dubious, Cyril asked, "You know I'll accept, but... Why does it have to be a formal duel?"

They had magic battles in class every week. Byron could simply beat him in one of those. And yet he was awfully hung up on the idea of making it official.

Byron frowned again, seeming to have trouble choosing his words. Eventually, though, he found them. "Because it's more manly! It means more to win an official duel than an unofficial one."

Monica stole a glance at Cyril. He seemed a little flustered. He probably didn't know why Byron was so set on dueling him, either. Nevertheless, when someone approached him with a strong desire, he always responded with sincerity.

"I see," he replied. "Then I will meet your challenge with all I have."

"Just you watch. I'm not the same Byron you fought before!"

Last time Monica saw Cyril and Byron having a magic battle, Byron had tried quick-chanting and failed. Maybe he had improved his precision since then.

I still wonder why he's so insistent about dueling Cyril. Monica didn't have much interest in the honor and fame to be gained from duels. Cyril evidently intended to meet the request in good faith, but Monica couldn't get her head around Byron's feelings on the matter.

\* \* \*

Serendia Academy's bazaar was much more refined than a city market, but its lively energy was also a far cry from the festival ball. The noise of it put Elliott on edge. He couldn't help but feel that he didn't belong here.

Benjamin, on the other hand, couldn't be more different. He'd probably enjoy himself wherever he went, whether that was an elegant ball or a downtown market.

"Oh, my friend, your face. It is as though you are the one in a slump!"

The musician—the one *actually* in a slump right now—clapped Elliott's shoulders, meaning to encourage him.

Elliott, face thick with exhaustion, roughly brushed his bangs up and out of the way. "I just can't get going today," he said. "Probably because it's raining."

"Ah yes," said Benjamin wistfully. The two had known each other for many years. "You've always hated rainy days, haven't you?"

Elliott shrugged dramatically. "Once, long ago, my father was listening to me play the violin and told me my performance sounded muffled. I told him it was because of the rain—and he slapped me and told me not to make excuses."

Elliott's father was stern, and he was especially strict with his son. Whenever Elliott made excuses, he'd slap the boy right across the face.

"Your father is terrifying, indeed," agreed Benjamin. "His strictness reminds me somewhat of Vice President Ashley, in fact."

"Nonsense. My father is a hundred times scarier." Compared to him, Cyril was like a puppy dog who kept whining *Prince! Prince!* Elliott frowned and sulked.

Benjamin began to wave his right hand as if swinging a conductor's baton.

"Elliott, do you not think the sounds of the rain you so loathe and the muddled notes of your violin on a rainy day are each their own kind of music?"

"And I suppose the noise of this commoner's bazaar is music, too?"

"Of course!" said Benjamin, starting to hum a tune.

It was a famous piece that even Elliott knew, based on a marketplace in a foreign country. He remembered the melody; in fact, he'd practiced it a lot on the violin when he was young. Benjamin was trying to use the old song to demonstrate that music was present even at this bazaar.

Elliott scowled. "I feel sick to my stomach just being here. A bazaar is no place for a noble."

"And yet here you are—for my sake."

Elliott fell silent as his friend looked him straight in the eye. Stop that, he thought. If you're going to spend all day staring at the sky in some weird rapture, then don't look at me dead-on only in situations like these.

"Don't you think of me as a friend?" Benjamin prodded.

"Your father and grandfather both received their titles, and—"

"And yet I am one of those upstarts you so despise. Musicians are meant to be kept by nobles, not become nobles themselves."

Several excuses came to mind. They'd known each other for as long as Elliott could remember. Their fathers knew each other. But Elliott couldn't bring himself to say any of these things, and they each sunk back into his heart, unvoiced.

Commoners must act like commoners and nobles like nobles. Try to cross the barrier of social status, and you'll only make yourself—or someone else—unhappy.

Elliott didn't intend to revise his thinking. His uncle had been accepting of many people regardless of position before his commoner wife betrayed him, driving him to suicide.

Come to think of it, it was raining that day, too.

The rain had sounded delicate, and somehow clinging, as it came down. He remembered exactly what the stench of death permeating the wet air had smelled like.

Benjamin looked at him with consideration. "Thinking back, there were two incidents that pushed your feelings on status even further, weren't there? The first was when your uncle passed, and the second was before you enrolled at Serendia Academy—I think you were a little under ten at the time. Something happened, though I've no idea what—"

"No more of this, Benjamin. That...that's the one place I can't let you go." For your own sake, he thought inwardly.

He couldn't let his friend shoulder that second burden he carried in his heart.

Elliott closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he spoke in an especially bright voice, as if to sweep away the soggy air around them. "Anyway, this isn't about me. It's about you and your slump. If we don't do something, we won't make it in time for the recital."

Elliott had forced an end to the conversation, and Benjamin's answering smile held a twinge of loneliness. Nevertheless, he placed a hand on his chest and loudly declared, "When you are troubled, my friend, tell me. I doubt I can lend you any money or strength, but I can perform with everything I have to encourage you."

"Yeah, well, what's troubling me now is your slump." Elliott glared at him.

In return, Benjamin shot him a mischievous wink. The gesture gave Elliott a very bad feeling.

"About that—to tell you the truth, while we were at the clothier earlier, I heard a *very* interesting rumor from a few other students!"

"...All right, out with it."

His friend then began to tell him all about the rumor, mixing in plenty of musical terminology and hand gestures. Elliott's premonition had been right on the money.

\* \* \*

That evening, as the bazaar wrapped up, Monica parted ways with Cyril and

went to find Elliott and Benjamin.

Did Lord Mording enjoy the bazaar? she wondered. Did he shake off his slump?

At some point, the rain had stopped, and the black clouds had parted to offer a clear view of the evening sky. A reddish-orange glow lit up the entire hall, thickening the shadows.

The merchants would take a little while longer to pack up, so servants were moving around lighting the candlesticks. Monica watched the process as she walked. Eventually, she saw a pair of people coming toward her—the very ones she was looking for.

"Miss Norton! Oh, but you must listen to this. I have the most interesting tidbit for you!"

Benjamin was waving his hands, his eyes sparkling. In contrast, Elliott looked ready to keel over.

Monica straightened her back and looked up at Benjamin. "What is it?"

"You know the old student dormitory? The abandoned building back in the woods... They say the ghost of a beautiful maid wanders it..."

"The ghost of a maid?" repeated Monica.

The musician's cheeks flushed crimson as he began to regale her with the story. "Many years ago, a boy attending Serendia Academy fell in love with a servant maid. Ah, 'twas a forbidden love transcending social status!"

"The kind I loathe," muttered Elliott, seeming very displeased.

Benjamin ignored him and continued. "The boy made up his mind to marry the maid, even if he had to throw away his noble status. But when the maid tried to envision a future with her beloved, she realized she would only bring him misfortune, and so she ended her own life... And the boy, having fallen into despair at the death of his dearest love, gulped down poison in order to follow her."

His flaxen hair fluttering, Benjamin looked toward the sky.

"But alas, the tragedy continues! The deceased maid, worried about her

beloved's happiness, did not go to the goddess's paradise after death, but instead still wanders this world as a ghost. Unable to reunite even in the afterlife, never have they seen one another again. Ahhh, this tragedy calls desperately for a violin to express it!"

"Sounds like you're well on your way," said Elliott. "Should only take one more push to get you out of the rut. Now you just have to compose a piece about this tragedy or whatever and you're back. Problem solved."

Elliott, who valued rank more than anything, likely didn't think a tragic love "transcending social status" was worth listening to. All that mattered was whether it could get Benjamin out of his slump.

Monica found herself agreeing. She neither understood this love between a man and a woman of different stations nor did she care enough to try.

And yet for some reason, Benjamin's impassioned gaze pressed down on her. "Miss Norton, what are your thoughts on this tragedy?"

Very illogical, she thought—but she caught herself before saying it, deciding to choose her words more carefully. "Ummm, I don't understand why the maid would kill herself... Couldn't she have just run away...?"

"Heh-heh. But you see, life was not worth living if she could not be with the one she loved—what passion! What fervent affection!"

"Passion... Affection...," Monica repeated hollowly, tilting her head to one side. Her only passions were for math and magecraft. She doubted she'd ever understand what he meant. She groaned in thought as though he'd handed her a very difficult equation.

Benjamin took Elliott's and Monica's hands in his. "Now that the rain has stopped, what say we go there right now?!"

"You can't be serious..." Elliott grimaced.

With a smile, Benjamin replied, "Oh, but I am, Elliott. Where else would we go after such a conversation but the old dormitory? The sun happens to be setting as we speak. Don't you think this is the perfect chance to see the ghost?!"

\* \* \*

<sup>&</sup>quot;We'll only look around for a few minutes. Otherwise, we'll miss curfew."

Elliott issued a stern warning as he took the lead through the dimly lit woods, a lantern in his hand. The foliage was still wet from the rain.

They had some time before curfew, but since the sun set so early at this time of year, the sky was already dark—stars visible through gaps in the black clouds. A flock of crows could be seen passing across the last glow of evening orange.

Why did their cries sound so loud in the dark of the forest? Monica felt her spine tingle as she adjusted her grip on her lantern. The ground was muddy and easy to slip on. Even a momentary loss of balance could ruin their white uniforms.

"Ahhh, the sounds of the forest are so different after the rain," mused Benjamin. "The damp fallen leaves crunching under our feet, the *drip-drop* of water from the branches, the rustling of the wind through the moist foliage of the trees—and passing through this forest, the travelers shall finally reach their destination. Awaiting them is a beautiful maid, who has wandered this world since her death... Oh, that's good, that's *so* good. This shall make for excellent music..."

As Benjamin gradually slipped into a musical world of his own, Elliott barked, "Don't swing the lantern around."

A short walk later, they could see the shadow of a building through the trees. It stood at three stories tall and was quite a bit smaller than the current student dormitories.

His expression grave, Elliott gave them a final warning. "Again, do not enter under any circumstances. That goes for the west gardens, too. Anywhere you see a no-entry sign, the mana density is high enough to be dangerous."

These old dorms were abandoned after construction because the mana in the land grew too thick. While creatures that fed off mana, like spirits or dragons, loved to be in areas full of the stuff, too much was harmful to humans. People with a low resistance to mana could contract mana poisoning if they stayed in such places for too long, which could result in physical changes or, at worst, death.

After several warnings from Elliott, they headed for the dormitory's front entrance. The building itself wasn't that old, but it had the forlorn look

characteristic of such places when people stopped taking care of them. That lent it a certain atmosphere—like a spirit might appear at any moment.

Benjamin held his lantern aloft and shone it into a first-floor window. "According to the rumors, you can see the maid in hallway windows. There have been reports of a ball of fire appearing inside, too. I'm sure that fire is the last remains of a soul—that of the maid's lover. Even reduced to a mere soul, he still wanders the old dorms, searching for his lost beloved... Ah, tragic love!"

Elliott snorted derisively. "Look a little more closely, Benjamin. There's a mirror on the wall in the east hallway. See? Over there."

He walked toward it and held up his lantern. His blurred visage appeared in the large hanging mirror inside.

"I'm sure some eccentric student brought a servant to look at this place. Probably at a similar time—dark outside, low visibility. He used the lantern to see inside the dorm...and saw his own servant reflected in the mirror, then mistook it for a spirit. And the fireball? Probably just the light from his lantern —"

Elliott's confident speech abruptly cut off. He widened his droopy eyes and, without moving his head, gazed farther back into the east wing.

"Did you...?" he began. "Did you see something light up over there? You did, right?"

"A ball of fire... It must be the spirit!" Benjamin cried out in joy, running over.

"Moron! Don't go off on your own! Ahhh... Damn it!" Elliott cursed, turning back to Monica and yelling, "Stay there, Miss Norton! Don't move an inch!"

"O-okay!" She nodded as he ran off to chase Benjamin.

Once he was gone, she disengaged the fireball she'd cast.

"...Miss Ryn, Nero?" she murmured.

A blond-haired maid floated down from the roof of the old dorm. The black cat Nero was with her, too, catching a ride on her head.

"What're you doin' here?" the cat asked. "And why the crowd—? Wait, I get it! You're after our secret base, aren't you?!"

Monica put a hand to her forehead as if enduring a headache. As soon as she'd heard the story of a maid's spirit appearing in the old dorms, she'd thought, No. It can't be... Can it?

Indeed, it could.

"Secret bases tickle boyish fancies," explained the gorgeous maid in her usual monotone. "And I heard that, at times, fierce battles are waged over them. Should we not do as boys do and hurl mud balls and caterpillars at the invaders?"

Monica was about ready to fall to her knees at this point.

"...There are rumors all over school about the ghost of a maid haunting the old dormitory," she said, glaring at them.

"Yeah? Well, I ain't seen one."

"Nor have I, despite spending a great deal of time here. I cannot recall a single occurrence."

Monica gritted her teeth against the urge to give up and go back to her room.

"...I think they're referring to you, Miss Ryn."

Ryn's face remained impassive, though she widened her chartreuse eyes slightly. "Oh, dear."

Spirits love places with high concentrations of mana. Since Ryn was contracted to Louis, she received a steady supply of very pure mana from him, so she was never in danger of expiring. Still, the dense mana in this area had probably naturally drawn her.

While a human would have a difficult time getting into the locked dorms, she could simply take on the form of a small bird and fly in through a tiny gap. Someone had spotted her spending time in the building, and that had resulted in the rumor of the ghostly maid.

"Anyway, I forbid you from using this place as a secret base for—huh?"

Before she could say the rest, something caught Monica's eye.

She had just seen a light near the hallway in the west wing. It looked like a

small ball of fire, appearing suddenly and quickly fading.

It wasn't Monica's magecraft. And since Ryn was a wind spirit, she couldn't produce fire.

Then what was it...?

Once again, something in the west wing hallway lit up and then vanished.

