

SECRETS OF THE  
SILENT



WITCH

V

Matsuri Isora

Illustration by  
Nanna Fujimi





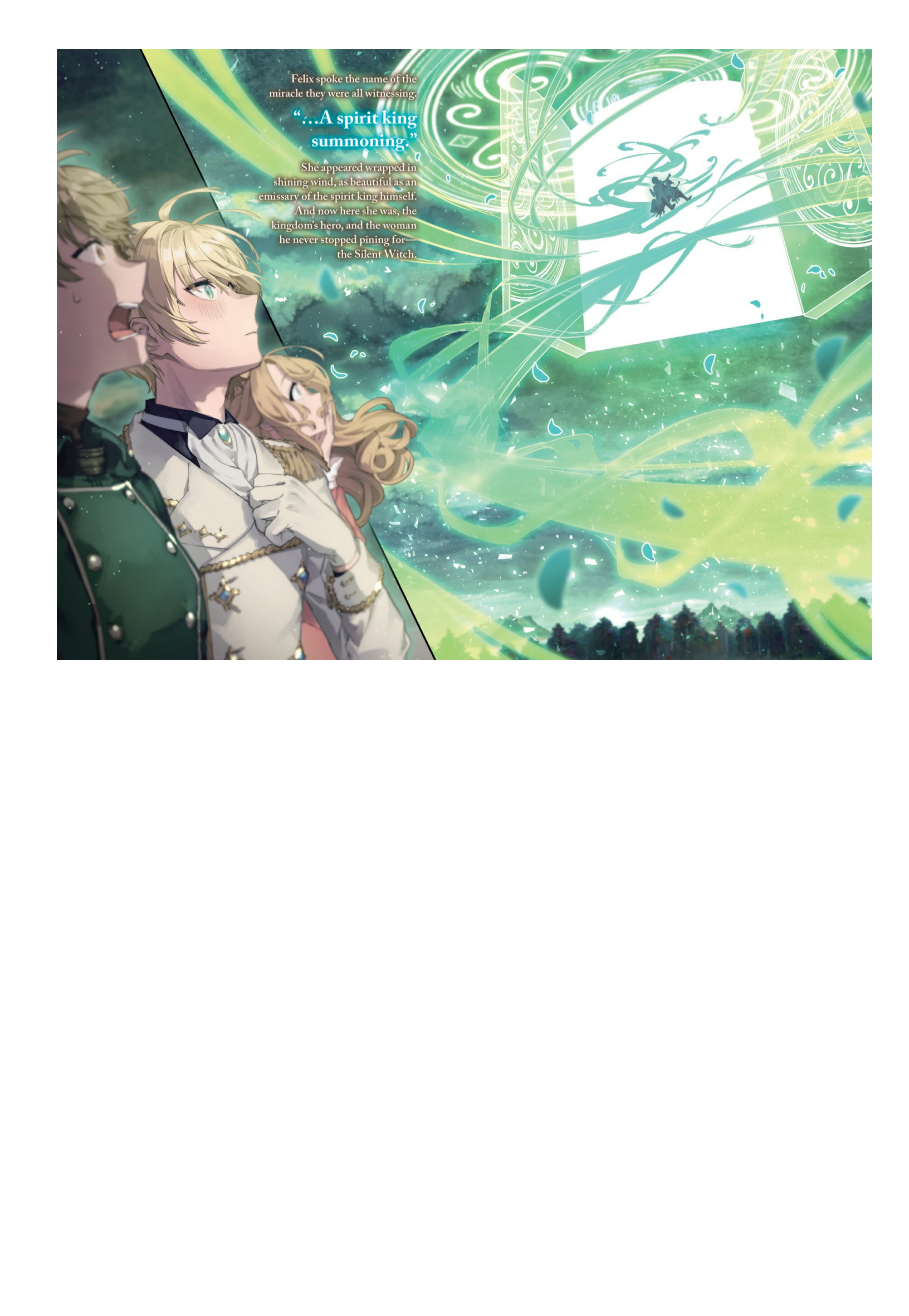
The  
**Artillery Mage**

**BRADFORD  
FIRESTONE**

One of the most powerful martial mages in the Kingdom of Ridill, even among the Seven Sages. A tall man with an easygoing personality who doesn't sweat the small stuff. His specialty is multi-layered strengthening spells, and his record, a six-layered strengthening, is the greatest in Ridill's history.

SECRETS OF THE  
**SILENT** ★  
**WITCH**  
**V**





Felix spoke the name of the miracle they were all witnessing.

**“...A spirit king summoning.”**

She appeared wrapped in shining wind, as beautiful as an emissary of the spirit king himself.

And now here she was, the kingdom's hero, and the woman he never stopped pining for—the Silent Witch.

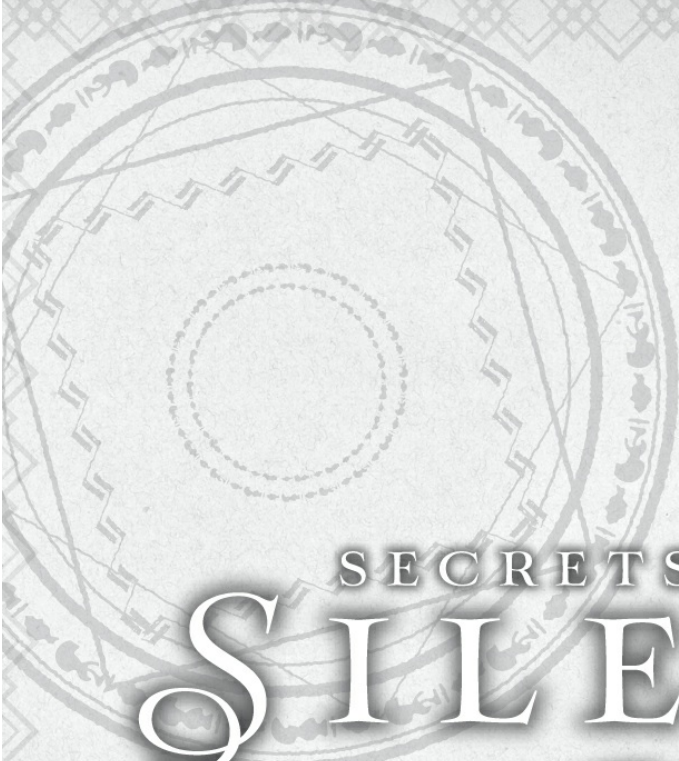




“I’ll shoot  
it between  
the eyes.”

Monica instantly used  
the angle of the rifle  
to measure the bullet’s  
trajectory, then opened  
a fist-sized hole in the  
barrier to let it through.





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**SILENT** ✨  
**WITCH**

V

**Matsuri Isora**

*Illustration by Hanna Fujimi*

  
New York



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**SECRETS OF THE SILENT WITCH V**

**Matsuri Isora**

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## PROLOGUE

### The Game Starts Before You Even Get to the Table, My Fellow Sage

Over half a year before the Silent Witch Monica Everett, one of the Kingdom of Ridill's Seven Sages, received her mission to guard the second prince, she attended a ceremony at the castle to celebrate the new year.

In Ridill, the New Year's ceremony was followed by a week of feasting. During that time, the Seven Sages were required to stay at the castle.

Monica, however, had been completely exhausted by the main event, and starting the following day, she holed up in the guest room she'd been assigned with some books and chose to skip all the parties. But for some reason or other, servants kept coming to her door, asking if she'd like a bath or offering to do up her hair for her.

Her raggedy braids and dreary complexion seemed to concern them, but she didn't plan to attend the feasting anyway. Why bother taking a bath or doing her hair nicely? She just wanted to read her books in peace and quiet, away from everyone else.

So she donned her Sage's robe and left her room, deciding to go to the Jade Chamber instead, where the Seven Sages gathered. The Jade Chamber had a special barrier protecting it; nobody but the Sages and the king himself could enter, so she wouldn't have to worry about the unending stream of servants.

Since the other Sages would no doubt be at the latest party, she'd be able to focus on her reading without anyone getting in her way. Gripping her half-read book and seldom-used staff, she pulled her hood low over her face and started off toward the Jade Chamber.