Nero and Ryn seemed to notice it, too. From atop the maid's head, the cat exclaimed, "The heck was that? You do that, Monica?"

"No," she answered quickly, before sinking into thought.

That was an incomplete spell. It was probably meant to produce a fireball at a distant location by embedding a remote formula. But the caster couldn't maintain it, so it fizzled. Remote formulae are very difficult. There can't be many people at Serendia who can use them.

Once again, something glowed at the back of the hallway and disappeared. That was the third one. And Monica had been counting the amount of time between them.

That was a fast activation time for a remote formula. It must not be normal casting, but quick-chanting. The spell was incomplete because the caster is inexperienced with both quick-chanting and remote formulae...

Having arrived at her answer, Monica held up her lantern and ran to the back of the west wing. Ryn, with Nero on her head, gave chase in almost complete silence.

Nero wailed from atop the maid's head. "Hey! Monica, where are you going?!"

"The west gardens. I have a hunch that...if I don't stop this, something bad will happen."

\* \* \*

Distance thirty, power minimal. Good, it's working... Thanks to the book I borrowed, I'm getting the hang of quick-chanting. It's down to the remote formula now. If I can master that, then I can attack him from beyond his ice walls...

He focused his mind, carefully constructing the magical formula, but his spell fizzled again.

Magical formulae were like equations. Embedding special extras, like remote controls or multilayered boosts, made them all the more complex. Add quick-chanting into the mix, and it got even more difficult.

The author of the book he'd borrowed—the Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages—was said to be able to cast advanced spells without even chanting at all, much less quick-chanting. He couldn't even guess at how she performed such miracles. She was solidly in the realm of geniuses.

But I'm no genius. I'm average. What I need is hard work. Ashley works hard, too, when nobody's watching, he told himself, then started his quick-chant once again.

But his formula was incomplete, and he felt his mana leaking out. Quite a bit of it had drained from his body. If he had to give an analogy, it felt like losing a large amount of blood. Everything went cold, and your senses and mind steadily dulled. It felt like he was losing what he needed to keep himself alive.

I'm fine. This area has a high concentration of mana. I should be recovering it faster than usual... I can keep going. I can keep on... I can...

Refocusing his mind, he began to weave his mana. But his impatience must have come out in the spell, because it twisted unnaturally and fell apart.

In an instant, a fist-size fireball ballooned to the width of his body Oh no...!

By the time he realized he was losing control, it was too late. The expanded fireball exploded—or at least, it should have.

"...Huh?"

Rapidly, the fireball shrank like it was being shut in by invisible walls and crushed.

There was no way someone just so happened to activate a sealing barrier to save him. The spell must have coincidentally misfired.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he wiped his sweaty brow with a handkerchief, then heard feet squishing through mud behind him.

He turned to find a short girl with light-brown hair.

That's Ashley's underclassman...

Looking emotionlessly in the direction the fireball had disappeared, Monica Norton spoke to him quietly. "This place is off-limits...Lord Byron Garrett, president of the magic-battle club."

Past the no-entry sign, in the old dorm's west gardens, Monica found the culprit. He was a tall boy with yellowish-blond hair and orange eyes—the president of the magic-battle club, Byron Garrett. She'd just seen him at the bazaar earlier that day.

Byron didn't seem to know what to do in response to her warning, and his stern-looking face drew back in a grimace. He probably hadn't expected anyone else to be there.

Places with high mana density were more likely to cause mana poisoning, but they also facilitated faster mana recovery and were thus well suited for practicing magecraft. That was likely why Byron had come here in secret to try to master his techniques.

Byron's specialty was fire-aspected magecraft. People had seen his fireballs from afar and linked it to the ghost-maid rumors. Just like Benjamin, they had assumed it was the soul of a ghost searching for his beloved.

Ryn's presence in the building combined with Byron's activities had only served to make the story of the ghost maid more and more believable.

"You shouldn't practice magecraft in places with high mana concentrations," she said. "Many people...have contracted mana poisoning doing so."

Back when she attended Minerva's, she'd seen several people sent to the infirmary after doing exactly what Byron was doing now.

Byron, his face warped with impatience, begged her. "Miss Norton, please, don't tell anyone about this. I...I need to beat Ashley in our next duel."

"Why do you want to duel him so badly?"

Monica had never really felt a desire to best someone. Even in chess, when she lost, she never got frustrated. She'd think about why she'd lost, learn from

it, and be satisfied. Magic battles were the same—she had no interest in whatever honor or prestige came from winning them.

And so she couldn't understand why he was so obsessed with dueling.

Byron looked down, seeming ashamed of himself. Moving his thick lips, he mumbled, "Girls like strong guys better, right?"

"...Huh?" Monica's expression changed from worry to outright confusion.

Girls like strong guys better? I'm supposed to include myself in the "girls" category here, right? Then do I like strong guys better or no...? But wait. How should I define "strong"?

Monica got the feeling that trying to define something like that would only overheat her brain, so she raised one of her hands a little and said, "Ummm, is this a statistics problem?"

"Statistics? I'm not sure about that, but don't girls always say they prefer strong guys?"

Finally, Monica understood. This wasn't a statistics question—it was a biological one. "Oh, I understand... Then yes, I suppose that from the standpoint of the continued survival of the species, mating with powerful males would be most logical."

*"…"* 

Monica looked completely convinced. Byron coughed, seeming uncomfortable for some reason. "My fiancée says she likes boys like Ashley," he explained. "He's the strongest student at this academy when it comes to magic battles."

"Oh, um, I see..." In other words, Byron wanted to win his fiancée's attention by beating Cyril. "But um, either way, you shouldn't be practicing here. I-I'm a student council member, so...so I can't let this pass!"

"...I guess you're right. I'm sorry," said Byron, patting his sweating forehead with a handkerchief.

It was the same handkerchief with the lily of the valley embroidery that Monica had found earlier. The stitching was quite fine on the front, but from the back, you could see all the randomly cut thread ends.

Seeing it made Monica suddenly think of something. "Um, Lord Garrett... Did someone give that handkerchief to you?"

"It's a gift from my fiancée," he replied. "She's in the embroidery club. She's really good at it, too."

There was a little pride in his voice as he talked about her. But his face quickly clouded over, and he smiled self-deprecatingly.

"But she loves Ashley, not me, so... I guess she just gave it to me because we're engaged, and she felt obliged..."

"U-ummm..." Monica was about to say something, but then she closed her mouth.

Seeing that lily of the valley embroidery made her realize something. When you turned it over, you could see white and blue threads on top of the leaves here and there. But Monica couldn't see any blue threads being used on the front. The lilies of the valley had been done in three colors: white, yellow, and green.

What were the blue ones for?

Maybe it's a message from his fiancée to him...

She was reminded of something Benjamin had said. Blue ink was a good-luck charm—a love letter written in blue ink ensured the recipient would return your feelings.

Was there a similar meaning to the blue thread underneath the flowers' leaves?

I don't have any proof, though... And besides... Monica felt that if she said something to Byron now, she'd be revealing someone else's private feelings without their permission. And so she kept her mouth shut.

"Miss Norton?" asked Byron dubiously as she went unnaturally quiet.

Just then, she heard Elliott and Benjamin.

"There you are, Miss Norton! I told you not to go anywhere!"

"Ah, I was worried you had been taken by the ghost! To see you safe and sound gladdens my heart."

The pair came running up to them, then directed their gazes at Byron, eyeing him suspiciously.

"What are you doing here, Club President Garrett?" asked Elliott. "This place is off-limits."

Monica started to panic. If Byron said he'd been practicing magecraft, they'd realize he'd been coming and going for some time in an area no one was supposed to be.

So instead, she told a lie.

"Um, Lord Garrett said he came to see the ghost maid, too! And um, I thought I saw her over here, and well... Or maybe I didn't, but..."

Monica was a terrible liar, and she had panic written all over her face. Her eyes were wandering, darting here and there, and she'd begun to play with her thumbs.

Elliott looked at her, clearly suspicious, but then— "Gyahhh?!"

—all of a sudden, he screamed. His now-wide, droopy eyes were focused on the window behind Monica.

"The maid! She's there, in that window!" he cried.

Everyone looked at the window. There was no maid there—or any trace of one.

Then Elliott began madly gesticulating and crying out in self-defense. "I'm serious! I saw a maid with blond hair! Just for a moment, then she vanished!" It was very unlike him.

A blond-haired maid... Monica knew exactly who he'd seen. But she couldn't possibly reveal the truth to the others.

Benjamin put a hand to his chest, full of emotion, and looked up at the night sky. "So the rumors were true, after all... Oh, my heart! How fiercely it moves! A pair of tragic lovers, now ghosts, and the traveler crying out upon witnessing them... How sublime. The perfect music!"

"Wait. By traveler, do you mean me? Why are you working my scream into your music?"

Elliott pressed in upon his friend, but Benjamin was unfazed, swinging his right hand around like a conductor's baton and speaking in a sonorous voice. "Even screams of terror are music, Elliott! Thank you, my friend. Your cries have completed my masterwork! I must return to the dormitory posthaste and compose this song!"

It seemed Benjamin had recovered from his slump. Behind the lively musician, Elliott sulked, clearly unconvinced. Saved by Monica, Byron managed a wry grin.

She glanced up at him, and he whispered back, "Thanks. And sorry."

Managing an awkward smile and a nod, Monica prayed the ghost-maid rumors wouldn't spread any further.

From the old dorm's roof, Ryn and Nero listened in on the conversation.

The spirit responsible for one half of the ghostly commotion was as impassive as ever, but her softly spoken words contained a hint of pride.

"I must say, I've done an excellent job."

\* \* \*

The day after the ghost maid was sighted at the old dorms, the north wind took on a more severe chill—the kind of cold that pierced one's very core. It seemed the previous day's rain had brought winter with it.

As Elliott walked to school alone, he scrunched up at the cold air slipping through the gaps in his uniform. He often walked to school with Benjamin, but the musician had been holed up in his room, focused on his latest composition, from the moment they returned. He might even decide to cut classes that day.

Ugh. Yesterday was just awful.

Benjamin had dragged him around from dawn till dusk, and then, worst of all, he'd let out a cowardly shriek at seeing the ghost. And it had happened in front of an underclassman, no less.

The only good thing was that his friend had pulled himself out of his slump.

The winter recital should be safe and sound now, he thought. Just then, he

heard frantic footsteps behind him—and a voice said, "Elliott! My friend!"

Struck by a nasty premonition, Elliott turned around and saw Benjamin running toward him, flaxen hair swaying back and forth.

"Elliott!" he cried. "Listen! I've completed the first movement based on yesterday's events! And its greatest highlight is when I evoke your scream with my violin..."

Before Elliott could yell at him not to make his friend's embarrassment into music, Benjamin's eyes focused on something beyond Elliott and sparkled.

At the end of his gaze stood a noble girl with long, straight black hair: Claudia.

Elliott's nasty premonition was only getting worse. Stop! I can't take anymore, he prayed as he turned to his friend.

"...You got out of your slump, right?" he asked.

"Yes! I have been reborn, and is this not the perfect chance to dedicate my music to the one I so adore?"

"No, it isn't!" Elliott cried out, practically screaming. "Don't! If she lambasts you again, you'll fall back into your slump!"

Then, from right next to him, someone said, "Excuse me..."

Under the newcomer's gaze, Elliott grimaced. It was a short boy with wavy brown hair—Claudia's betrothed, Neil. A beautiful noble fiancée and a musician trying to steal her away was never a welcome combination.

"Well, what I mean to say is, Claudia is my fiancée, so..."

Neil seemed to peel away his usual timidity. His face sharpened, and he stared at Benjamin.

"If you so wish, I will accept a request to duel. This is not a matter I can mediate, after all." This was a rare declaration from Neil, a mediator known for always guiding the way to a peaceful solution.



As Elliott and Benjamin stood there flabbergasted, Neil trotted along after Claudia.

"Good morning, Miss Claudia. Um... Shall we walk together?" He sounded just as timid as usual when he spoke to her.

Benjamin watched him go. "He must have caught wind of my musical dedication to Miss Claudia. Men in conflict, risking it all for one woman... How wonderful. I can make a passionate piece with this!"

Elliott was certain his friend wouldn't be making any more passes at Claudia. While he frequently sought love from those otherwise engaged and had a passion for writing music, he was not inclined to accept requests for duels. He was a moody musician, and his mind was already on his new piece. In fact, he was even now waving his right hand around like a conductor's baton and humming to himself.

Suddenly, his hazy, enraptured eyes snapped open. His gaze had fallen on another beautiful girl walking next to Claudia—the student council secretary, Bridget Greyham.

No! thought Elliott, I've had enough bad feelings for today!

"Elliott, do you not think my music was always meant for her instead?"

That was it. Elliott wasn't going to stand by and let this happen. He grabbed Benjamin by the collar and started walking. "How is it possible to be so inconstant?! And I thought you were only into beautiful people who were already in love!"

"Ah, but she *is* in love, Elliott. I can tell. After all, I've professed my feelings for her ten times since we were in the intermediate course and have always been rejected!"

"That's the first I'm hearing of it... And if you're going to try an eleventh time, could you do it *after* the recital?" Elliott grumbled.

Bridget Greyham, he thought. The perfect beauty. If she's in love with anyone, then it must be... Ugh. I knew I was right all along. Anyone who tries to cross boundaries of social status like that will always make someone unhappy. What a

tragedy.
Elliott looked up at the school building, no light in his darkened eyes.

## \*\*\*\*\*\* INTERMISSION \*\*\*\*\*\*

## **Violin on a Clear Day**

Elliott Howard would be turning seven that year. He was tall compared to other boys his age, and he was skilled at both book learning and physical activities. He was a quick study at everything.

That was why he'd been chosen as the second prince's playmate. Duke Clockford invited him to his estate on a regular basis, where he'd play with Felix—still convalescing with his grandfather—and teach him things like violin and chess.

A pattering, clinging rain was falling that day. Elliott hated rain. It got his clothes wet, made his hair frizzy, and muffled his violin. There was nothing good about rainy days.

He didn't want to go out in the rain, and he didn't want to play violin, either. But his father had ordered him to.

"Elliott," he'd said, "go practice your violin with the prince today."

*Ugh*, he'd thought. Just the idea of having to go *anywhere* on a rainy day depressed him. And his father wanted him to practice violin, too. If he played, and the rain muffled the sounds, he knew his father would scold him.

But the man was so strict. There was no way Elliott could tell him I don't want to play my violin when it's raining.

I hate this. I want to go home, he thought.

Just then, Felix spoke up, his voice reserved. "Um, um..."

The prince was shorter than other children his age and had a weak voice to match his timid nature.

Elliott's father, Count Dasvy, asked, "What is the matter, sir?"

The boy fidgeted, playing with his fingers, until at last he said weakly, "Count

Dasvy, I...I want to play chess with Elliott today."

\* \* \*

"And that's check," said Elliott, taking a black pawn with his white knight.

Felix was clearly rattled. He knit his brows in thought, then moved his black queen. "Um, in this situation...should I do this?"

"Checkmate."

"Oh!"

Despite playing without a queen, Elliott won the game in no time at all. "You've got a long away to go, Prince," he said with a mean-spirited chuckle.

Felix's shoulders slumped in defeat as an attendant standing behind him set down a cup of tea. Apparently, he'd been ready to give it to the prince the moment the chess game ended. The talented young man then followed up with the prince's favorite snack.

"Sir, what of your violin?" the attendant asked. "You've been practicing so much. You wanted to play that concerto with Lord Howard, right?"

Felix's eyebrows lowered into a weak smile. "I'd rather play violin on a clear day."

The prince had figured it out. He knew Elliott hated playing on rainy days.

Felix Arc Ridill wasn't great at studying or physical activity; he was a shy, cowardly, unreliable prince. But to Elliott, the boy was also the kindest person he'd ever met.

The kindhearted prince gulped down his tea. "Elliott, when it's clear again, let's play violin together."

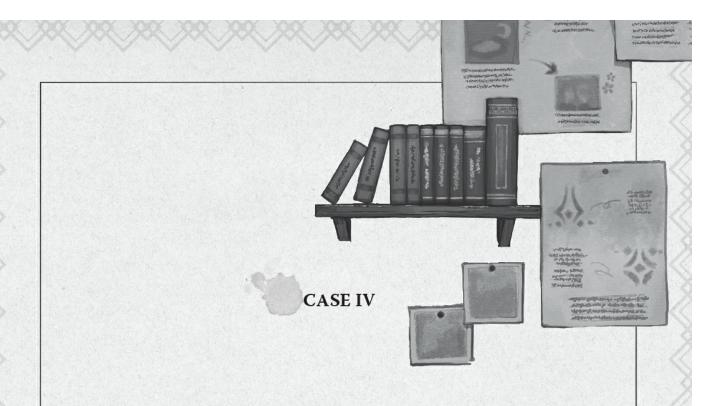
"Works for me. Next clear day we get, that's what we'll do. You better practice a lot, Prince."

Elliott waited for the attendant to leave the table before whispering something else into the prince's ear.

"And practice climbing trees, too."

"Okay."

The considerate attendant pretended not to hear the two boys' secret as they grinned at each other, full of mischief.



## The Villainess's Secret Maneuvers

~The Charmed Dream~



Two weeks had passed since Serendia Academy's school festival. In those two weeks, Monica had tried to help Felix sneak into the library, been pulled every which way by a lost girl and a spirit, and done her best to help a musician recover from his slump. In other words, she'd been fairly busy.

Still, with the festival cleanup now behind them, a measure of calm had returned to the student council room.

...Or so it had seemed.

"Argh! The festival is supposed to be over. So what is going on here?!" growled Cyril as he stepped into the room with Felix.

The rest of the council had already arrived, and everyone turned to look at them. Felix had on his usual gentle smile, but Cyril was clearly out of sorts, flinging cold air everywhere.

"Why haven't things calmed down yet?! It is outrageous that the prince is still being bothered by all this!"

Elliott's feather pen came to a stop, and he looked at the silver-haired boy in exasperation. "Seems the one who needs to calm down the most is *you*."

The vice president narrowed his eyes at Elliott, but before he could say anything in response, Felix spoke in a calm voice. "Cyril has been mindful of me all day long. I don't blame him for being irritated."

Elliott shrugged. Cyril pursed his lips, falling into a sulky silence.

Neil, who had been organizing some documents, spoke softly out of consideration for Cyril. "Why don't I go make some tea?" he said, getting up.

"I-I'll come and um, help!" Monica stood up to go after him.

The boy opened the door leading to the hallway—and then froze in his tracks.

"Whoa...," he breathed.

A moment later, Monica got a look at the hallway, too. She squealed in fright.

A wall of people extended to either side. Half of them were female students, and the other half were their servants.

All of them were gathered in front of the council room, sweeping the floor

with their eyes in a frenzy. Though, as one might expect from noble girls and their servants, none of them saw fit to get down on the floor and crawl. And so around thirty people stood very primly in the hallway, their eyes glued to the floor. It was downright *creepy*.

If it had been only a handful of people, one might assume they were simply looking for some lost item. But *this* many?

This is too scary! Way too scary!

As Monica shook with fright, Neil quietly closed the door. She couldn't blame him. She, too, wanted to forget they'd seen anything.

But then Bridget Greyham, who had remained silent up until now, stood up.

"Out of the way," she said, shooing the two of them from the door before opening it once again.

When the crowd noticed Bridget, they all shuffled back to the wall, looking ashamed.

The noble beauty's amber eyes scanned from left to right as she directed a cold scowl at the crowd. "You're obstructing our duties. If there is nothing you need, then begone."

Even without shouting, her beautiful voice carried through the hallway, making it clear she wouldn't take no for an answer.

After that, the people gathered in the hall turned around and left like a wave pulling back out to sea.

Elliott clapped. "Excellent work. A stark difference from Cyril, who just screams at everyone."

Cyril glared at him, then said in a low, stifled voice, "What in the world were they *doing* out there?"

"There is some absurd charm making the rounds," explained Bridget, closing the door and returning to her seat. "Take a hair from the one you love, wrap it in paper, then sleep with it under your pillow—supposedly you'll meet them in your dreams."

"Oh," said Elliott, as if it all made sense now. "A charm that lets you meet with

the one you love in your sleep." He looked at Felix.

Felix smiled, his vivid blond hair swaying. He looked a little troubled.

As the second prince and the most likely candidate to succeed the throne, he had many admirers. And political motives aside, quite a few noble girls were infatuated with him simply for his high grades and good looks. Among those pining for him were some who would gladly rely on charms to see him in their dreams.

I thought I heard not long ago that writing love letters in blue ink was popular..., thought Monica. Either way, it didn't make much sense to her, since she didn't understand love itself. She was a little impressed; were there really that many different charms out there?

But then Cyril pounded the table with his fist. A chill air spread out from him, even colder than the north wind. "You mean to say they were scavenging for a lock of the prince's hair? For a reason like that?! It's beyond rude to even think of using a part of his royal body to fulfill their personal desires!"

Cyril revered Felix, so he couldn't forgive anyone for using the prince for their own ends—even if it was just a strand of hair. He glared toward the hallway, his eyes glinting, then he put a hand to his chest.

"Prince! I shall protect your hairs!" he declared.

The boy was so serious that sometimes he went a little off course. Felix grinned wryly and rested his cheek on his hand. "It's just a fad," he assured Cyril. "It'll be over in a few days. No need to get so worked up."

"...Your magnanimity is truly praiseworthy." At Felix's gentle words, Cyril quickly reined in his chill.

The prince smiled again, then glanced around the room. "Let's put this matter aside," he said, urging everyone to take their seats.

He must have had an important message. Once they were all seated, he began—his expression unusually stern.

"I just received a report from the library committee that a page has been torn out of one of the grimoires currently being stored in Library 2."

Monica gasped. She knew better than anyone here how terrifying it was to damage a grimoire. Unlike books on magecraft, grimoires were magic items merely shaped like books—their spells could trigger without anyone's intervention. Both the paper and ink used for them were special, and if a page was damaged, it could cause the magecraft inscribed within to go out of control.

"Fortunately, Mr. Macragan performed some quick sealing work to prevent any major issues," the prince went on. "However, this is a nasty prank. Tomorrow, we will inform the entire student body, and once the culprit is found, we will punish them severely. If you ever find yourself using the library, please keep an eye out."

There was a quiet rage in Felix's voice. Monica could guess why. The truth was that he *loved* magecraft, enough to read expert manuals on the subject in secret. For him, damaging a grimoire—the crystallization of a mage's skill and technique—was unforgivable.

Monica thought as she listened to the prince. *Grimoires are usually treated* the same way as magic items, and both are strictly monitored. You would need permission to view them... So how did one get torn?

A frightening possibility came to mind—what if it was an attempt to set off the grimoire and involve Felix somehow in order to assassinate him? But in that case, the method seemed too unreliable. The grimoire *hadn't* misfired. It had been sealed immediately.

If you viewed a grimoire, you'd have to sign a viewing record. Why would anyone...?

Whatever the case, if the culprit had left behind a viewing record, it was only a matter of time before they were found. With that settled, Monica moved her focus on to the next topic at hand.

\* \* \*

"I've told you a million times to come *immediately* when called! How long were you planning on making me wait?!"

Monica was used to this inevitable performance put on by her collaborator, the faux villainess Isabelle Norton, whenever she entered the girl's room.

But that day, she quickly gave up the act and closed the door.

"Um, Lady Isabelle?"

"You look *awful*, my sister. You'll get better rest on the couch than on a chair. Please, have a seat. Agatha, prepare some hot milk instead of black tea today. And put plenty of honey in it!"

Monica did as she was told and sat on the couch. As she did, Isabelle's maidservant, Agatha, smoothly placed a blanket across her lap.

Isabelle sat down next to her and looked her in the eye. "You seem so tired. It saddens my heart..."

Monica couldn't be called *healthy* at the best of times, but that day she must have looked even more haggard than usual. Her exhaustion was probably showing on her face. She rubbed her cheeks with her palms, trying to get a little bit of color back into them.

"Well, there've been a lot of people near the student council room lately... It's putting me on edge..."

Three days had passed since the council had spoken about the charm—the one that supposedly made you dream about the object of your affections. Bridget's thundering commands were improving the situation somewhat, but there were still many more people than before loitering in the hall outside.

Felix was the second prince and widely known as a potential heir to the throne. He'd always been popular, but noble girls flocking to him in search of strands of his hair wasn't normal. Most importantly, if things kept up like this, it could hinder her secret mission to protect him.

After hearing her story, Isabelle put her fan over her mouth as if in thought. "That charm? It's popular among the first-year advanced students as well. If I recall correctly, someone heard it at one of the embroidery club's regular workshops..."

"The embroidery club?"

"Anyone can participate in the workshops, even if they're not part of the club. I occasionally take part as well."

According to Isabelle, the embroidery club's workshops were a place to gather information, much like tea parties. While tea parties tended to have a fixed membership thanks to family and interpersonal relationships, such barriers were lower during these embroidery get-togethers.

They had their own cliques, of course. But if your worktables were close, you could hear what others were talking about. Someone must have heard about the charm at one of these sessions and spread it around Isabelle's class, too.

Isabelle opened her fan, then puffed out her chest a little. "Of course, an admirer as passionate as myself has no need for charms. I can see *you* in my dreams whenever I wish."

That sounds even more amazing than a charm, thought Monica, speechless.

"Apart from that...," continued Isabelle, "I believe the secret code may be contributing to people's trust in this particular charm."

"...Secret code?"

As far as Monica had heard, all this charm involved was wrapping a strand of someone's hair in paper and putting it under your pillow. This was the first she was learning about any secret code.

"From what I heard, you write the secret code on a piece of paper, then use that to wrap a strand of the person's hair."

...Huh? Suddenly, Monica had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. "You mean like a shamanic technique...?"

"Shamanic techniques... You mean like the choker you recovered during the school festival?"

Isabelle seemed confused. And that was perfectly natural. Most people went their whole lives never having anything to do with curses. Even Monica wasn't well-versed in them. They were completely different from magecraft—and were the sole domain of House Albright, the Abyss Shaman's family.

"Um, Lady Isabelle, do you know what the secret code looks like?"

"One moment, please... Agatha!"

Her maid quickly brought out a feather pen and a piece of paper. Isabelle

closed her eyes gently, as if combing through her memories, then used her pen to write down the code.

It wasn't like any magical formula or circle Monica was used to seeing. But it had a regularity to it that she remembered.

It looks like the Abyss Shaman's cursed seals... I think.

Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman and one of Monica's colleagues in the Seven Sages, had used cursed techniques several times in her presence. During one such instance, he'd written a seal on a piece of paper and wrapped it around a strand of hair, thus creating a simple shamanic tool.

Maybe I should look into it. Just to be safe. If it was a curse, and not just a charm, things could spiral out of control.

As Monica organized her thoughts, Isabelle bolted up off the couch. "It looks like it's time for the villainess to make an appearance."

"U-um..."

"Information gathering in high society is where I shine. Just watch—see how this villainess elegantly sniffs out the source of these rumors!"

She spread her fan and was about to belt out another high-pitched laugh, when—perhaps out of consideration for Monica's weariness—she abruptly closed her mouth. Then she sat back down on the couch, her posture prim and proper, and instead proceeded to join Monica in drinking the hot milk Agatha had prepared.

\* \* \*

The embroidery club's workshop was held in a comfortably large room, just like a salon might be. Taking a seat on one of the couches and continuing her embroidery of a skylark, Eliane Hyatt, daughter of Duke Rehnberg, kept an ear out for gossip.