Tons of people went in and out of the castle during the New Year's celebrations, and every time she passed one, her stomach would contract. But eventually, she arrived at her destination and stood before the door. There, she pressed the tip of her staff against it and let her mana flow. Channeling mana

through a staff's jewel into the door was required to unlock the room.

Once it was unlocked, Monica cracked the door open, took a peek inside—and immediately regretted coming.

“Oh, hello, my fellow Sage.”

“Hey, it's Silent! Perfect timing. Get over here!”

Two men sat at a round table playing cards. One of them had long, chestnut hair done up in a braid, while the other was about forty and had black hair and a beard. The former was Monica's colleague, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller; the tall, bearded man was Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage.

Both had on robes that marked them as members of the Seven Sages, but unlike Louis—who had the decorative front part properly fastened—the broad-shouldered Bradford had removed it and partially unbuttoned the collar of the shirt he wore underneath.

Monica began to shake with fear. These two were the Sages' main combat specialists. To put it bluntly, they were both hotheaded and quick to pick fights. She didn't want to be anywhere near them if she could help it.

She tried to excuse herself immediately, but Bradford was already calling her over. He had seniority, and she didn't have the courage to ignore him. Still trembling, she stepped into the room.

“Come, have a seat,” said Bradford, pulling out the chair next to him. Then, turning to Louis, he added, “She doesn't come here often, does she?”

“I'm sure she just got scared of the servants trying to tend to her and came here to escape.”

Bradford nodded sympathetically. “Oh, right. Seems they're all quibbling over who gets to take care of the Seven Sages.”

At the moment, the court was split between those supporting the first prince and those who favored his younger brother, and these two factions were constantly trying to assert dominance. Of the Sages, the Barrier Mage was on the first prince's side, while the Gem Mage stood behind the second. All the others were neutral.



The leaders of each faction wanted to get as many neutral Sages on their side as they could and were trying to win them over with hospitality. No wonder the servants' eyes had been glinting with ambition.

“With all those interruptions, it’s no wonder you couldn’t get any rest in your room,” said Bradford. “In that case, why don’t you join us for a few rounds?” He began picking up the cards scattered on the table.

Louis, still holding all his cards, smiled thinly. “You must have had a bad hand.”

“Nah, I just thought we oughtta start fresh so we can deal in Silent.”

“I see.”

Louis put down his cards face up on the table. Monica saw various images depicting the wings, claws, and eyes of a dragon. She didn’t know what any of them meant, but it seemed the Barrier Mage had already put together a winning hand of some sort.

“Whoa. I was nearly in trouble there,” muttered Bradford, gathering up the remaining cards and looking over at Monica as she sat down next to him. “You ever played this game before?”

“Um, no...”

“You get seven cards to start. Then players take turns drawing one card from the deck and discarding another. The object of the game is to get all the parts needed to make a full dragon.”

Bradford then lined up a few cards for her and explained how winning hands worked.

Herbivorous dragons scored the fewest points, followed by the lesser species: pterodragons, earth dragons, fire dragons, and water dragons. Higher points were awarded for the greater dragons, including green, yellow, and blue varieties. The legendary dragons—colored white and black—gave even more points, with black being the highest. In addition, before starting each game, you would determine an element for that round. If the dragon you completed matched the element, you would receive double the points.

As Monica absently counted up all the cards, Bradford continued in a serious tone, “Even if you start with a bad hand, you can still win. When that happens, it’s best to bluff and act like you have something good.”

“Oh?” replied Louis with a little shrug. “You mean you haven’t noticed, Lord Artillery Mage? When you have a bad hand, you always touch your beard.”

“What?!” exclaimed Bradford, touching his beard on reflex.

Louis smiled, then looked at Monica. “As you can see, this is a game where idiots who are easily swayed by others make fools of themselves.”

Still holding his beard, Bradford glared at Louis and scowled. Then he put his thick hand on Monica’s shoulder and rumbled in a low voice, “Let’s team up, Silent. We’ll outwit him together.”

A strangled whimper escaped Monica’s throat in place of a response. She could see piles of silver and copper coins stacked to one side of the table; these two were gambling. She had no desire to take part, but Bradford was already dealing the cards.

She gripped her robe where it fell over her knees. She was trembling.

Louis drew a card from the deck, then discarded a blue wing. Monica “checked” it. You could steal an opponent’s discarded card when you were one step away from completing a dragon by declaring “check.”

Monica added the blue wing to her hand, then revealed her cards and declared victory. “Ummm, I have a water dragon...so I win.”

Bradford, who was playing as her partner, clapped his hands. “Gah-ha-ha! There we go, there we go! Luck is on our side now!”

Laughing heartily, he tousled Monica’s hair with one hand. She didn’t like tall men with loud voices, and, unsure what else to do, she simply froze and let him continue.

They had just concluded their second game, and the Bradford-Monica team was in the lead, having won both.

Louis, sitting across from Monica, didn’t seem particularly fazed, however. In fact, he wore a rather eerie smile.



“Well, well,” he said. “Lucky as ever, Silent Witch.”

Monica was almost certain her victories had nothing to do with luck. In fact, she couldn't help feeling that Louis was purposely letting her win.

She twitched as a bad feeling settled over her.

Bradford dealt the cards again, then pushed a pile of silver coins out in front of him. “All right! I'll bet twenty silver this time!”

Monica's eyes went wide. Up until now, they'd been playing for five coins or less per round. Bradford was rushing things.

“Ummm, I don't, well, maybe you should, um, rethink that...”

As Monica flailed, Bradford smirked. His expression the picture of confidence, he whispered into her ear. “I just realized something. Barrier here plays with his hair whenever his hand is bad.”

“...Huh?”

Hesitantly, she took a peek at Louis. He was looking at his hand, a confident, relaxed smile on his face. But his fingers *were* fiddling with a tuft of hair at his cheek.

“It's time to go all in,” whispered Bradford. “We're gonna make him cough up every last coin.”

Monica had a *very* bad feeling about where this was headed. Bradford, however, had no intention of holding back. Despite the Silent Witch's trepidation, the game continued.

Monica's hand came together nicely. One more card and she'd have a full greater dragon—red, this time. And since the element this round was fire, a red dragon was worth twice the points.

Still, she couldn't shake her sense of unease. It felt like the tables might turn any moment. Anxiously, she drew a card from the deck—and her shoulders jerked.



THE ARTILLERY MAGE  
Bradford Firestone



*...Oh, oh no, it's the green wing...*

If Monica's prediction was correct, Louis was going for either a pterodragon or its greater form, a green dragon. If she discarded the green wing, he could check it, and she could lose.

*We always keep seven cards in our hand. I only need six of them to finish a red dragon... I have one free slot, so I should keep the green wing and discard my extra fang instead.*

"My fellow Sage," said Louis, chuckling as he hid his mouth behind his cards. "You might want to fix that habit of jumping out of your skin whenever something unsettles you."

"Aww... Um, okay..." She bunched up her shoulders.

Bradford whispered to her again. "Don't falter," he said. "Look at him. Look closely. He's playing with his hair. He's got a bad hand. Now's our chance to press the attack!"

"Oh," said Monica, nodding vaguely as Louis discarded a card.

It was a golden eye—the last card Monica needed to win. But before she could check it, Bradford raised his voice.

"Check! Gah-hah-hah! We've got a red dragon! And the element is fire, so it's worth twice the points! Sorry, Barrier!"

As Bradford made a victorious whoop, Louis revealed his hand.

"Apologies," he said. "To tell the truth... I already have a cursed dragon."

Bradford was dumbstruck.

It seemed Louis had already assembled a pterodragon in his hand. But that wasn't all—his other card had the word *curse* written on it. Monica hadn't used that card a single time so far; she looked at it, confused.

Louis smiled and explained for her. "When you have a complete dragon *and* a curse card in your hand, it's called a 'cursed dragon.'"

A cursed dragon—a dragon under the effect of a curse—was an extremely rare type with few historical sightings.

“...Ummm, then how come you, um, didn’t say you won?”

“You don’t need to say you’ve won, even if your cursed dragon is complete. But if anyone else says *they* win, then...” Louis’s smile deepened. “...they *lose* all the points they would have won.”

“Hwah?!”

That meant a huge victory could instantly turn into a crushing loss. The curse card hadn’t appeared even once that round, and Monica hadn’t known about the special rule.