What she heard was all about a charm that had lately become popular, which involved wrapping a strand of hair from someone you loved in paper and sleeping with it under your pillow in order to dream of them.

Oh my. My, my. So they're crowding around Lord Felix in the hopes of finding a fallen hair for their charm... How vulgar. What a sad fate it must be to never

get a smile from him except in your dreams.

Eliane was Felix's second cousin and the number one candidate to marry him. He would attend her tea parties if she wished it and dance with her at balls as many times as she wanted. She didn't need to rely on an adorable little charm just so she could see him in dreams.

She almost never attended the embroidery club's workshops, but today she had made an exception. As a noblewoman, she needed to be well-informed on all the latest trends. These sessions usually had a much lower attendance rate, but thanks to the charm fad exploding, it was currently a roaring hub of activity.

All nobles should have an interest in following trends. And...you never know when such knowledge will come in handy. I might as well have a listen.

The girls sitting nearby stopped their embroidery and began writing something on a piece of paper. This was no embroidery diagram, however, but rather the secret code used for the charm. First, you wrote it on the paper, then you put a strand of the person's hair into it. Pretending to switch floss, Eliane glanced at the code out of the corner of her eye.

It was more complicated than she'd imagined. As someone with knowledge of magecraft—albeit at a beginner level—the code looked rather like a magical formula. She could tell beyond a doubt, however, that it was not. This was something else.

I'm sure whoever came up with this charm modeled the code after a magical formula. She frantically tried to memorize it, knowing she wouldn't be able to, when a murmur rippled through the room.

"Good day."

With a smile, in came her classmate, Isabelle Norton, noble daughter of Count Kerbeck.

Eliane privately frowned. She didn't particularly like the girl—after all, she was only a count's daughter, yet she dared to stand out more than Eliane—but Count Kerbeck wielded a great deal of influence, so Eliane couldn't act coldhearted toward her.

As the big shot Kerbeck girl entered, a girl with hair the color of milk tea

quickly stood up. It was the embroidery club president, Cecily Stanley.

"Good day, Lady Isabelle," said Cecily. "I'm so happy you came. And I see you brought your retainer as well."

Behind Isabelle was Monica Norton, a short girl with light-brown hair who served as student council accountant.

Isabelle hid her mouth behind her fan and snickered. "Why, yes. And can you believe, this poor excuse for a servant can't even do one stitch properly. Would someone mind showing her the ropes?"

Monica looked down stiffly at Isabelle's mean-spirited comment.

Eliane thought. Was it best to say *Oh, you poor thing* and invite Monica over to her table?

No, no. If a servant like that was to come to our table, she would only look more pitiful by comparison. The tragedy!

Everyone else probably had the same idea. Their faces made it clear that while they all wanted to curry favor with the influential House Kerbeck, they didn't want a servant at their table.

It was a girl at another table who finally offered to help—Sheila Ashburton, the vice president of the embroidery club. The black-haired girl wore glasses and seemed the epitome of calm as she smoothly raised a hand.

"In that case, please come over here... Well, you know... This table is where we teach beginners."

As Monica sighed in relief, Isabelle cut in sarcastically. "Oh, how nice for you. I know it will be hard, but please learn how to sew a floorcloth, at *least*. Ohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh!" Laughing in amusement, the girl took a seat at a table with several other high-ranking nobles.

Monica Norton, twitching and trying to make herself look small, went over to the corner table to join Sheila's group.



After surmising that the charm at the center of the recent fad might be using a shamanic technique, Monica had written a letter to Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman, asking him to check if it matched any curses he knew. She'd entrusted the letter to the high wind spirit Ryn; that way, it would arrive faster than normal post. Still, she wouldn't necessarily receive an answer right away.

So while she waited, she accompanied Isabelle to the embroidery club's workshop to investigate further.

Isabelle had suggested that they split up once inside. The workshops were, for the most part, divided into groups consisting of higher-or lower-ranking nobles. The high-ranking groups were usually led by the club's president, Cecily Stanley.

Cecily acted much as one would when sponsoring a tea party, teaching the noble girls embroidery while making light conversation to entertain them. Hers was an important job—she provided the topics of conversation, whether that was embroidery, clothing, or the latest trends in fashionable society.

Looking after the other groups was the club's vice president, Sheila Ashburton. Isabelle had this to say about the girl: "She may be reserved, but she is very kind. If I neglect you, she is sure to invite you to her table."

And Isabelle was right. After being bullied, Monica found herself called over to Sheila's table right away.

Wow, Isabelle is amazing... It really went exactly like she said...

Isabelle knew the family situations, interpersonal relationships, and personalities of everyone who attended the embroidery club. She was quickly becoming ever more reliable as a collaborator.

Monica's job was to ask Sheila where the charm had originated. The girl in question was currently guiding a group of lower-ranking students through some embroidery. She would sometimes move from table to table giving instructions, so it was very possible she knew more about the rumors than Cecily—or at least, that was what Isabelle believed.

I'll...I'll do my best! As Monica rallied her courage and made her way over to

Sheila's table, she suddenly spotted a familiar figure sitting on the couch right next to the vice president.

She widened her eyes. "Huh? Um... Lana?"

"Monica?!"

Lana quickly pulled her embroidery hoop to her chest, then hid it behind her so Monica couldn't see. Maybe she was the type of person who didn't like to show people things she wasn't finished making. Monica didn't like to show off half-finished magical formulae, either, so she understood the feeling.

Then if I sit next to her, I might end up bothering her...

As Monica hesitated, wondering where to sit, Sheila patted the seat right next to her. "This spot is free."

The vice president's couch was at a right angle to the one Lana was sitting on, so while they could talk to each other, they were far enough away that they couldn't see what the other was embroidering.

Grateful, Monica took a seat next to Sheila. "Th-thank phew..."

As Monica sat down, Sheila looked at the girl's embroidery box and frowned. It was small enough to fit in someone's palm, and it only had a needle and some thread in it. She didn't have scissors to cut the floss, so she would have to bite the strands off with her teeth. There were also several scraps of fabric she could use for practice inside, but that was all she'd brought.

Sheila slid her own embroidery box over to Monica. "If there's a tool you need, please use mine... Well, you know. I can lend you a thimble, too."

"Th-thank you... Um, which, um, finger do I put this on?"

The vice president eyed Monica through her glasses, shocked—she hadn't expected the girl to be quite this clueless. But then she kindly explained how to use the thimble. She really was caring, just like Isabelle had said.

Monica wasn't exactly clumsy with her hands, but she had no real interest in sewing, so she could only do the very basics. Essentially, she could sew two pieces of fabric together without caring about how it looked, and that was it. She hadn't really cared about her appearance while living up in her mountain

cabin. As long as she could mend the holes in torn clothing, that was enough.

"You put the thimble on the middle finger of your dominant hand," explained Sheila, "then use it to push on the head of the needle. It makes things easier when sewing thicker fabrics."

"I, um, I see..."

Before, whenever she was working on a thick piece of fabric and couldn't get her needle to go through, she'd push the head against a table to force it. This was a revelation.

"We can start by practicing how to sew in a straight line. We'll use this fabric. You're not moving the needle so much as... Well, you know. Imagine you're bringing the needle forward. Move the fabric so that you're sticking it in at a right angle."

"Um, I think I get it..."

Monica began to stitch the fabric as Sheila had described. At first, the thimble on her right middle finger felt odd, and she couldn't move her right hand properly. But she didn't actually need to move it much in the first place.

Don't move the needle, bring it forward... At a right angle to the fabric...

Most "proper" ways of doing things were rooted in logic. Monica liked it when things were logical.

Huh? Wait, I'm doing it more efficiently now. And I think the stitches are neater, too...!

As Monica covertly admired her stitches, Lana stopped hers and frowned. "You should have said something if you were coming," she said.

"Um, do you come here a lot?" asked Monica. "To these workshops, I mean?" For some reason, Lana flinched.

Sheila cast a sidelong glance at the girl, then said, "It's Miss Colette's first time here. But she's quite good at this."

Lana's mouth began to twitch like she was trying to hide how happy she was at the compliment. She still seemed intent on hiding her embroidery from

Monica, though. If she'd rather Monica not see it, that was probably best. Monica let her gaze wander, so as not to look at Lana's hands.

"Do you embroider often, Lana?" she asked.

"I dabble, I suppose," said the other girl. "Our family's business includes clothing, so it can't hurt to know a bit about how it works, right? Embroidered rickrack pieces with pearls or beads around them have been popular lately. I'm sure you've seen them on collars and broaches. And people add embroidery to the edges of lacework, too..."

She spoke quickly. To Monica, it seemed like she was trying to hide the real reason she'd come to the workshop. If she didn't usually attend, then why do so now? Monica could think of only one reason.

Could it be that...Lana's also interested in the charm...?!

Was she in love with someone? Did she want to see him in her dreams?

But first, I have to figure out if this new charm is related to a curse... If it's not a shamanic technique but just a harmless charm, then it shouldn't be a problem...

People would still be after Felix's hair, of course, but once the fad ran its course, the commotion near the student council room would settle down, too.

Monica stopped moving her needle, then tried to speak as casually as she could. "Um, I hear a certain charm has gotten really popular lately..."

Her attempt was completely unnatural. She hadn't managed a casual tone at all.

Lana shot her a dubious look. "You're interested in that, Monica?"

She'd been right. Lana *did* know about the charm. But how should she answer? Should she say she was interested?

As Monica hesitated, Sheila—without stopping her own embroidery work—replied, "Oh, that. The one where you wrap a strand of hair in some paper... The poor student council. People have been practically banging on the council room's doors looking for a strand of the prince's hair."

"Y-yes...," said Monica.

"Ever since the rumor started spreading, these workshops have been much more popular... I just want to embroider in peace, but well. You know. It's complicated."

"I wonder who started the rumor...," Monica wondered aloud—far too directly.

Sheila probably thought the charm business was bothering her as a member of the student council. "I don't know who started it," she said, looking slightly sympathetic, "but apparently the charm came from a book recently donated to the library."

"A book donated to the library...?"

That had to mean it was one of the tomes from the Haymes-Nalia Library, which had recently been closed down. Monica had been there one or two years ago, to do some sealing work on their grimoires.

The Haymes-Nalia Library... A charm...

Something about that tugged at her. She stopped her needle and groaned. It would only take one more push to remember what it was. As it turned out, that push came in an unexpected form.

"Scuse me! Can I borrow a needle and thread from someone? A hole opened up in my sock!"

The door swung open, accompanied by a loud voice, revealing the alwayseffervescent butcher's son, Glenn Dudley. And something he said further wrenched open the door to Monica's memories.

Two years ago, while sealing grimoires at the Haymes, Ray Albright—the Abyss Shaman—had described a curse. It was meant to open a hole in the sole of someone's shoe to help the caster feel better about himself.

Then Monica remembered the cute pink cover he'd designed to make curses more appealing to young girls.

Finally, she recalled the book's new title. He'd replaced its original name, *An Introduction to the Shamanic Arts* with bubbly letters reading *My First Charm*.

Monica's throat spasmed. She started hiccupping, but her hiccups sounded like contracted whimpers. If the charm's originator had taken the idea from *My First Charm*—formerly *An Introduction to the Shamanic Arts*—then no matter what anyone else called it, it was a curse.

This is terrible...!

Hands shaking, Monica put her needle away, then wobbled to her feet. "Um, I'm sorry! I haph, um, something r-really important to do!"

She bowed to a surprised Lana and Sheila, then burst out of the room.

Her first task was to check the list of donated books in the library.

When Glenn Dudley stepped into the room and shouted in that absurdly loud voice of his, Eliane was so shocked she pricked a finger with her needle.

How far must you go to aggravate me, Glenn Dudley?!

Though she quietly glared at him, he didn't seem to notice. Instead, he turned to look, confused, at the girl rushing out of the room.

"Well, Monica's certainly in a hurry. What happened? ...Oh, sorry. Could I borrow a needle and some thread?" he called out.

The noble girls watched him, half exasperated and half amused. Normally, a man storming into the embroidery club's gathering—a *ladies'* gathering—would have been grounds for criticism.

But after playing the hero in the festival play and making it a huge hit, the whole school had their eyes on him. Quite a few noble girls were hoping to get closer to him.

Glenn scanned the room, then seemed to spot someone he knew. "Oh, hey, it's Lana," he said, heading over to her table.

Why is he going over there? thought Eliane. I'm right here! ...Well, I don't want to get a hair's breadth closer to him. Still, we did perform together, so you'd think he'd at least greet me.

Placing her embroidery hoop on her lap, Eliane called out to him. "Good day, Lord Glenn."

"Oh, you're the girl from the play."

She had to desperately stop her smile from going haywire. *She* remembered *his* name. Did he not remember hers?

"It's Eliane Hyatt," she replied, looking up at him with a smile that had been described as having fairy-like beauty and slightly tilting her head.

"Have you torn a sock?" she asked him. Would you like me to sew it up for you?"

Now she was sure he'd be moved to tears, thinking what a compassionate, kindhearted young woman she was.

Unfortunately, his reaction was much more awkward. "Well... Hmm..."

He glanced at the skylark she was in the middle of embroidering and, of all things, put on a pained grin.

"It'd be faster if I did it, so don't worry about it. Oh, but I'll borrow your needle and thread!" He took a seat next to her and fished a needle and some thread out of her embroidery box without asking.

He then strung the thread through the needle and made a French knot, seeming very practiced.

As Eliane shook from the humiliation, Glenn glanced at the skylark in her embroidery hoop. "If you're gonna stitch a boar," he said, "it'll look better if you make a stripe pattern with black thread here."

She let out a classy giggle. "Oh, Lord Glenn. You are ever so good at joking," she said, maintaining an elegant smile, consciously holding herself back from slapping him in the face with her hoop.

\* \* \*

Monica ran—or rather, *stomped*—through the halls toward the student council room. It looked incredibly awkward and clumsy, but she was going as fast as she possibly could.

She'd just come from the library. Ten or twenty minutes ago, after darting out of the embroidery club's workshop, she'd gone straight there and had the student in charge show her the list of donated books.

And there it was, just as she'd thought:

My First Charm. Author: Ray Albright

Its official title was *An Introduction to the Shamanic Arts*, but that part was in such small print it must have been overlooked.

Normally, you needed permission to view shamanic tomes. But this one's cute new cover had led it to be mistaken for a general-use book and placed in the normal part of the academy's library.

Once Monica realized this, she'd frantically requested to borrow the book. Unfortunately, it was already on loan. And because of their confidentiality policy, the librarian couldn't tell her who was borrowing it.

I put in a reservation to borrow it next, but I have to get ahold of it as soon as I can...

If she sent in an appeal to the school saying that a shamanic tome was mixed in with the general books, they might have retrieved it immediately. But then others would be suspicious of her—how did she know it was special? Normal people basically never got the chance to see a shamanic tome. The argument that she knew the author was the third Abyss Shaman seemed a little weak.

For now, I have to make sure the prince hasn't been cursed...!

Her mission was to protect Felix. His safety was her top priority, so she had to check on him first. Desperately, she ran, her limbs flailing.

For someone with chronic physical weakness from lack of exercise, running from the embroidery club's salon to the library building and then to the student council room as fast as she could felt like a marathon. Her sides hurt.

Eventually, her steps changed from big stomps to tired wobbles—but she'd made it to the council room.

"I'm... I'm here...," she muttered as she began to cough.

Opening the door, she saw that Felix was alone, doing some work—perfect for her purposes. There was no council meeting that day, but Monica had assumed the prince would want to use the nice, quiet room to focus on his tasks. And she'd been right.

Thank...thank goodness... If he wasn't here, I'd have had to go all the way to the third-years' classrooms... For someone as shy as Monica, visiting a classroom in a different grade was a terrible trial. She sighed in relief.

Felix's feather pen stopped, and he looked up at her. "Hello there. What's wrong? Why do you look so out of sorts?"

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"P-Prince, um..."
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But before she could get the words out, she swallowed them back down. She wanted to tell him that someone had found a shamanic tome among the regular library books and spread around a cursed charm—to ask him if he'd noticed anything wrong. But she didn't know much about curses or which ones were in the book to begin with. In fact, there was only one she could recall.

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"P-Prince, your..."
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Felix fell silent. First Cyril was worrying about his hair, now Monica was concerned for his socks? The quiet room filled up with Monica's pained huffing and puffing.

Still smiling, he said, "They seem fine, I think."

Oh, good... At least I know he wasn't cursed to have holes in his socks. Privately relieved, she continued. "Also, um... Any new bruises, or a fever...?"

"Why the sudden questions?"

That was a perfectly natural thing to ask. Monica panicked and started waving her arms meaninglessly in front of her, desperately trying to form words. "Um, well, there's an illness like that going around, and I was worried you were sick!"

"Hmm?" said Felix, getting up from his desk. As Monica continued to pant, he went over to her and smiled. "You were worried about me?"

"Yes, very much! Very worried!" Worried, as his bodyguard, about how exactly he might have been cursed.

She peeled her eyes, studying any exposed skin she could find—his face, his

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Your socks! Are they okay?!"

neck. Those cursed by a shamanic technique usually had patterns called seals form on their skin.

I don't see anything like that, but what about under his clothes?

As Monica stared at the place where his neck met his uniform, the prince—with very natural motions—took Monica's shoulders and directed her to sit on the sofa. She flopped down onto it and sunk into the cushions as he quietly took a seat next to her.

"And how is this illness related to my socks?"

"Well, um... It's an illness where the skin on your foot can start to fester, and..."

"My, that sounds awful."

"Yes! It's really, really awful!"

Part of her realized that if an illness like that really was going around, it would be considerably worse than the curse that punched holes in your socks. Regardless, she quickly nodded.

Felix, seeming somehow amused, grinned and tilted his head to the side. "What other symptoms does this illness have?"

"Um, palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness...," she said, offering a bunch of symptoms she thought sounded reasonably convincing.

Felix gave a start. "Oh, that's not good then," he said gravely.

The color drained from Monica's face. "D-don't tell me those symptoms ring a bell!"

"Indeed they do," he said. "I know of someone so pale they look ready to pass out, and they've been *very* short of breath."

"Wh-who is it?!"

Monica was panicking now. The curse didn't necessarily have to be on Felix. There was a chance someone near him could have been cursed instead.

Just then, she realized something. For the last few days, this charm craze had everyone after Felix's hair. And that meant Cyril was *always* at the prince's side.

Yet right now, he was nowhere to be found.

"No!" she cried. "Not Lord Cyril!"

"I mean you."

"Huh?" said Monica, caught totally off-guard.

Felix smoothly removed his glove and put his hand to her forehead.

"...Well, it doesn't seem like you have a fever. But you've been out of breath ever since you arrived, and you look very pale. I was worried about you."

Her shortness of breath was from running all the way here—and her poor complexion was chronic. "N-no, I'm fine. Um, so why isn't Lord Cyril here?"

"He's out on a different matter right now." Felix seemed to think about something, then lowered his tone. "You remember me telling you how a grimoire page was torn? He found the culprit, and he's going to question them."

Oh yeah. That did happen, thought Monica. Grimoires had viewing restrictions, so if you went through the records for the one in question, you'd be able to find the culprit pretty easily.

"Who, um, did it turn out to be?"

"One Miss Wanda Willmott, a third-year in the advanced course. I suppose you wouldn't know her... She's the cousin of the embroidery club's president. She belongs to the club, too."

Monica had never heard the girl's name before. But the fact that the culprit was a member of the embroidery club bothered her.

The charm going around is probably a curse from the shamanic tome. And the one who spread it was in the embroidery club...

The shamanic tome mixed into the regular books and the torn page from the grimoire. Something linked them. Monica could feel it.

Was Wanda Willmott the one who borrowed My First Charm—or rather, An Introduction to the Shamanic Arts? But even so, why would she tear out a grimoire page?

As Monica looked down and began to mull this over, she felt something touch

her mouth. She could smell something tickling her nostrils, too—the rich scent of butter. Out of reflex, she got her mouth around it and started chewing.

It was a baked item, soft and buttery with raspberry jam and a mottled pattern of crumbs on top. The slightly moist body and the topping had different textures, adding interest, with the sourness of the raspberries providing the perfect accent.

"...Huh?!"

Monica's head came up, the baked good halfway into her mouth. A mischievous, blue-eyed gaze met hers.

"Once you eat that, go back to your dorm room and take the rest of the day off. I'm pretty sure the exhaustion is getting to you."

Her mouth full of baked goods, Monica wasn't sure how to reply.

Felix's lips turned up in a smile. "Or do you want me to take care of you instead?"

She shook her head vigorously. If that ever happened, an enraged Cyril would make a freezer out of the entire student council room. "How dare you subject the prince to such treatment!" he'd scream at her. She started to tremble at the thought.

"I-I'll be going *nomph*!" she exclaimed, shooting up to her feet and scampering away. Felix watched her go with a chuckle.

After bursting out into the hallway, Monica shut the door and exhaled. She was exhausted, physically and mentally. But she was steadily getting all the information she needed.

I'm still missing the most important piece, though...

First, she wanted to meet up with Isabelle and go over what they'd learned. The embroidery club's workshop would be ending soon.

As Monica started toward the girls' dorm, she suddenly heard a soft voice in her ear.

"Lady Silent Witch... Can you hear me?"

It belonged to Ryn. She was probably producing sound from afar by directly vibrating Monica's eardrums.

Last night, Monica had entrusted the spirit with a letter to Ray. Had she gotten a response?

"You said you wanted Sir Abyss Shaman's reply as soon as possible, and so..."

Monica had only made the request the day before. I can't believe she got a reply already! she thought, impressed.

Then, with a hint of pride, Ryn continued, "So I have kidnapped him and brought him here."

"Meep?!" cried Monica.

\* \* \*

Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman, was sitting in the forest outside Serendia Academy, curled up in a ball, his arms around his knees.

"Th-this is unbelievable... All of a sudden, I'm kidnapped, and then I go spinning through the air and land here... What's happening? I don't understand. What is going on? I was sure my organs would start leaking through my nose..."

Apparently, Ryn had tested out one of her "unprecedented landing methods" on him. After bringing Monica to Ray, the spirit nodded meekly. "I am glad you appear to be satisfied."

Monica felt bad for him, so she bowed apologetically. "I'm really, really sorry. To tell the truth, one of your books made its way into the school..."

She briefly explained the situation. The shamanic tome he'd altered the cover of at the Haymes-Nalia Library had gotten mixed up with the regular books, and whoever had found it was spreading one of its curses around the school in the guise of a charm.

Ray's already pale complexion grew even more ghastly. He scratched at his purple hair, apparently struggling. "I'm happy a girl picked up my book...so happy... But this seems like a pretty bad situation..."

"The curse might be, um, targeting the prince," added Monica.

The shaman widened his eyes and stammered incomprehensibly. "Abuh, buh,

buh-"

She knew the feeling. They had to get that shamanic tome back as quickly as they could, then capture the one responsible for spreading around the curse.

"I wrote you a letter about it, but... Is there a curse where you see the person you love in your dreams?"

"...No."

Ray hung his head and shook it. His purple hair rustled from side to side, his bangs momentarily parting to give a view of his glinting pink eyes.

"The essence of shamanic techniques is to make others suffer...," he explained. "The one you're referring to is supposed to interfere with your target's dreams. You create a simple shamanic tool with a strand of your own hair, then place it under the target's pillow. When you do, you can infiltrate their dreams and do mean things to them... Specifically, you can yell at them and call them names, since it's just a dream."

Yelling aside, this flustered Monica. Things were getting a little strange.

The original technique uses your own hair—and interferes with someone else's dream? But the charm uses a strand from the one you love, and then you put it under your own pillow...

That meant the casters were cursing themselves, didn't it?

Why had someone spread such a thing around? What were they after?

Monica groaned, trying to puzzle it out.

"Well," said Ray softly, "you need paper that can be imbued with mana to create the tool. And imbuing it takes training anyway. I doubt someone could use it straight from the book..."

"Huh?"

Ray's words pricked Monica's memories. Wait, that means...

If her assumption was correct, then everything was connected. The culprit probably couldn't use shamanic techniques at all. But their ability to curse wasn't the issue here. The details didn't matter—the fact was that someone

had gotten the prince mixed up in a ritual using shamanic techniques. If that was proven, the culprit would be put to death.

I have to settle this whole thing peacefully. In secret. But how...?

\* \* \*

"I see... So that is the situation we find ourselves in."

After returning to the girls' dorm, Monica went to Isabelle's room to exchange information and ideas.

A shamanic tome from the Haymes-Nalia Library had found its way into Serendia Academy. And for some reason, a curse meant to interfere with a target's dreams was spreading as a charm to see the person you love in your own.

After this brief explanation, Isabelle put her fan to her lips and lowered her eyes in thought. Monica took a sip of the tea Agatha had prepared, then explained her own theory.

"I think the culprit, and the one who tore the page out of the grimoire, was Miss Wanda Willmott."

From what Ray had said, the curse required paper that could be imbued with mana. Such paper was valuable—and it was used for grimoires. Even a noble girl would have a hard time getting her hands on it.

Instead, she'd obtained it through other means—by ripping a page out of a grimoire in the library.

"I think, um, that she repurposed the technique for herself."

Originally, the curse involved putting a simple shamanic tool with your own hair in it underneath a target's bedding, then interfering with their dreams. But Felix was royalty. Nobody would be able to slip something like that into his room.

So rather than interfere in his dream, Wanda probably wanted Felix to interfere in *hers*. That was how she'd reinterpreted the curse, and why she'd used a torn-out grimoire page to make the charm.

"The one thing I don't understand is why she spread the rumors," said

Monica. "Wouldn't it be better for her to keep it secret?" She folded her arms and hummed in thought.

"You wish to settle things peacefully, yes?" asked Isabelle quietly, looking Monica straight in the eye. Her expression was the epitome of a proud, dignified noble girl.

In front of Monica, Isabelle could act like a regular, excitable girl, as well as the noble, elegant daughter of Count Kerbeck. Both versions were parts of the whole that was Isabelle.

Feeling a little overwhelmed, Monica nodded slightly. "Y-yes."

"Then, if you would, my sister... I am more than capable of cleaning up this incident myself."

\* \* \*

When Cecily Stanley, president of the embroidery club, saw the tea party invitation, she doubted her own eyes. The sponsor was Isabelle Norton, daughter of the great eastern noble Count Kerbeck.

While Isabelle was two years younger than her, the girl's family far outranked hers. Plenty of people wanted to get on Isabelle's good side, male and female alike. Cecily was no exception. If she could establish a positive relationship with Count Kerbeck's daughter, her father was sure to be delighted.

Oh, I'm so glad I worked this hard to make the embroidery meetings exciting...

The club's workshops were just one of many watering holes in noble society. As sponsor, she had to keep a constant watch on how everyone was feeling and provide suitable topics of conversation. Lately, rumors of a new charm had been making meetings much livelier. Even girls who she didn't often see had started attending.

Isabelle must have invited her to this tea party out of respect for her skills.

"Excuse me," she said, knocking on the door of the private tearoom.

A servant from House Kerbeck showed Cecily in. Isabelle was already seated; it was to be just the two of them.

Cecily offered a friendly smile and a curtsy. "Thank you for inviting me today,

Lady Isabelle."

"And thank you for coming," Isabelle replied. "I know you must be busy, so I appreciate it. Please, sit down."