But Louis wasn’t about to accept an excuse like that. “Not happy?” he said. “You were the fool here. You sat down to a game without looking up the official rules—instead, you simply took someone else’s explanation at face value.”

As he spoke, he purposely played with the hair hanging by his cheek.

That was when Monica finally figured it out. “W-wait, Mister Louis, then the thing about you playing with your hair when you’re at a disadvantage was...”

“Like I said, this is a game where idiots who are easily swayed by others make fools of themselves.”

So he was only playing with his hair as an act to convince his opponents to make their move. Bradford fell to his knees, and Louis happily dragged the pile of silver coins to his own side.

Feeling guilty about the massive loss, Monica looked over the cards on the table. To tell the truth, she’d been curious about something from the moment Louis had revealed his hand.

“Ummm, Mister Louis... I don’t, um, think...this is the right number of cards...”

“Perhaps it’s just your imagination?” Louis smiled thinly.

“No,” she said, her voice flat. The hesitation had vanished from her youthful features, and her round eyes stared at the cards without blinking. “From what I know of the game so far, there should be eight fang cards in the deck. But there’s one too many. I remember all the discards, so I know I’m right.”

It was only at times like this that Monica talked so fluently. Louis crooked his head slightly to one side in a particularly adorable expression.

“The game starts before you even get to the table, my fellow Sage,” he said.

“So you were cheating before we even sat down, eh?” Bradford cut in. “Why don’t you take that robe off and turn it inside out for us?”

“In this cold? Don’t be absurd.”

Louis stood up from his chair and began to shuffle toward the exit. Bradford, sure the other man had cheated, smiled viciously and pointed his staff toward the fleeing mage.

“All these card games have put me in the mood for a magic battle. Come join me, Barrier.”

“My, my. You’ve got a lot of energy for a middle-aged man. Perhaps you should apply for the Magic Corps.”

Bradford began chanting an attack spell, which Louis countered with a quick-chanted defensive barrier.

The Jade Chamber was protected by a powerful barrier of its own that was not so easily broken. Louis’s defense, then, was only meant for himself. Monica was, of course, not included.

With a sound that was half-scream, half-whine, Monica dove under the round table and, without chanting, triggered her own defensive barrier.

About fifteen minutes later, the Artillery Mage and the Barrier Mage, having roughhoused all around the Jade Chamber, were restrained by the Witch of Thorns, who had come running alongside the Starseer Witch.

The Starseer Witch then whisked Monica, who was curled up in a ball under the table muttering strings of numbers as she stared blankly into the distance, away to safety.



Monica is no longer a helpless child.

Now she is one of the Seven Sages—

the Silent Witch.

SECRETS OF THE  
SILENT\*  
WITCH  
V



## CHAPTER 1

### The Winter Market and Alteria Chimes

Each year, when the month of Shelgria arrived, the town of Craeme—located about an hour’s walk from Serendia Academy—would host a pre-solstice winter market.

Monica had been to the town once before, as part of her mission to protect the second prince. This time, she found it even busier, with many more stalls and booths.

The Kingdom of Ridill’s winter holiday spanned ten days, starting with the solstice and ending on the last day of the year. Most stores were closed during the holiday, so people had to get all their shopping done before the solstice.

Serendia students had the day off, so Monica had come to the winter market with Isabelle Norton, her secret collaborator in her mission to protect the prince, and Isabelle’s servant, Agatha.

*It’s always so crowded here... Ugh, now I’m tense...*

Despite her anxiety, Monica was doing fairly well. Last time, she’d been so scared of the crowd, she’d curled up into a ball in the middle of the street.

Monica, shrinking in on herself as she walked, was wearing the clothes Louis had gotten her for outings, plus a coat. Next to her, Isabelle had on a dark-yellow dress with a fur wrap. Agatha, too, was dressed for going out, having shed her servant clothing for a chocolate-brown outfit.

They’d traveled to Craeme that day so that Isabelle could get her shopping done.

As Monica stared at the ground, Isabelle turned to her and said in a cheerful tone, “Let’s head straight to the market, my dear elder sister!” Her expression was full of obvious excitement.

“My lady,” Agatha softly chided her, “others from the academy may be here. Please be careful.”



“Oh, that’s right... Then allow me to act as a villainess should.”

Isabelle took a few steps away from Monica, then jerked her chin upward.

“Come with me, bag-carrier!” she declared. “And if you don’t keep up, you’ll most certainly regret it!”

As it happened, the villainess currently treating Monica like a bag-carrier always arranged for her purchases to be loaded onto their carriage, so it was all but guaranteed there would be no bags to carry.

The winter market consisted of open-air booths and stalls radiating outward from the town square, and many of them dealt in food to last the holiday, sweets that would keep for a while, and wreaths to celebrate the solstice. A few shops would create custom-order wreaths on the spot to match their customers’ tastes.

Solstice wreaths were meant to ward off evil, and it was said that decorating your home with one would protect you from disaster and bring good fortune for the new year.

Monica had made one with her father when she was a child. She remembered calculating the ratio of vine to ribbon and the position of the pine cones.

*Seeing all these wreaths sure brings back memories.*

Her foster mother had bought premade ones, and ever since Monica had joined the Seven Sages and started living in her mountain cabin, she hadn’t bothered with them at all.

As Monica gazed at the wreaths, decorated with a rainbow of colored ribbons, Isabelle stopped in front of a hard candy shop.

“First, I need souvenirs, for when I return home,” she said. “I’d like a few different kinds that will survive the journey. Then I’d like to stop by that little shop known for its scented soaps, and... Oh, yes. I should buy a new book or two for the children at the orphanage.”

Books might seem like an item one could just as easily buy in County Kerbeck, but apparently it took time for newer volumes to arrive out east. Craeme, on the other hand, was relatively close to the capital, so you could find the latest

popular books without any trouble.

As Isabelle counted off what she wanted to buy on her fingers, the ever-sensible Agatha gave her some advice. “The soap shop is straight down this road on the corner, my lady. The bookstore, however, is on a different street.”

“Then let’s buy the sweets first. I’d like some you can’t find so easily back home...”

Isabelle’s main goal for this shopping trip was to procure souvenirs to take back to Kerbeck with her. The month of Shelgria was in full swing, and Serendia Academy’s winter break would begin the following week. People in Ridill spent the time between the winter solstice and the new year with their families; the students would all go home, and the dorms would be completely shut down.

After Isabelle had bought ten boxes of hard candy for her family and their servants and directed the clerk to transport it to her carriage, she sighed and looked a little forlorn.

“Oh, if only you could spend the winter holiday with me...”

Isabelle had invited Monica to come home with her, and at first, Monica had planned to do just that. Isabelle and her family had been incredibly helpful, and she wanted to thank them all properly.

But two days prior, Mary Harvey, the Starseer Witch and another of the Seven Sages, had seen an omen in the stars, and the situation had taken a sudden turn.

“This winter, a dragonraid will befall our kingdom.”

Mary Harvey was the number one prophet in Ridill, and now people were on watch for dragons everywhere in the country. And since the Starseer Witch had prophesied it, as another Sage, Monica would likely be called in to help. That was why she couldn’t join Isabelle for the holiday.

*Now that I think of it, there are a lot more guards in town today...*

A dragon had appeared in Craeme not long ago, and the townsfolk were probably more than a little concerned about the omen.

Dragons were weak to the cold, so they were usually most active from spring

to summer. The majority of them hibernated through the winter, making it a rare season for dragonraids.

But this prophecy was from the Starseer Witch herself, so despite the season, they *had* to be careful. Her predictions had saved this kingdom many times in the past.

“If only we could have eaten minced pie and ginger cake together for the solstice! Then I could have given you a grand tour of Kerbeck...!”

A sheen of glistening tears appeared at the corners of Isabelle’s eyes. She must have truly regretted this turn of events.

“Now, now, my lady, you’re troubling the Silent Witch.”

Agatha’s words seemed to jolt Isabelle out of her fantasies. She took out a handkerchief and patted at her tears.

“Oh, dear me. A villainess mustn’t let herself cry so easily... All her tears must be fake.”

“That, um, sounds like a pretty strict rule...,” remarked Monica with a shudder.