Cecily quickly scanned the flowers and tea utensils on the table. The vase was made of finely decorated, highly transparent glass; the tea set was first-rate, adorned with plenty of gold. In the vase was a large orange rose. The roses that bloomed in autumn and winter tended to be smaller, so having such a large one in this season signified Isabelle's wealth.

As expected from the daughter of a major eastern noble...! she thought, impressed.

Isabelle flashed a full smile and began. "I've taken quite the interest in that charm everyone in the embroidery club is talking about. You've heard of it, I'm sure, Lady Cecily?"

"Why, yes. I recall you were at the previous gathering, in fact, and were asking quite fervently after it. Hee-hee. I have to wonder what sort of dream you'd like to have."

"Now, now, Lady Cecily. There's only one person anyone in this kingdom pines for, is there not?"

A hint of "sulking child" crept into Isabelle's charming face. It made her look like a little sister—adorable.

Cecily brought her fan to her mouth and smiled a little. "Ah... Yes, we do all long for Prince Felix."

"I wonder, does Miss Wanda Willmott feel the same?"

For a moment, Cecily felt like someone had just thrown cold water all over their fun. Her grip on the fan tightened, and she had to fight to keep the emotion off her face. Everybody knew her cousin Wanda was infatuated with the prince. This was nothing to be rattled over.

"Yes, she does indeed," she replied. "She quite reveres him, in fact..."

"Is that why you taught her the charm?"

Cecily felt her blood run cold.

Isabelle hid her mouth behind her fan, her eyes icy as she watched the other girl. Her face held none of the girlish innocence of a moment ago.

"I don't know," Cecily said immediately, "who it was that first suggested the charm."

She hoped her voice didn't reveal how disturbed she was. What about her smile? Was that okay?

As she began to panic, Isabelle drove in her next blade. "My First Charm. By Ray Albright."

That title. How did she know it? A chill ran down Cecily's spine. She wanted to swallow, but her mouth was so dry and ragged that she couldn't manage it. Hand trembling, she took a sip of her tea.

Isabelle went on. "Miss Wanda never seemed like much of a reader... You, on the other hand, are an avid one. Am I right?"

She was. Cecily loved reading. During embroidery club workshops, the sponsor had to be ready to provide all kinds of topics. So she knew all about what was popular. She knew of all the clothing trends, hairstyles, novels, plays —and charms.

That was what had led her to that book. She'd realized at once that it was no book on charms, but a shamanic tome. Still, her curiosity pulled her in, and that was when she'd figured it out. She could use its curses as charms.

And so she'd used the curse meant to interfere in someone's dream as a foundation for a charm to see the one you loved in your own dream instead. When she'd explained it to Wanda, she'd said she read about it in a library book.

"I'm certain that if you use this charm, you'll be able to see Prince Felix in your dreams," she'd said, placing the paper charm in her hand and closing her cousin's fingers around it.

On her honor, she never intended for the charm to spread any further. All she wanted to do was help out the lovesick Wanda.

The next morning, she'd been practically bouncing as she came to Cecily and

hugged her.

"Cecily! Cecily! You won't believe this! The charm—it's amazing! It worked! I had a dream where I danced with the prince!"

She'd had the dream she wanted. It must have been the result of her own strong feelings, or perhaps a mere coincidence.

Regardless, Wanda thought the charm was the real thing. In a burst of excitement, she'd told all her friends. And thus the rumor spread in a flash, turning into a minor fad. Thanks to that, the embroidery club workshops had grown livelier, and Cecily found herself pleased with the situation.

But things had taken a turn for the worse a few days ago. Wanda came to Cecily again, but her face was gloomier this time. "The charm stopped working. I wonder what happened...," she'd said.

Charms didn't actually do anything. Even Wanda would have known that, but that glimpse of happiness in her dreams had sucked her in.

She and Cecily shared the same dorm. At some point, Wanda started fishing through her belongings—and found the book.

Cecily looked down. Isabelle's voice continued to pelt her like cold rain. "Lady Wanda sought out special paper to increase the charm's effects, right? And it seems she was looking for a paper shop at last week's bazaar... But paper able to be imbued with mana is not so easily obtained."

Wanda had searched high and low at the bazaar last week looking for such paper, but in the end, she was sadly unable to find it.

"So she tore a page out of a grimoire in the library and used that instead," said Isabelle.

"How...how do you...?" How much did the girl in front of her know? Cecily's voice shook.

Isabelle tittered, then angled her fan down slightly. Her mouth was visible now, and it was turned up in a cold smile. "Oh? Keep one ear to the ground, and such paltry rumors are easy to catch... Perhaps you were so focused on providing information that you neglected to think of what it all meant."

Cecily was an avid reader for the purposes of gathering information. Wanda didn't like reading. Wanda pined for Felix. Cecily and Wanda were on good terms, and Cecily supported Wanda's feelings for the prince. Wanda had gone to the bazaar and searched for special paper that could be imbued with mana.

All of these things were tiny morsels of information, but Isabelle had put them all together and arrived at the truth.

That's...terrifying...

Cecily felt like she was freezing, despite the fire in the hearth. Her hands trembled madly; she balled them into tight fists to still them, then looked down.

Isabelle watched her with pity. "The book was written by the Abyss Mage, yes? Meaning it's a shamanic tome."

"That... I..." She tried to lie. But something like that would be obvious from simply looking at the book. So she fell quiet.

Icicles in her voice, Isabelle continued, "That means Lady Wanda attempted to place a curse on royalty."

Immediately, Cecily began to shout. "Wait! She...she doesn't know anything! She believes it's just a charm!"

That was a lie. Wanda had stolen a look at the book. The thing she'd believed to be a charm was a shamanic technique, and she'd known it. And she'd still wanted to increase its effectiveness.

But Cecily didn't want to make Wanda into some kind of criminal. Not only was she her cousin—she was a good friend. Tearing a page out of a grimoire would be grounds for a strict warning, but cursing royalty? Expulsion would be a lucky break. At best, she'd spend life in prison. At worst…execution.

"I tricked her! That's all! She didn't do anything wrong...!" Cecily cried, all out of sorts.

Isabelle folded her fan and switched her cold look for a soft smile. "Of course she didn't. I plan to keep all this to myself. I wouldn't want to disturb the peace of our school life, would you?"

Now that she'd revealed all Cecily's secrets, she was offering to help her.

"You can explain the book to the librarian like this," she said. "I borrowed as many books as I could but didn't read this one for a while. As the return date approached, I got impatient and read it, then realized it was a shamanic tome. That should convince them. All that remains is for you to tell Lady Wanda not to say a word."

Cecily clung to Isabelle's merciful outstretched hand—she had no other choice.

She had been backed into a corner, and now she gazed up at the very one who had done it as if she was her savior.

Teacup in hand, Isabelle simply smiled calmly back at her. Cecily could even make out compassion in the expression.

The girl was two years younger than her, but as a noblewoman, she was on another level.

"Oh, right. I'm sure the charm will go out of fashion on its own soon, but...if possible, I think it best to replace it with a different trend quickly."

"Something new...?" That sounded awfully convenient. Could they really do that?

As Cecily wondered about it, unsure, Isabelle flashed her an incredibly charming smile. "Believe it or not, there *is* something I'd very much like to make popular."

\* \* \*

A week had passed since Isabelle's questioning of Cecily, and a measure of tranquility had returned to the area around the student council room. People hadn't totally forgotten about the charm, but nobody was swarming Felix hoping to get their hands on a strand of his hair anymore.

Cecily had gone to the library and told them she'd realized a book she'd borrowed was a shamanic tome. The book itself, its cover the new one Ray had created, was returned to House Albright, whereupon he got a severe telling off from the previous Abyss Shaman.

Lady Isabelle is just incredible, thought Monica as she headed for the council room, thinking back to her collaborator's conversation with Cecily that day.

Monica had been hiding behind the curtains in the tearoom; she'd heard everything. Isabelle's skill in getting the embroidery club president to confess was truly a thing of beauty.

"In situations like these, the trick is to withhold some information. That makes them believe you somehow know everything. It rattles them something awful," Isabelle had said.

Not only had she overwhelmed the girl and driven her into a corner, she'd then offered a means of getting her out of the situation entirely. That had brought her down for good. Isabelle had called it "one of her villainess techniques."

Apparently, becoming a good villainess meant learning extremely advanced forms of information gathering and negotiation. The rabbit hole went deep, and Monica couldn't even pretend to understand it.

Still, there was one thing that had defied even the talented Isabelle's predictions—it had to do with the new fad she'd wanted to start.

"They have published a book detailing all the incredible feats of the Silent Witch, one of the great Seven Sages and the one who saved our lands! I would very much like to make that book popular instead...!"

Eavesdropping from behind the curtain, Monica had almost started foaming at the mouth and nearly fainted. This was the first she'd heard of such a book being published.

According to the villainess, those living in Kerbeck had been so grateful to the Silent Witch for putting down the black dragon that they'd dedicated a book to her. Monica wished they would have asked permission first.

Fortunately for her, despite Cecily's and Isabelle's best efforts, the book hadn't caught on. Instead, lace embroidery became a minor fad. Some noblewoman had worn a beautiful outfit with gorgeous embroidery on lace, which had incited the boom. The only topics at the embroidery club's workshops lately were wedding outfits and lace embroidery.

This had frustrated Isabelle. "It was the perfect opportunity to spread the news of how great you are, my sister... How disappointing," she'd said.

Monica had been secretly relieved. I'm so happy a book about me didn't catch on... Thank goodness, she thought as she opened the student council room door.

There was no meeting today, but she had something to submit to Felix. Nobody else was in the room; the prince was reading a book by himself. When he noticed Monica come in, he looked up.

Was it just her, or did his blue eyes sparkle for a brief moment?

"Um, sir, I finished the income and expenditure report for the bazaar...," she said nervously.

Felix beckoned her over, not saying anything. Yes, his eyes really were sparkling. Papers in hand, Monica slowly walked toward him.

The prince held up the book he was reading so Monica could see. "Look at this," he said. "A book detailing the accomplishments of the Silent Witch. It just arrived at our school library."

Monica's eyes were as round as saucers. She felt like she was going to topple over.

He was holding up the very book Isabelle had plotted to make popular and failed.

A rosy red came to the prince's fair cheeks as he tabbed through the pages, spellbound. "I never expected anyone to be so detailed in describing her feats. Just look at this page... It even lists all her contributions to modern magecraft during her time studying at Minerva's. I can feel such love and respect from this book. It makes me happy to know someone is so passionate about informing the world of her charms..."

Monica began making odd croaking noises like a dying frog, but the prince only continued. The Silent Witch covertly held her stomach as Felix launched into his own passionate description of her charms.

It's a good thing that he's happy... It is, but... Ah... Ugh, my stomach hurts so bad...

"Do you have time after this, Monica?" asked Felix. "If it's all right with you,

we could have tea and talk about the book at length."

"I-I'm sorry, I actually, um, have something to do..."

That wasn't a lie. She had accepted two tea party invitations that day—the first being Lana's and the second, Isabelle's.

Felix's eyebrows lowered in a sincere expression of sadness. "Oh. That's a shame..."

Monica quickly submitted the papers, then excused herself with a bow and left the room.

The prince watched her as she went, a meaningful smile on his lips. "I do hope you have a nice day," he said.

"...?"

That's a weird thing to say after classes are already over, she thought, confused as she headed for the tearoom.

\* \* \*

The tearoom Lana had indicated was rather small—it was a private room, consisting of one round table with a white cloth, laden with a cake on a plate and a pot of black tea.

The cake in the center was covered in all the cream you could imagine, with plenty of berries on top to boot. Lana seemed to be more enthusiastic than usual about this tea party.

"The snacks today are so...well, so grand. Did you invite someone special?" asked Monica.

Lana pouted, seeming a little exasperated. "What are you saying? *You're* the special guest today."

".....Huh?"

Lana usually had a servant prepare the tea, but today was a rare exception. She took the teapot in hand and poured Monica a cup. "Today *is* your birthday, isn't it?"

"Oh," Monica blurted.

Lana was right. It was the first day of the first week of Shelgria, Monica's birthday. She had a feeling she'd mentioned her birthday at some point, but she was shocked her friend had remembered.

"In my family, we always have berry cakes for birthday celebrations," explained Lana. With unpracticed motions, she cut the cake and carefully placed a slice on a plate. It fell on its side, spilling the decorative berries.

Frustrated, she cut a second piece and put it on another plate. This one didn't fall over; it stood up perfectly.

She nodded, satisfied, then placed the upright one in front of Monica. "It's all yours."

"Th-thank you," said Monica.

For Monica, birthdays were family occasions. The last time someone had celebrated hers was before she enrolled at Minerva's; she'd spent it with her adoptive mother, Hilda Everett.

The woman had done something truly extraordinary with the cake, with one half underdone and the other half burned. But she'd dug out the tiny sliver between the two halves—the edible part—and given it to Monica.

The best part of the cake, served just for her. It was a gentle, happy memory. She basked in it as she ate the better plated of the two slices.

It was was luxurious, the butter imparting both scent and moisture. The sweet cream practically melted in her mouth, and the slightly tart berries were the flavor of bliss.

As her face relaxed into a smile, Lana sniffed pridefully and ate the slice that had tumbled over.

Suddenly, Monica noticed something—a handkerchief, perhaps—hanging out of Lana's pocket. It was about to fall to the floor.

Monica swallowed. "Lana," she said, pointing, "something's falling out of your pocket..."

For some reason, the girl's face went very red. She immediately brought her hand up to her pocket. Then, as if she was debating something with herself, her

gaze wandered, and she stumbled over her next words.

"This is just, well, I thought it would be good to put a comb in, and... But it's not very well-made, so..."

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"...?"
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She fell silent for a few moments, then pulled the cloth out of her pocket. It was a drawstring pouch, made of plain, undyed fabric. The corner of it featured an embroidery of small flowers—violets.