Isabelle rallied herself and put on a sharp expression—the very image of a refined noble girl. “I apologize for my embarrassing display,” she said. “I would still like very much to enjoy the holiday with you, but...the threat of a dragonraid is of utmost importance right now.”

The eastern regions of the Kingdom of Ridill, starting with County Kerbeck, were known for their especially frequent dragonraids. The history of Kerbeck was filled with battles against dragons, and Isabelle, Count Kerbeck’s daughter, knew the terror of these raids far better than even Monica did.

Seeing her friend’s forlorn expression, Monica awkwardly spoke up. “Um, I think they want the Seven Sages to help the Dragon Knights, so... I might, um, be dispatched near where you live, Lady Isabelle.”

“Oh! My, my, yes! Should that happen, please, please, *please* do come pay us a visit. We shall rally the full might of our forces to support you in exterminating the dragons!”



“Oh, no. I-I’ll be fine, so... Please prioritize protecting your lands instead...,” mumbled Monica.

Then Agatha, still wary of their surroundings, whispered “my lady” into Isabelle’s ear.

The latter quickly dropped her friendly look and angled her chin up and away in an expression of disgust. In a clear, ringing voice, she said, “Ugh, I can scarcely stand it! To think a lowly girl like you will be in the same house while I am trying to enjoy the holiday with *my* family in peace and quiet! It beggars belief that you are somehow related to us! Why, you’d be better off in the stables!”

“U-ummm...?” Monica was taken aback by the sudden change in her friend’s behavior.

Without moving her head, Agatha caught Monica’s eye. “The two girls behind me to the right are academy students. It seems they noticed Lady Isabelle...” The maid was keeping a constant eye on those around them in order to prevent Isabelle and Monica’s relationship from being exposed. She whispered to Isabelle, “What shall we do?”

Isabelle cast her eyes down in thought, then spoke carefully. “I would truly like to spend a nice, leisurely time with my elder sister... But just to be safe, we should split up for now. Is that all right with you?”

“Um, yes!” Monica nodded.

Isabelle twirled an orange curl around one finger, then said her next words clearly enough to carry. “I am *so* tired from walking! I’m sure *some* shop or other is serving tea. You—go buy everything I’ve written on this note at once.” She took a note out of her pocket and thrust it at Monica. It was blank. “I’ll be in front of the clock tower in one hour. If you are even one second late, I’ll make sure you regret it!”

After that, she and Agatha stepped away. Pretending she’d just noticed the two girls nearby, she greeted them with an “Oh! Good day to you.”

Monica took the opportunity to walk in the opposite direction.

Some distance away, a man had been watching the two girls: Isabelle Norton,

daughter of Count Kerbeck—and Monica Norton, her attendant.

He was in his midthirties, with brown hair and a plain face that not many people would remember. He was of average height and build, and he wore an unremarkable overcoat.

He was a hired detective, but not the kind that starred in novels—who stunned the other characters with their incredible powers of deduction and dramatically solved various crimes.

Though he was a detective, he'd never deduced much of anything, really. In general, his job was to conduct background investigations and search for missing pets. That day, he was fulfilling a request to tail a certain girl—namely, Monica Norton.

*It seems like Count Kerbeck's daughter does indeed bully Monica Norton, he thought. The pure hate and disgust in her voice as she criticizes the girl can't possibly be an act.*

It *was* an act, but the detective didn't know that. Instead, he turned his thoughts to the purpose of his mission.

*My client told me to keep tabs on Monica, but... Is there anything out of the ordinary about her? I can't help thinking the big-time count's daughter is a more valuable target...*

After being ordered to do the shopping by Isabelle, Monica walked to and fro, note in hand, clearly unsure of what to do. If the man was being honest, it didn't seem like there was much point in watching her.

*Well, client's orders. I'll keep with it for a while,* he told himself. Then he continued to tail Monica.

After parting ways with Isabelle, Monica wandered around pointlessly for a little while.

*We're supposed to meet in front of the clock tower in one hour,* she thought. *What should I do in the meantime...?*

Since Isabelle had technically ordered her to go shopping, maybe she should find something to buy. Nero had stayed back at the dorm; she could buy a treat

for him. That sounded like a good idea.

Not long ago, Monica would have had trouble simply walking around the crowded winter market. Now, though, she was able to look through the shops and buy things she wanted. She still had a hard time when loud clerks tried to talk to her, though.

As Monica looked around for a shop with a more reserved staff, she heard two familiar voices.

“How long do you intend to keep eating?! Did we not come here to look for souvenirs?!”

“Come on, we’ve been walking forever. I know you’re hungry, too. Here, VP, you can have some of this.”

“I don’t want any! We’re here to shop, so let’s get down to business!”

“But it’s fun to just wander around and look at stuff!”

Monica’s eyes automatically traced the voices to their source.

A slender boy with his silver hair tied back and a tall boy with dirty-blond hair were making a nuisance of themselves in front of a stall selling food and drinks. It was Cyril Ashley and Glenn Dudley.

Neither of them were in uniform; the former wore a staid outfit, while Glenn wore something a little more rustic that looked easy to move around in.

Glenn noticed Monica watching them and waved.

“Hey, Monica!” he called out. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

Whenever Monica saw someone she knew in a crowd, she was always concerned she might bother them if she approached, so she was grateful for Glenn’s gesture.

She scampered over. “L-Lord Cyril, Glenn, hello... Ummm, are you here shopping?”

“Yep!” exclaimed Glenn. “I’m looking for a souvenir to bring home, and...”

Cyril folded his arms and nodded. “If a student from our school were to cause issues while away from the academy, it would harm the prince’s reputation. As



His Highness's aide, it's my duty to keep an eye on the underclassmen, and—"

"And I happened to bump into him, so now we're shopping together!" interrupted Glenn, apparently taking no offense at Cyril's words. Then he reached into the paper bag in his hand and brought something out.

It was a fried cake, about as big as if you made a loop with your thumb and index finger, cooked to a perfect golden brown.

"Here," said Glenn, holding it out to Monica.

"Oh, um, thank you," she managed, receiving the piping-hot cake and taking a small bite.

The egg-and-wheat dough had a gentle flavor, and there was apricot jam inside. While the filling was a little tart, it went well with the plain sweetness of the dough.

Monica breathed in and out, trying to cool the hot jam in her mouth as she ate the cake.

Cyril patiently waited for her to finish, then asked, "Are you here by yourself, Accountant Norton?"

"No, I'm with Lady Isabelle. I'm, um, not with her at the moment, but...uh, we're supposed to meet in an hour."

Cyril's face darkened. "I can't say I like the idea of a female student going off on her own."

"In that case, you should stick with us until you have to meet back up with her!" said Glenn. "No problem, right? Let's go shopping, Monica! We could use a girl's advice!"

Monica's face tensed. *A girl's advice?* she thought. She was well aware her tastes were very different from those of most other girls.

"Ummm, advice...? About what...?" she asked with trepidation.

Cyril and Glenn responded at the same time.

"What would be a good souvenir for a lady?"

"What kind of gift would make a girl happy?"

By now, even Monica knew that most girls didn't want grimoires or books on mathematics. She tilted her head and hummed in thought. "Ummm, you want to buy a souvenir for, um, a girl?"

"Yep," replied Glenn. "Y'see, I've got two little sisters, and they keep pestering me to bring them something when I come home—something stylish and cute, they said!"

Stylish and cute... That was more Lana's wheelhouse. Monica rubbed her temple with her fingers, wondering what her friend would buy in this situation. *Lana likes makeup and accessories... Oh, and the other day she said she wanted perfume...* Monica didn't know how old Glenn's sisters were, but she got the feeling they were a little young for perfume.

Then she remembered something. Hadn't Isabelle just been talking about a popular shop that sold scented soap?

"Ummm!" she started. "Then, um, what about some soap...? It, uh, smells good, I heard. Lady Isabelle wanted some, too..."

Monica was a little sad she couldn't recommend it with more confidence. She hadn't ever used it herself, after all. But this was still the best suggestion she could come up with.

Glenn popped another fried cake into his mouth and chewed it. He crooked his head to the side and thought for a moment, then said, "Why does soap have to smell good? It's just supposed to make you less dirty, right?"

"It's better than it smelling *bad*," said Cyril. "Soap made the old way has a particular odor, and I hear a lot of people can't stand it... And don't talk while you eat. It's bad manners."

Glenn nodded and continued munching on his cake.

Cyril sighed in exasperation, then looked at Monica. "Do you know where the shop selling this soap is, Accountant Norton?"

"Oh, um, yes!" According to Agatha, it was right down the street, at the corner.

"Would you mind showing us the way?"

“Not at all!” she replied enthusiastically.

There wasn't much she could do in this situation, but having a friend and someone she respected rely on her made her chest tingle with joy.

When they arrived at the soap shop, they found it bustling with female patrons. Apparently, it *was* quite popular. A few of the customers appeared to be noble girls from Serendia Academy, here with their servants. The way they kept glancing at Cyril and Glenn all but gave them away.

“Whoa, you're right!” exclaimed Glenn as soon as they were inside. “It smells so nice in here—like flowers!”

The shop's display shelves were covered with cloth featuring tiny flowers, atop which herbal-and floral-scented soaps sat in adorable paper wrappings. One variety even had rose petals suspended in the bar. Glenn stared at the item's sales copy, looking mystified.

“It says Lady Barlock uses this. But who's she?” he asked.

“The Countess of Barlock, I would assume,” answered Cyril. “I hear she's famous in high society for her extensive knowledge of beauty products.”

Glenn nodded, then picked up one of the bars with flower petals in it. “Then I'll go with the ones she likes! I bet my sisters will love it.”

“Don't you have two sisters? Shouldn't you buy two?”

Glenn looked away from Cyril and muttered, “But just look how expensive they are... I was thinking I could just cut it in half and rewrap them...”

“That would be dishonest. Buy one for each.”

“I dunno... If I spoil them like this, I bet they'll just demand more,” complained Glenn as he picked up a second bar.

Leaving him aside, Cyril examined a bar of lavender soap.

*...I wonder if he's planning to give it to Claudia,* thought Monica.

Cyril caught her staring and began to fidget. Speaking rapidly, he said, “This is, well... Lavender is rare back home, so...”

“Oh, um, yes,” she stammered. “I think it's a good scent, too.” Monica

thought it was better to choose a scent you liked yourself, rather than relying on the recommendation of some famous countess.

Cyril smiled but looked somehow dispirited.

“...All right, then,” he said. “I’ll go with this.”

As she watched him head to the counter, she cast a sidelong glance at the lavender soap. *I don’t know if I can stop by this year now that there’s the possibility of a dragonraid... But if I can’t go myself, I can still send something... Yeah, that’s a good idea.*

Monica picked up two bars of lavender soap and lined up at the counter.

After the three of them left the soap shop, they began to hear a clear jingling sound from somewhere.

Glenn turned and fixed his gaze on a small square around the corner. “Oh, it’s Alteria chimes.”

In the middle of the square stood a pole about as tall as an average adult. Several small, thin metal tubes hung from it, with snow crystal–like decorations occupying the gaps between them. As the northerly wind blew past, the tubes swayed and hit the other ones, causing a pretty jingling noise.

The origin of Alteria chimes was a certain legend about an ice spirit named Alteria who lived a long, long time ago.

Although Alteria was a high spirit, she was quite weak, and before long she was on the verge of disappearing forever. In order to ask the god of the spirits for help, she mustered what little strength she had and created chimes made of ice. These weren’t just any chimes, however—they were made from winter’s beauty and produced an incredibly clear, refreshing sound.

As she rang her chimes, Alteria called out to the god of the spirits.

*O God, O God, I beg of you to notice me, your humble servant.*

*O God, O God, I beg of you to lend me your ear and hear my lowly voice.*

*O God, O God, I beg of you, please grant me the smallest of your blessings...*

Hearing her chimes, the god of the spirits blessed Alteria and rescued her



from her sorry fate.

That legend gave rise to the tradition of Alteria chimes. By ringing the chimes and praying, you could receive God's ear and blessing—in other words, whatever you wished would be granted.

“Back home,” said Glenn, “whenever winter comes, we set one of those up at the school or the church or wherever. Do you think we could go over and ring them?”

“Glenn, do you, um, have...a wish you want granted?” asked Monica.

“Not exactly,” he replied, scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment. “I just want...you know, to promise to do my best.”

“I see,” said Cyril, sounding impressed. “So you have a goal in mind and wish to swear a divine oath. I admire your attitude.”

“Heh-heh.” Glenn chuckled, then pulled a rope attached to the Alteria chimes.

The metal tubes and the snow crystal decorations hanging between them jingled. While they were still ringing, Glenn shouted, “I'm gonna work hard at my magecraft training!”

It was a good oath to make, but the fact that he'd yelled it caused people nearby to stop and stare. Monica flinched away from all the attention.

Glenn turned to her next. “You too, Monica! Wanna ring them?”

“Hweh?! Ummm... I, ummm...”

Normally, she would have turned down such an offer. But Glenn's promise to work hard just now had really struck a chord with her. She felt she could understand, if only a little, why he'd wanted to make it.

*My goal...*

She stepped forward and took the rope. Then she closed her eyes, as if to confirm how she felt inside, and at last she began to speak.

“The first time I came here, I was so scared, I couldn't take a step until Glenn found me...”

She'd squatted, shut her eyes, and cleared her thoughts of everything except

numbers—the only thing she could do was retreat into her own mind. She'd never even considered taking action by herself. She'd always let some gentle hand pull her along.

“But, ummm, today, I can walk around normally. Even though there are more people than last time. So, ummm...” She rang the Alteria chimes. The metal tubes and snow crystal decorations shook, producing a beautiful jingling sound. “I, um, I want to keep getting better at...those kinds of things!”

She wasn't able to word her promise very well, but it had clearly come from the heart.

As she let go of the rope and turned around, Cyril nodded, his arms still folded in front of him. “Glenn Dudley. Monica Norton.”

“Yessir!”

“Um, y-yes?”

He looked at his two underclassmen as they straightened up. “I have high hopes for both of you,” he said briefly.

Monica and Glenn exchanged glances and smiled. The only reason they'd decided to break character, ring the Alteria chimes, and swear their oaths was because they'd had an upperclassman there to witness it.

“Hearing that from you makes me even more determined, VP!” said Glenn.

“Heh-heh... Yeah,” Monica agreed.

The northerly wind blew again, causing the Alteria chimes to sway and jingle. As Monica listened to the sound, she silently repeated her oath—*I promise to keep doing my best.*

After all, she had a friend and an upperclassman willing to support her without laughing, no matter how small and silly her goal was.

That day, while Monica and the others were shopping in Craeme, Felix Arc Ridill, the kingdom's second prince, was sitting on the couch in his private dormitory room, polishing a pocket watch.

It had been specially made for him, with the royal family's emblem engraved into the metal. Neither that nor the fact that it could tell the time was

important to him, though.

He closed the case, then twisted the bottom slightly. When he opened the lid back up, a hidden compartment beneath the face of the clock had become visible. In it was embedded a large aquamarine: the stone of contract signifying his pact with the spirit Wildianu.

Aquamarines weren't particularly rare, but they were said to be worth more the deeper their coloration. The one in Felix's hand right now was an extremely deep blue—a stone of the highest caliber.

Once, this stone had been worn around the neck of a noblewoman. He'd heard she had beautiful blue eyes, the exact color of the stone. Felix didn't know much about her, but he'd once seen eyes that were every bit as beautiful and blue as hers had been.

...Though he'd never see them again, now.

Felix closed the pocket watch's lid and opened a drawer in his desk. Just like the watch, it had a two-layered construction with a hidden space underneath a false bottom. He took out a few pieces of paper he'd stowed away in the secret compartment.

It was a half-written thesis on a certain magecraft formula—penned by none other than the prince himself.

*I guess it's time to get rid of this.*

If he seriously intended to ascend the throne, such essays would be unnecessary. Political influence and linguistic ability were the main skills demanded of the second prince, not knowledge of magecraft.

“Are you...just going to stop looking?”

A young girl's confused words flashed through his mind.

Felix smiled thinly. Resignation was written all over his face.

*...That's right.*

This was something he'd have to let go of if he wanted his wish to come true. That was what he told himself, anyway, as he brought the papers over to the furnace to burn them. Behind him, Wildianu, who had taken human form in

order to sort the prince's mail, spoke up, his tone reserved.