Monica recognized that fabric. Lana had been working on it during the embroidery club's workshop.

"A present like this, well... I figured it wouldn't be too much of a burden, so..."

Normally, Lana didn't attend those workshops. But she had this time. Monica had thought she was interested in the charm, but she'd been wrong.

Lana had wanted to hide the embroidery hoop from her to keep the present a surprise.

Lana was the daughter of a wealthy merchant. If she'd wanted to, she could have bought an expensive, luxurious gift. But she hadn't. Monica's heart pounded in her chest at the reason—at Lana's awkward thoughtfulness.

What should I do ...?

She was so happy her face had grown hot.

"I-if you don't need it, then that's—"

Monica reached out with a shaking hand and grabbed her friend's sleeve, interrupting her.

"...I like it," she said.

She almost never gave her own opinion so clearly. The edges of Lana's mouth started to squirm, and she held the bag out in front of her. "Then here."

"Tha...thank you!"

Lana wasn't exactly a genius at embroidery, but the violets were neat and charming. Monica looked at the bag, chuckling to herself, then suddenly remembered.

"Lana, um... When is your birthday?" she asked.

"The fourth day of the fourth week of Alteria." Lana took a sip of her tea, then stole a glance at her friend. "On that day, will you make coffee for us?"

## "...Of course!"

Lana's birthday was right after winter break ended. At that point, Monica should still be at the academy. She could celebrate Lana's birthday with her.

I'll have to get some good snacks to go with the coffee, thought Monica happily.



When Lana's tea party was over, Monica went to Isabelle's, which also turned out to be a celebration of Monica's birthday.

"I so wanted to throw a grand party, but the situation being what it is... I hope you'll forgive a smaller one," Isabelle had said, giving her a brand-new feather pen.

Clutching the drawstring bag and feather pen to her chest, Monica headed back to her attic room, a spring in her step. Once she arrived, she'd switch feather pens right away and put the comb she'd bought with Lana into the bag.

As she opened the door to the storage room, she found a small basket placed in front of the ladder leading up to the attic.

"...?"

The basket was packed full of baked goods, plus a single card. The card was pretty, with gold foil in a starry pattern on it, and it read: "To MY DEAR FRIEND IN DELINQUENCY, PLEASE ACCEPT THIS AS AN EXPRESSION OF THANKS. MAY THIS DAY ON WHICH YOU WERE BORN BE A GOOD ONE."

The "thanks" was probably for her help with his plot to sneak a peek at that library book a few days ago.

Looking more closely, the baked goods were familiar. Pâte sablée crust featuring berries stuck on top with honey—the first thing he'd ever given her after she'd come to the school.

With an awkward grin and a half chuckle, she picked up the basket and went up the ladder. A drawstring bag with violets embroidered on it, a brand-new feather pen, and a card decorated with stars.

She had more treasures for her drawer again.

## \*\*\*\*\* INTERMISSION \*\*\*\*\*\*

## **Meeting of the Dazzling Family of Villains**

Isabelle looked up. A swarm of pterodragons blotted out the blue sky, casting her in shadow.

Dragonraids happened often in Kerbeck, but a swarm of pterodragons attacking en force was rare. Nevertheless, Isabelle was not filled with terror or despair.

For before her very eyes was the only one in the world who could use unchanted magecraft: the Silent Witch.

The witch held her staff aloft. A glittering gate opened up in the sky, sending wind lancing toward the pterodragons, striking them down.

Their brows shot through, the dragon corpses fell—but they didn't collide with any buildings or people on the ground. Instead, they floated over and piled themselves in an open area.

What other mage could not only kill every dragon present, but even shift them out of the way like this?

Her body atremble, Isabelle cried out in emotion.

"She's...she's just so cool!"

...And that was where the dream ended.

Waking up in her room in her family's estate, Isabelle sat up in bed and exhaled.

It had been two months since the slaying of the Black Dragon of Worgan and its winged minions, but what she felt that day still made her heart pound.

She brought her hands up to her cheeks, relishing the irresistible bliss, chuckling to herself.

Soon, she would meet the Silent Witch she so adored.

"Ah, I simply cannot wait!"

She hugged her pillow and swung her legs.

"How come you're in such a good mood, Isabelle?" asked Henry at the breakfast table as soon as he saw her face.

Isabelle took a sip of her black tea and smiled. "Heh-heh. I had the most wonderful dream this morning."

"The one where the Silent Witch saves Kerbeck?" he replied without missing a beat.

For the last two months, the Silent Witch was all Isabelle had dreamed about.

"That's right," she said with a nod.

Then Henry's eyes, quite close in color to Isabelle's, began to sparkle. "That's so cool...!" he said. "I wish I could help her, too. Aw... If I was born one year earlier, I could have enrolled in the intermediate course..."

Once autumn came, the Silent Witch would be enrolling at Serendia Academy as part of her mission to protect the second prince—and Isabelle had been requested to provide support.

The Barrier Mage had been the one to come to her with the idea. "Please bully her as you see fit," he'd said. "She's less likely to be found out that way."

In other words, Isabelle would act like the villain in their story, torturing the Silent Princess to lend her a layer of camouflage. At least, that was the conclusion the Nortons had come to in their family meeting.

And so she'd been researching day and night how to carry herself as the perfect noble villainess.

"We should invite the Silent Witch here once your mission is complete, Isabelle," her mother had suggested with an elegant smile.

Her father, the count of Kerbeck, had agreed. "Good idea," he'd said, stroking his beard. "Also, the cover story the Barrier Mage gave us involves the Silent Witch being taken in by my mother..."

Monica Everett, the Silent Witch, was to play the part of the previous

Countess Kerbeck's adopted daughter while she was undercover at the academy. In other words, she'd be treated as Count Kerbeck's younger stepsister.

The count looked around at his family, his face the picture of seriousness. "So when she arrives here at our invitation, should I greet her as my sister?"

The entire family immediately voiced their disapproval.

"Objection! Objection, I say," said Isabelle. "The Silent Witch may be playing the part of my aunt, but in all other cases... I would prefer to call her my elder sister!"

"Me too!" chimed in Henry. "I want to call her my big sister, too!"

"Dear, the Silent Witch would be troubled to suddenly have an elder brother like you."

Opposed by not only his son and daughter but even by his wife, the count nodded deeply. His next words held every bit as much gravity as any other important decision he might make.

"Hmm. I see your point. Then let us never speak of this joke again. Now, on to our next matter. We must discuss if the proper form of laughter for an evil count is closer to 'heh-heh-heh...' or more of a 'keh-keh-keh...'"

EPILOGUE

## The Silent Witch's Little Mystery





It was a clear winter day, and the practice grounds for Serendia Academy's magic-battle club were being used for a magical duel.

The combatants were Cyril Ashley, vice president of the student council, and Byron Garrett, president of the magic-battle club.

Despite it being a holiday, a good number of students had shown up to watch. Entertainment was hard to come by in this closed-off school, so an official magic duel was a bit of a show for them.

The student council, starting with Felix, was part of the crowd; they'd come to cheer Cyril on.

"Lord Cyril, um, d-do...do your best, please!"

"Hey, VP! You got this!"

The rowdy voice next to Monica belonged to Glenn. He wasn't on the student council, but there he was, in one of the front-row seats reserved for the council members, rooting for Cyril.

Next to him was Neil, who was making a record of the magic battle. Claudia was leaning against him. She evidently didn't care enough to support her elder brother; her gaze was fixed squarely on Neil.

Five minutes had already passed since the start of the duel. At first, they felt each other out with weaker spells, probing for opportunities. But in a drawn-out fight, Cyril would have the advantage thanks to his quicker mana regeneration.

Byron probably knew that. So after putting a bit more space between them, he went on the offensive. He tried to set up a surprise attack by creating flaming arrows with remote magecraft.

But Cyril realized from the length of his opponent's incantation that he was using a remote formula. He quickly protected himself from the arrows with a wall of ice.

"This is a good match," murmured Felix.

Monica had to agree. Byron's magecraft had improved by leaps and bounds—likely as a result of his secret training.

Maintaining his distance, Byron recited a somewhat lengthy chant. This time, three large fireballs appeared and flew at Cyril all at once.

The fireballs were flashy, but Monica could tell they weren't very powerful. He's using them as a decoy, she thought. His real aim is...

Embers scattered as explosions boomed. They didn't set any of the nearby trees on fire, though; those were protected by the barrier set up for the duel.

The ice wall collapsed along with the fireballs, glittering as it dispersed—and then a single flaming arrow struck Cyril in the left shoulder.

It had been quick-chanted, and Cyril hadn't been able to block it in time. He groaned in pain and backed up into a tree trunk.

"VP!" yelled Glenn, seeing the predicament Cyril was in. Claudia covered her ears, evidently annoyed; the tall boy's voice was painfully loud. She didn't seem to care much about her brother being in trouble.

As his face scrunched up in pain, Cyril counterattacked. Pillars of ice began to sprout from the ground, surrounding Byron.

Each of those pillars is meant to support a multilayered strengthening formula, thought Monica. Which means he's about to trigger a twice-enhanced attack spell in the middle.

Her prediction was right. In the center of the icy perimeter, right at Byron's feet, a magic circle emerged—and from it burst a powerful blast of freezing-cold air. It froze Byron's feet to the ground.

Panicking, Byron chanted another spell, trying to protect himself from the chill. It didn't go off, though. He was out of mana.

"The duel is over, you two. Ashley has won," declared Macragan, their referee.

Byron sunk to his knees in frustration.

\* \* \*

As Cyril left the barrier, Felix smiled and congratulated him. "That was a very good duel."

The vice president's face lit up in a sincere expression of happiness. "Your

words do me honor, prince!"

The defeated, on the other hand, was heading away, his gait unsteady. But a female student was following him—one Monica knew.

Wait, that's...

Suddenly a little curious, Monica went after them. She located the two quickly. They were on the path leading from the woods back to the dormitories, facing each other. Byron had his head down.

"That was an embarrassment," he said. "As your fiancé, I've brought you shame."

"But I—"

"No, you don't need to say anything. I promise I will defeat Ashley before we graduate."

With that, Byron quickly headed back toward the dorms.

The girl, left behind, reached a hand out toward his back—but then lowered it again, choosing to stay quiet.

Monica wondered whether she should say something. But in the end, she didn't need to. There was a small crackle at her feet—her boot had just crushed a twig.

The girl noticed her then. It was Sheila Ashburton, the vice president of the embroidery club.

The black-haired, bespectacled girl had a kind heart; she'd shown Monica the ropes at their club workshop. Sheila watched Monica, knowing the girl wanted to say something.

Fidgeting with her fingers, Monica spoke. "Are you, um, his fiancée?"

"I suppose I am... Though, well. You know. Our parents set it up," she said simply, not criticizing Monica for spying on them.

Monica decided to go for it and ask the question that had been on her mind. She doubted she'd get another chance. "The lily of the valley embroidery on Lord Garrett's handkerchief... Did you make that for him?"

"Where did you see that? ... Well, you know. I suppose a boy wouldn't be very happy to receive such a thing." Her flat tone had a whiff of self-deprecation to it.

Suddenly, Monica raised her voice. "Lord Garrett said it was very important to him!"

Sheila widened her eyes slightly behind her glasses. Her expression was more astonished than happy.

Monica thought back to Byron's handkerchief. The lilies of the valley had been embroidered very neatly, and when you turned it over, you could clearly see blue threads. A hidden message, based on that charm that said if you wrote a love letter in blue ink, your love would be returned.

"He didn't seem to notice the blue thread, though... Um, are you okay not telling him?"

"I'm more surprised that you noticed at all, Miss Norton. You're like... Well, you know. Like a detective," said Sheila, smiling wryly.

Her eyes were no longer on Monica; they now gazed longingly after Byron.

"I'm not very good at choosing the right words," she said. "I keep saying 'Well, you know' and all. I've always been like this. I can never find the right way to express my feelings."

Her voice was soft, marked by a lack of confidence. Her expression, which made her always seem off in her own little world, was now twisted in servility.

"Someone asked me once, during an embroidery club workshop, what my type was. I really admire Lord Byron for how hard he works... Yes, I suppose I should have simply said that. But I got embarrassed all of a sudden, and so..."

Sheila clasped her fingers in front of her.

"So on a whim, I said that I liked people like Lord Ashley. Because he and Lord Byron are both hard workers."

And Byron had overheard her, which made him think she loved Cyril, not him.

I don't really think it's right for me to butt into other people's business, but...

Monica made up her mind and spoke. "Um, Lord Garrett keeps dueling because, well..."

"Because he loves me? How am I supposed to believe that? I'm sure he's just, well, you know... He feels his pride as my fiancé has been slighted."

Monica could tell Sheila had little confidence in herself. That was why she couldn't simply express her feelings. What if she caused him more trouble? What if it made him like her less? The anxiety had her trapped, and in the end, she'd never say what she wanted to. Monica was very familiar with that feeling.

"Was that the reason for the blue thread?" Monica asked.

"Yes, well, you know... It was supposed to show my love for him. I know how roundabout it is. Maybe somewhere deep down I'm okay if he doesn't understand it."

Would you really be okay with that? wondered Monica. She didn't understand love or romance, but she definitely knew how hard it could be to express your feelings. Even just saying "thank you" took courage. But she also knew how happy it could make you feel when you did convey something like gratitude or goodwill.

But I don't think it would be right to push my way of thinking on her... Monica fell silent, unsure of what to say.

Seeming to remember something, Sheila said, "Oh, Miss Detective. I wanted to ask you about something."

She took a card out of her pocket. It was a Shelgria card. There was a small hole in the upper-right corner with an orange ribbon tied to it.

"Happy Shelgria. From Byron Garrett."

Next to the curt message was something round drawn in yellow. Sheila pointed to it and said, "I received a Shelgria card from him. But I don't really understand the strange yellow symbol here."