"Master, there's a letter for you from Duke Clockford."

"Let me see it."

Felix put the sheaf of paper on the edge of his desk, then unfolded the duke's letter. The contents were about what he'd expected.

"Diplomatic work," he said to the spirit. "A group of envoys from Farfolia is visiting the Duchy of Rehnberg, and he wants me to entertain them."

"If I recall, the Duke of Rehnberg is..."

"Miss Eliane Hyatt's father, yes."

Duke Clockford's orders were twofold. First, once winter break began, he was to head to the Duchy of Rehnberg and hold diplomatic talks with the Kingdom of Farfolia, achieving favorable results for Ridill. Second, he would stay at the duke's estate and deepen his relationship with Eliane, one of his marriage candidates.

Farfolia, an agricultural nation, was located to the southeast of Ridill. There was little doubt the talks would concern trade; the kingdom was a vital ally. And given Ridill's unstable relationship with the Empire, if Farfolia were to side with them instead, it would put Ridill in an extremely poor position.

He would need to be an excellent host to the envoys, strengthening their nations' relationship while arranging trade deals that would benefit Ridill.

*And I'll have to see Miss Eliane on the side, I suppose.*

With Felix staying at her family's estate, Eliane would surely be in very high spirits. Of the prince's marriage candidates, she was Duke Clockford's favorite, and having earned his seal of approval at the ball following the school festival, she was acting like she and Felix were already engaged.

*...It's not that the duke likes her personally, though. He probably just supports her because her father is so easy to control.*

Whatever the case, Felix's winter break was shaping up to be quite a drag. The air at the academy was practically electric with excitement as all the students prepared to head home. Cyril seemed particularly thrilled this year;



he'd been happily counting down the days until break began.

*Must be nice*, thought Felix with a tinge of envy. Sighing, he read through the rest of the letter—but when he reached the final sentence, his eyes shot open in surprise.

“...Master?” asked Wildianu worriedly.

“Wil! Wildianu, great news!”

The light had returned to his blue eyes, and his hands trembled with joy as they held the letter. He looked down at his thesis on the edge of the desk. It was something he'd decided to give up on—needed to let go of—had to burn. It wasn't necessary to achieve his goal.

*But I may never get a chance like this again...*

He sat down at his desk, took out a feather pen and a jar of ink, and set to work on his unfinished thesis.

“Master?” asked Wildianu.

“Sorry,” replied Felix stiffly, his pen dancing across the page. “I'd like to focus for a while. Please don't talk to me.”

The corners of his lips turned up in irrepressible joy, and his cheeks flushed. He was going to savor every moment of this.

*During the holiday, I'll... I'll get to meet the Silent Witch! Lady Everett herself!*

\* \* \*

After their shopping trip to Craeme, Monica returned to the academy with Isabelle. She walked through the girls' dorm, clutching the lavender soap to her chest as she headed for her attic room.

She was going to give the two bars of soap to her foster mother and their housemaid as thank-you gifts for taking care of her. She hadn't been to visit them since she became a Sage, but she was hoping to stop by if she could find the time that year.

*Miss Hilda lives in the capital, so if I have time before the new year, I can probably pay her a visit...*

As a Sage, Monica was required to attend the weeklong New Year's celebration at the castle. The previous year, she'd been so absorbed in developing a new magecraft formula, she'd completely forgotten about it.

In the end, Louis had used flight magic to race to her cabin in the mountains shortly before the new year. He'd then rolled her up in a big mat and had taken her to the castle by force. Just the memory of it sent chills down her spine.

*That was really scary...*

As she reflected on this, she climbed the ladder to her attic room and pushed up the door.

"Oof. Nero, I'm back."

"Welcome home."

But the one greeting her as she crawled up through the doorway wasn't Nero—and it wasn't Ryn, either.

Instead, it was a monocled man sitting on the window frame with his legs neatly crossed and his long, chestnut-colored hair done up in a braid. This was Louis Miller, the Barrier Mage and another of the Seven Sages.

Louis was the one responsible for the defensive barrier surrounding Serendia Academy, which meant he could enter the school even without permission, at least temporarily. There was a significant risk that someone would spot him, however. Louis was normally a very careful man, so the fact that he'd braved that risk to come here in person was a very bad sign indeed.

Monica blanched and trembled. "U-ummm, today...wasn't the New Year's ceremony, was it?"

Normally, the man sitting on the windowsill would have said something like, "Are you sleeping with your eyes open, my fellow Sage?" but this time, he spoke in a grave tone and got directly to the point.

"Things have taken a very bad turn," he said.

Louis was the kind of man who, even when things went south, tended to smile like he had everything under control, or else desperately laugh it off. His solemn expression meant things weren't just bad, they were *terrible*.

Pushing up his monocle with one finger, he explained. “Lady Monica Everett. You have been summoned in your role as the Silent Witch to protect our kingdom’s second prince, Felix Arc Ridill.”

“...Ummm, isn’t that, well, what I’m doing right now?”

She was, at that very moment in fact, on a mission to guard the prince while concealing her identity. Monica had been prepared for the worst, so this revelation left her feeling oddly disappointed.

But Louis, his expression still grave, shook his head. “I’m not talking about your secret mission. This is an *official* assignment.”

“...Huh?”

“In the coming days, a group of envoys from the Kingdom of Farfolia will be visiting the Duchy of Rehnberg. Diplomatic negotiations are set to take place there, and it’s been decided that the second prince will participate.”

Felix was often present at diplomatic talks with neighboring nations. He’d been participating in such events ever since his early teens, and he’d secured several very important deals.

“Since the duchy is in the southeast...there is a danger it will be subject to dragonraids.”

Quickly understanding the situation, Monica felt her face tense. “You mean I’m to p-protect him...at the talks?” she asked.

“That’s right. And since this is an official mission, you must show yourself before the prince and act as the Silent Witch would.”

Monica was speechless.

Louis heaved a sigh. “And even worse...”

“I-it gets worse?!”

“It does indeed. My idiot pupil will be joining you to protect him.”

Louis’s pupil was one of the people she’d just been out shopping with in Craeme—Glenn Dudley. And he had no idea she was a Sage.

“B-but why...? How did this...?”

“Originally, this job was supposed to fall to you and *me*. But those geezers in the central regions are wetting their pants over this dragonraid business and are demanding that the Barrier Mage remain in the royal capital.”

Louis was second to none in Ridill when it came to defensive barriers. While Monica could cast them faster than he could, he was far superior in all other aspects, such as strength, scope, and duration. Some even called him Ridill’s guardian deity.

“Allow me to repeat for you what those rotten ministers said to me. ‘Oh, come to think of it, you have a very talented pupil, don’t you, my lord? You can simply send him on the mission instead. That solves everything. Ha-ha-ha.’ Their suggestion went uncontested, and now, as they say, here we are.”

Apparently, some of the kingdom’s most prominent figures had witnessed Glenn’s efforts during the festival play. After seeing him in action, they’d decided he was very talented and more than capable of protecting the prince.

Louis had objected, of course, but due to the dragonraids, Ridill simply didn’t have enough people to go around. Louis had suggested that in that case, they might as well send the Silent Witch alone, but he hadn’t been able to convince those in charge.

Anger seeped into the edges of his words, and his face twisted into a wicked expression. But Monica didn’t have any time to be afraid of him.

*I have to openly guard the prince as the Silent Witch? And with Glenn around? While concealing my identity?*

It was reckless, no matter how she thought about it. She could pull her hood low over her face, but her voice would give her away the moment she opened her mouth.

“U-ummm, I, uh, if I talk, they’ll know it’s me...”

“That’s why I’m thinking of having an attendant go with you to speak on your behalf. Someone who knows you, knows your identity, and doesn’t let secrets slip. Can you think of anyone like that?”

Sadly, the Silent Witch didn’t have any such acquaintances. As for people who knew her identity, she could only think of Bernie Jones. But as the son of a



count, he was very busy. She couldn't possibly ask this of him.

*That leaves...Nero, I guess? He's the only one. He could transform into a human and serve as my attendant...*

But could Nero even manage something like that? He wouldn't simply be attending to her, he'd have to speak on her behalf, too. The idea left her uneasy.

As she gripped her aching stomach, Louis rubbed his throbbing temples. It seemed this was stressing out both of them.

"At any rate, nothing can be changed now," he said. "Please pick someone quickly."

"R-right..."

"I'll be very clear with my idiot apprentice not to talk to the Silent Witch more than necessary and to bother her as little as possible."

"Um, thank you..."

Glenn was very friendly, no matter who he was with, and that was bound to cause problems. She could easily imagine him sticking his face in hers, saying something like, "Hey, Miss Silent Witch, why the hood? Why so quiet?"

"You'll also need your official robe and staff," Louis continued. "They're both at your cabin, right?"

Each of the Seven Sages was given a special robe and a staff. But Monica hadn't been able to bring them to Serendia Academy, as she was meant to keep her identity a secret. For that reason, she'd left both behind.

"We're short on time, so I'll have Ryn fetch them. Your robe's in your wardrobe, right?"

"Um, yes..."

Monica didn't have many clothes, so her wardrobe was pretty empty. It probably wouldn't be hard to find her robe. The bigger problem was the staff.

"And where is your staff?" asked Louis. "Let me guess—buried under some paperwork?"

“N-no... My staff, it’s... I don’t use it much, so, well...”

A mage’s staff was a magical item capable of stabilizing mana and temporarily amplifying it. While it was a good tool to have, most who rose to the position of Sage no longer needed such support. Plus, in Ridill, the length of one’s staff denoted status. As a result, those belonging to Sages, who stood at the pinnacle of magecraft, were needlessly long.

Not only was Monica’s longer than she was tall, but it was also covered in decorative baubles. It took up a lot of space and only got in the way inside her cabin.

“Ummm, well, the staff is... It’s in the yard...”

“The yard?” Louis raised an eyebrow.

Monica began fiddling with her fingers and said quietly, “I’m using it as, um, a drying pole...”

Louis Miller was left speechless, his beautiful face twisting up as it never had before.

\* \* \*

A young maid rushed down the hallway of the Serendia Academy girls’ dorm.

Her name was Dory, and she served the daughter of Marquess Shaleberry, Bridget Greyham. She was terribly impatient, and whenever she had something to say to her young lady, she was overcome with the urge to run. But reminding herself she was currently at Serendia Academy, she kept her pace at a brisk, elegant walk.

*If I embarrass myself, it will bring shame to Lady Bridget... I must be careful!*

She stopped in front of the door to Bridget’s room and quickly took a deep breath. She wanted to keep her composure and impress the young lady she respected.

She knocked and announced her presence, careful not to let her low-class accent slip out. “Please excuse me, my lady.”

“You may enter.”

She softly opened the door and went inside.

Bridget was the only one there, sitting on her couch and reading a book on foreign languages. Since it was a holiday, she wore a dress with a subdued design instead of her uniform.

Her lustrous golden locks; her smooth, pale skin; her amber eyes framed by long lashes—Dory knew of nobody else as beautiful as Bridget. For someone like Dory, with frizzy black hair and freckles, Bridget was an idol.

*She's gorgeous, no matter how many times I see her... Grandpa used to say a beauty becomes a bore in three days, but I never tire of looking at Bridget.*

As Dory stood there, captivated, Bridget marked the page in her book and turned to stare at her maid. She was waiting for Dory to tell her why she'd come.

Hastily, Dory took a note out of her pocket. With the calm demeanor of a proper servant, she handed it to Bridget.

“A report from the detective you hired, my lady. Apparently, the target—Monica Norton—went to the winter market in Craeme...”

The note contained a record of Monica Norton's actions at the winter market. She had gone with the Count of Kerbeck's daughter to carry her things, but the noble girl had erupted in anger partway through the trip and ordered Monica to go shop on her own. After that, she'd encountered two male students from Serendia Academy and spent some time with them. Later, she met back up with the count's daughter and returned to the girls' dorm—nothing suspicious, in the detective's view.

Lately, the young lady Dory served had been investigating this Monica Norton girl. She seemed harmless and plain, but Dory had witnessed her using flight magecraft, which meant she was a mage.

*I'm sure there is a very deep, elaborate reason why Lady Bridget is investigating her.*

Dory had a hypothesis.

She believed that Isabelle Norton, daughter of Count Kerbeck, was in love with Prince Felix and, in order to eliminate her rivals, had hired Monica, a mage down on her luck.

The destitute mage must have falsified her identity and infiltrated the academy in order to help set up Prince Felix and Isabelle, and since Bridget was in their way, they were plotting to eliminate her.

*I'm sure Lady Bridget will uncover the evil mage's identity! My, she's so gallant!*

Dori's delusions went even further—she imagined that Bridget would unveil the evil mage, and then Felix would propose to her.

*I was almost deceived by an evil mage, the prince would say. Thank you, Bridget. Will you be my wife?*

*Yes, Prince, she would reply. I would be happy to.*

And so Felix would become king with Bridget as his queen, and they'd live happily ever after.

While Dory was busy dreaming up ever more fantastical scenarios, Bridget finished reading the note and handed it back to her.

"Destroy this," she said. "Make sure nobody can use it as evidence."

"Of course, my lady."

"And have the detective watch Monica Norton during winter break as well... It's very likely she'll show her true colors once she's outside the academy."

Then Bridget went back to reading her book, as if nothing had happened.

Dory, who had been basking in her fantasies, immediately reverted to being a capable maid. "Understood, my lady. I will inform him. Regarding other matters... The tailor responsible for the aqua-blue dress you ordered the other day would like to adorn the chest with a flower decoration, with your permission."

Dory had seen the dress's design. It was wonderful, well-suited for the classy, mature Bridget. But the chest area did seem a bit plain. With a flower there, her young lady would be even more beautiful.

But Bridget shook her head slightly. "If he wants to add something, have him choose a different decoration."

“Yes, my lady. I’ll tell him.”

Just then, something dawned on Dory. It seemed to her that Bridget had very few accessories or hair ornaments with flower motifs.

*I wonder if she doesn’t like flowers? Maybe she enjoys them in vases, but not on her clothes?*

Dory continued privately wondering as she left Bridget’s room behind.

Now alone, Bridget lowered her gaze to the chest area of her dress. Now that she thought of it, another servant had recommended the same thing this morning—that a flower corsage would look very good on her.

They were probably right; a floral decoration would match her outfit well. And yet she had no intention of adding one.

*There is only one person in the world who can give me the flower I desire,* she thought to herself, her long eyelashes coming down to meet her cheeks.

Winter break was about to begin—thick with schemes and secrets.





## CHAPTER 2

### The Great Witch Descendeth in Shining Wind

After the closing ceremony for Serendia Academy's first term, Eliane Hyatt, daughter of Duke Rehnberg, hastened back to her dorm room and began to get ready.

She would be taking a carriage home that same day.

Truthfully, she'd wanted to take her time setting off, but envoys from the Kingdom of Farfolia would be visiting the duchy in the coming days, and she needed to be there to welcome the visitor.

Normally, she would have been unhappy at this turn of events, but this time she was more excited than ever. Because today, Felix would be returning with her. Not only that—he would be staying with her family while he conducted diplomatic business with the representative from Farfolia.

"I'll bring the hat I bought the other day. As for my broach, get the pearl one Mother gave me."

Her elderly lady-in-waiting, used to such demands, nodded and got out the hat and broach her lady had requested.

After fixing her makeup and hair, Eliane stood in front of her full-length mirror and checked herself.

She had on a brand-new coat and broach, plus a hat in one of the latest designs. The girl looking back at her in the mirror was so adorable, everyone would want to praise her for her charms.

*I'm about to ride in the same carriage as Lord Felix, so my presentation must be perfect.*

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a favorable impression on him.

According to her father, Eliane's great uncle—Duke Clockford—had been the one to choose their estate as the setting for the talks with Farfolia. In other

words, he'd set the stage for her.

*Once we arrive at the duchy, she thought, I should bring Felix somewhere. The famous Rehnberg orchards would be nice, but I'd also like to show him the gardens at night.*

Her family's gardens contained special flowers called spiritrests, which absorbed mana. When night fell, they would bloom, releasing all the mana they had accumulated. And when they did, faint particles of light would rise from their petals, making for a fantastic sight. How wonderful it would be to watch it happen side by side with Felix.