A strange symbol—yes, it did look like that, didn't it? Byron had probably used paint for it. But why get paint out for this?

Monica thought back to the card he'd bought. There had been so many, but Byron only had his eyes on one with a flower.

The moment she remembered that, everything clicked into place.

"Oh, and the ribbon... So that was...," Monica muttered to herself. Sheila looked at her dubiously.

Eyes still fixed on the card, Monica said, "I, um, saw Lord Garrett buy this card. But before, it was just a blank white card."

He'd been looking at the ones with roses on them, but he hadn't taken any. The stall had been selling cards with red, white, and pink roses—but not yellow ones.

"Lord Garrett drew this," Monica continued. "It's a yellow rose. Also, I think he put this ribbon on, too."

"But why would he go through all the ...?"

"It's a floral decoration."

Boys gave girls floral decorations—roses tied with ribbons—during the school festival. Elliott said the sender was supposed to choose colors matching his own hair and eyes.

"Lord Garrett has yellowish-blond hair and a little orange in his eyes. I think that's why he put the yellow rose and orange ribbon there," Monica explained, pointing to the picture that looked like a yellow rose and the orange ribbon tied onto the card.

Sheila slowly widened her eyes. She studied the poorly drawn rose on the card.

Monica interpreted it as a sort of charm from the sender to give courage. *I* think Lord Garrett wanted to tell her to be brave..., she thought.

"Now I'm looking forward to the dance at the graduation party...," she said. "I must strive to express my feelings before then."

"...Huh? The dance?"

Monica tilted her head, confused. She didn't know the flower decoration was a reservation for a dance.

Sheila smiled a little, convinced. Then she bowed.

"...Well, you know. Thank you for this little bit of courage, Miss Detective."

\* \* \*

"I'm back."

Monica returned to her attic room to find Nero on her bed reading. He deftly used his front paw to slip a bookmark between two pages, then shut the book.

"Heya. Welcome back. How was it? I mean the duel or whatever. Bet the chilly guy rolled over the other one like an avalanche."

"It was a good match, but yes, Lord Cyril won."

She took a seat on the bed, then grabbed Nero's front paw as if to shake hands. Nero waved his tail, expecting some new kind of game.

But she just smiled and said, "Thanks for everything you do, Nero."

"Uh, sure thing. But what brought this on?"

"I just felt like saying it for some reason." She let go of his paw, then moved to sit at her desk.

Nero meowed pleasantly, then flopped over on the bed. "I mean, I am pretty great. Only right that you should thank me. And keep it coming! Write me a song, literally sing my praises. The title can be 'Nero, the Coolest of Them All'... Hmm? What are you writing?"

"A Shelgria card. I wanted to write one," she said, thinking about what to put down.

There are...so many things I want to write.

That she had someone who adored her and called her elder sister. That she'd made wonderfusl friends. That she had upperclassmen she respected. That she'd made a delinquent friend in secret... Of course, she was still on a top-secret mission, so she couldn't write *everything*.

"Good. Okay... It's finished."

She looked over all the words she'd written and smiled in satisfaction.

Nero jumped onto the desk and stared hard at the paper—then he stepped in the inkwell with his front paw and stamped it in a blank area on the card.

"Nero?!"

"What do you think? My incredible paw makes a good accent, eh?"

The card Monica had chosen was a simple one without much in the way of decoration. The cat was right—his pawprint was a good accent...maybe.

Well, whatever, she thought, stuffing the card into an envelope.

With Thanks from the Silent Witch SECRET EPISODE

Hilda Everett, a researcher at the Royal Magic Research Institute, was perplexed. She looked like she'd just gotten some very unexpected results from an experiment. She pushed up her glasses.

"What in the world is this ...?"

"I should be the one asking that," came a low voice from behind her—that of Matilda, her housemaid.

In front of Hilda was a large clump of ice. Large, as in it reached the ceiling. A scorched ironing board and a white lab coat were trapped inside.

"Look," she said. "An iron gets the wrinkles out of clothes through a combination of the iron's weight and heat, right? So by imbuing a directional, flat-plane barrier with heat and pressing down on the clothing, I should be able to accomplish the same thing, but much more quickly... Or at least, I thought so..."

"And you caused a small fire."

Yes. And in her panic, Hilda had used ice magecraft to put out the fire, which explained the huge block of ice.

The scientist looked up at Matilda through her glasses, eyes watering. "Matilda, I just wanted to make things easier for you..."

"If you really want to make things easier for me, then clean up all this and go buy a new ironing board."

"...All right."

How was she going to deal with the ice block, though? If she melted it, the room would flood. This called for an extremely small flame spell to melt the ice, then evaporate it as it melted. She began doing the calculations for the formula.

Before Hilda got very far, though, Matilda took something out of her pocket. "Ah yes," she said. "This spectacle almost made me forget. There's a Shelgria card here from Miss Monica."

"Huh? From Monica? Wait, let me see!"

Neither Hilda nor Monica picked up a pen very often. How long had it been

since they'd exchanged letters like this? To say nothing of Shelgria cards specifically—they were things you sent to family and loved ones.

Suddenly, Hilda began to feel nervous.

The familiar handwriting on the card read:

"Dear Hilda,

How are you? I am doing well.

A lot of crazy things happen every day, but a lot of fun things happen, too. I'm doing my best.

I wish you a happy Shelgria.

Monica"

For some reason, a cat's pawprint was in the blank space of the message.

Hilda read the whole thing three times, then showed it to Matilda. "I wonder if she'll come home for the winter solstice," she said.

"Shall I prepare a feast for us?"

"Matilda! Yes! I love you!"

"If you love me, then please go buy that new ironing board."

"Okay!" Hilda replied cheerfully.

And I'll pick up a frame for the card along with it, she thought. After all, this was the first seasonal card her adopted daughter had ever sent to her.

Humming to herself, she opened the door, then stepped out into the wintry town.



## Characters So Far



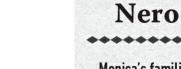
## Monica Everett

The Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages. In this book, she mastered thimble usage, thread-knotting, and French knots. She was previously scraping by with flat knots.



## Louis Miller

The Barrier Mage, one of the Seven Sages. He put himself through school but was a fairly rowdy student. He's known his one true love, his wife, since their school days.





Monica's familiar.
Has been fixated on
detectives lately.
There's no end of
strange happenings
around Monica, so he
probably hopes there
will be a sealed-room
murder case soon.



#### Rynzbelfeid

Louis's contracted spirit. She believes a proper maid should accidentally learn their masters' secrets and testify about them to detectives. She's prepared to speak on Louis's countless misdeeds should the need arise.



## Ray Albright

The Abyss Shaman, one of the Seven Sages. Makes his own shamanic tools, so he's good with his hands. On his days off, he passes the time drawing and writing poetry.



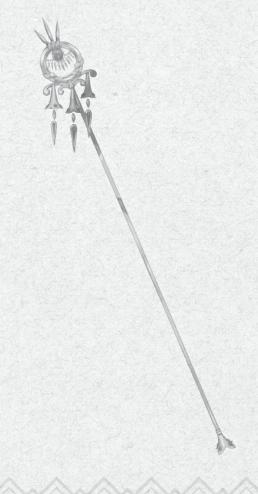
## Felix Arc Ridill

The second prince of Ridill and president of the Serendia Academy student council. Over the moon because he recently found someone to talk with about his hobby.



# Cyril Ashley

The adopted son of Marquess Highown and vice president of the student council. Likes animals, but because he's always emanating mana, they don't tend to like him. This makes him sad.





## Elliott Howard

The son of Count Dasvy and one of the student council secretaries.

Very much not a morning person. Once called Cyril "Granny" while half asleep and got chewed out for it.



## Neil Clay Maywood

The son of Baron
Maywood and the
student council's
general affairs officer.
Part of the Lineage
of the Mediators, he's
called on for all sorts
of campus issues,
large and small.
Deeply trusted by
those both older and
younger than him.



## Bridget Greyham

The daughter of
Marquess Shaleberry
and a student council
secretary. Has two
elder brothers and one
younger sister. Her
sister loves her, but
Bridget prefers to keep
her distance.



### Lana Colette

The daughter of Baron Colette. Looked for a birthday present for Monica at the bazaar but worried that she might not enjoy something expensive. Instead, she picked up her embroidery floss.



### Isabelle Norton

The daughter of
Count Kerbeck and
Monica's collaborator
on her mission. Very
frustrated at her
failure to spread the
good word of how
amazing her idol and
elder sister is.



## Claudia Ashley

The daughter of Marquess Highown. Cyril's younger foster sister and Neil's fiancée. Hates being used, and hates those who are good at taking advantage of others.



## Glenn Dudley

Second-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course. The son of a butcher and Louis's pupil. He got much better at flight magecraft in the course of running away from his terrifying master.



## Benjamin Mording

Third-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course. Loves beautiful girls who are already in love, but also loves madams who will support him. Always accepting new patrons.

## Characters



## Eliane Hyatt

The daughter of Duke Rehnberg and Felix's second cousin. Raised to be a proper lady but not that great at sewing.



### William Macragan

Teacher of fundamental magecraft at Serendia Academy and a high mage. Nicknamed the Waterbite Mage, he is married with three sons, one daughter, and seven grandchildren.



#### Rosalie Miller

A doctor and Louis's wife. Is aware of her husband's awful hobbies.

#### Wildianu

A high water spirit contracted to Felix. Can turn into a white lizard or a young male servant.

### **Byron Garrett**

Third-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and president of the magic-battle club. Views Cyril as a rival.

#### **Conrad Askam**

Third-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and president of the magic history research club. Quite canny in a number of ways. Has a unique laugh.

#### Sheila Ashburton

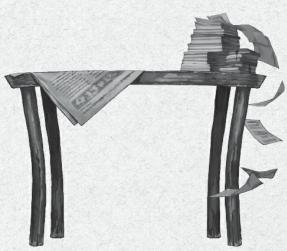
Third-year in Serendia Academy's advanced course and vice president of the embroidery club. Byron's fiancée. Says "Well, you know" a lot.

#### Hilda Everett

Monica's adoptive mother. A scientist at the Royal Magic Research Institute and once an assistant to Monica's father. Terrible at chores.

#### Matilda Mason

The Everett family housemaid. It's thanks to her that Hilda and Monica are able to live like real humans.



## **Afterword**



Thank you so much for purchasing *Secrets of the Silent Witch*, Volume 4 – *after*–.

In Volume 4's afterword, I touched on how I'd kept writing more and more. Well, I wasn't satisfied with just that—I went on and wrote a whole extra book.

I have the editing department to thank for that. I told them I wanted to keep moving the main story ahead, but that I also thought slice-of-life episodes were important. I wanted to write so much. I wanted to write and write! And so they proposed an after story for Volume 4, which tickled my selfish authorial impulses.

It was a blast getting to write all of it.

This book takes place between volumes 4 and 5, serving as kind of a volume 4.5. But you can't write decimals like 4.5 in Roman numerals, so we went with the subtitle *-after-*.

The editorial department actually had several other suggestions aside from the English word *after*, but I told them that I had zero English ability and begged them to pick the easiest, simplest word they could. And so we settled on *after* for the title.

One of the other English words they suggested was *fragment*, but I misread it as *flamingo* due to their similar Japanese spellings.

Silent Witch IV -flamingo-

...In terms of impact, at least, I think that one's got it in spades.

\* \* \*

I have a bunch of pages left for the afterword, so I'd like to comment a little on each episode individually. If you haven't read the book yet, please beware of spoilers.

Prologue: The Seven Sages and the Library's Secret

The Seven Sages gain more respect the longer they serve in their role, so out of Monica, Louis, and Ray, Ray *should* be the most respected. But in general, he gets treated the same way he does in this story.

Louis was actually being considerate of the two of them. If they'd been his juniors or subordinates, I think he would have just kicked them all the way to the library.

## The Black Cat Detective's Stray Reasoning *The Delinquents' Secret Book-Reading Mission*

Originally, I was going to go with "What the Useless Maid Witnessed" or "The Louis Miller Assassination Attempt."

Incidentally, whenever you see the phrase "The X Assassination Attempt," you assume it's a story about X almost getting killed. But when that X is Louis Miller, it sounds like he was the one doing the plotting, doesn't it? Or is that just me?

## The Struggle of the Icy Scion and the Butcher's Son *The Meat Thief and the Lost Girl*

This is a story where a little squirrel gets eaten. They're pretty low in the food chain. I hope she can become a real girl soon.

## The Cynic's Melancholy *The Musician Playboy and Rumors about the Old Dorm*

I hope you'll continue to warmly watch over this musician with too much love and his droopy-eyed friend who gets yanked around whenever his friend's heart gets broken.

#### The Villainess's Secret Maneuvers The Charmed Dream

This is a story about the prince having to worry about his hair and socks.

#### **Epilogue: The Silent Witch's Little Mystery**

There are a lot of boys in this story who are terrible artists, but currently, first place has got to be the vice president, artisan of nondescript blobs.

#### Secret Episode: With Thanks from the Silent Witch

Apparently, Hilda Everett's little episodes of disastrous housekeeping (that

always end in fires) are basically a year-round ritual.

Monica's dubious ability to do chores is only partly because she's never been interested. The other part is due to Hilda's influence.

\* \* \*

Nanna Fujimi, thank you so much, as always, for all the wonderful illustrations. It makes me so happy that you go to the trouble of depicting all the little objects in each scene. The detailed decorations on the pink book's spine put a huge smile on my face, too. They're *so* cute... I can't believe how adorable the spine is... (Please read the book to find out who made it and why.) The manga adaptation is reaching the latter half of Volume 1, too, and there are so many scenes I'm looking forward to.

Finally, thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone who purchased this book and read it. I am always in your debt.

Volume 5 will be the start of the winter break arc. I'm already doing my best to write it, so I hope you can continue to support me.

Matsuri Isora

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