*I must make full use of our time together...!*

In half a year, Eliane would graduate from Serendia Academy. It was her sincere wish to progress her relationship with Felix enough in that time that they could announce their engagement at her graduation party. For that reason, she couldn't afford to pass up this golden opportunity.

And if she really needed to, she could force his hand with a little "mistake."

*If, by some small error...yes, an innocent mistake...Felix were to accidentally wander into my bedchamber... Naturally, I would never do something as lowly as attempt to seduce him! But if seeing me in my nightclothes were to, say, stir something in him, and then we stayed together until morning... All I'm saying is that it could happen. I wouldn't be the one to tempt him, of course. I must only get him in the proper mood for it... And I can have my lady-in-waiting help me...*

As Eliane's mind wandered through various schemes, her lady-in-waiting called out, "It's almost time, my lady."

"Then let's be off," she replied with a smile, and the two of them left the dormitory.

Several carriages were lined up in front of Serendia Academy to ferry various students home. Among them, one stood out—it had cutting-edge wheels that dampened vibrations. That one belonged to House Hyatt.

She and Felix would be meeting by it.

Anyone who saw them get into the same carriage together would start talking

about it, and rumors would fly. *So the second prince has chosen Eliane to be his betrothed after all, they'd say. That must be why he's spending his winter break at her family's estate.*

*Hee-hee... Oh, how good it will feel!* she thought. Suppressing the urge to start skipping, she strode forward, just as a carefully raised noble girl ought to.

And there, waiting for her before the carriage, was a beautiful prince born to be the center of attention... For some reason, however, he wasn't alone.

"Oh! It's the short girl who played Amelia!" said the interloper. His words were rude and awfully loud.

"That's Miss Eliane Hyatt, Dudley."

Yes, the rude boy was none other than Glenn Dudley, who had performed alongside her during the academy festival's play.

Felix, who stood beside him, gently reminded him of her name, and Glenn's face lit up in understanding. "Oh, right," he said. "Eliane, Eliane... So what's Eliane doing here?"

That should have been *her* question, not his. Why was Glenn, a *commoner*, speaking with Felix in front of House Hyatt's carriage? And what's more, he was wearing a sharp dark-green uniform. *Why, that's the uniform of the Magic Corps, is it not?* All manner of questions formed in her mind.

Felix smiled sweetly and spoke again. "Dudley, she's the daughter of Duke Rehnberg."

"Oh, really? I had no idea."

Eliane was indeed the duke's daughter, but she was also Felix's second cousin. Despite the loose family connection, she was of noble lineage, and royal blood ran in her veins. To have that fact so casually brushed aside made her nerves start to fray.

"I have a hard time with aristocratic names," Glenn went on. "Wouldn't it make more sense if her name was Eliane Rehnberg Hyatt or something?"

"Most noble titles are derived from the land the bearer presides over."

"Oh! Is that right?"

“It is.”

“Gotcha. By the way, what does *derived* mean?”

If Eliane had to listen to any more of this, she'd go crazy. Before her face could stiffen, she hurriedly plastered on a charming smile.

“Good day to you, Lord Felix...and to you, Lord Dudley.”

“I'm not great with all that formal stuff, so you can just call me Glenn! Since we'll be traveling together for a while, I'd rather we get off to a friendly start.”

“...I'm sorry?”

*Traveling together? What does he mean by that?*

Felix smiled and explained. “As a pupil of one of the Seven Sages, Dudley here has been assigned to me for my protection during my stay.”

*What?*

Eliane was speechless.

Glenn continued, his smile as blinding as the sun. “Yep, that's the gist of it! Here's to a good journey!”

The students around them were certainly paying attention to their group. But this was not the kind of attention Eliane wanted. Their stares were not envious but curious.

Behind her perfect smile, Eliane was ready to scream in frustration.

\* \* \*

In a carriage where the occupants sat across from one another, Eliane's spot would naturally be next to Felix. It was obvious. So why was Glenn sitting next to him, and Eliane on the other side?

“Lord Felix, are you sure you are quite comfortable in that seat?” asked Eliane casually, as though she were merely being considerate.

Felix responded with a beautiful smile. “Of course. And Dudley is my bodyguard, after all.”

There was nothing she could say to such a sound argument.



*Darn it!* she thought. *I was looking forward to accidentally falling into his chest when the carriage bumped! And pretending to doze off and lean against his shoulder!* Internally, she was gnashing her teeth.

At this point, Glenn seemed to come to a sudden realization and jerked his head up to look at her.

*Finally figured out what I'm thinking, has he?* she thought. *Yes, that's right. Now exercise some tact.*

"There's no need to worry, Eliane! I can protect you *and* the prez. I've got you covered!"

*That's not what I meant!*

Barely swallowing her next words—"nobody wants your protection anyway"—she offered him a charming smile instead. "Why, Lord Glenn, you're so reliable... Why are you wearing that uniform today, if I might ask?"

Glenn was dressed in the colors of the Magic Corps, but as far as Eliane was aware, he wasn't a member of that group. The Corps was a powerful combat force composed of elite mages. From what she'd heard, most of them were high mages.

"My master used his connections to get me into some Magic Corps training," said Glenn. "And they lent me a uniform."

"Oh, I see."

In other words, he was wearing a borrowed uniform because he didn't have any other decent clothes. The outfit stood out less than the academy's uniform, and it did make him seem more like a bodyguard. Elaine nodded to herself.

"Hey, just wondering," said Glenn, still beaming merrily. "*Eliane* is pretty hard to say, so do you mind if I just call you Elly?"

*Of course I mind!*

She was about to say as much, when something occurred to her.

If she allowed Glenn to call her by a nickname, then turned to Felix and asked him to do the same—well, that would be a very natural way to get him to call her Elly, wouldn't it?

She directed a vague smile—one that wasn't quite a yes or a no—to Glenn, then shifted her gaze over to Felix. “If you don't mind, Lord Felix, you may also —”

But before she could finish her sentence, Felix's head suddenly drooped. His long blond eyelashes had fallen; he looked somehow drowsy. Apparently, he hadn't even been listening to her. Instead, he'd been letting the carriage rock him to sleep.

“...Ummm, excuse me, Lord Felix?”

“What? Oh, my apologies. I'm a little short on sleep... I've been so excited to go to Rehnberg that I didn't get much rest last night.”

Eliane's mood, which had been spiraling, shot back up at the prince's words.

*I had no idea Lord Felix was so looking forward to coming to my home!*

That sounded very promising indeed!

Savoring the joy rising within her, she modulated her tone to be thoughtful and considerate. “Oh, Lord Felix... Please don't force yourself. You may feel free to take a short rest.”

“Thanks. I think I'll take you up on that.”

Felix put his arm up on the seat's elbow rest, lowered his head onto it, and closed his eyes.

*Ah, even asleep, he's so handsome,* thought Eliane. As she stared at him, entranced, Glenn began poking her knee.

“...Do you need something, Lord Glenn?”

“Just staring at the scenery's pretty boring. Want to play a game? I brought a bunch from home just for today.”

“Well, Lord Felix is currently sleeping, so perhaps we shouldn't be too loud...”

“We'll be quiet, then. It'll be fine. Now, look at this coin!”

Glenn took a coin out of his pocket, tossed it into the air, and caught it with his right hand. Then he held both hands out to her. “Which hand has the coin?”

“...Your right, of course.”

Glenn grinned and opened both hands. The coin was in his left hand. Eliane's eyes went wide.

"Wait! What? How? You caught it in your right hand. I saw it just now."

"Let's do it again!"

Once more, Glenn tossed the coin and caught it with his right hand. Eliane watched it without blinking. The coin *had* to be in his right hand.

"It's in your right hand for sure this time," she said.

"Sorry, wrong again!"

"What?!"

Without meaning to, Eliane leaned forward and stared at the coin.

Simple parlor tricks like these commonly featured in street performances. But for a sheltered noble girl like Eliane, they were a fresh curiosity.

"That isn't fair. It isn't. You must... You must have used magecraft, right?"

"I didn't chant a word!"

He was right—he hadn't. Eliane pursed her lips in thought as she stared at his hands.

"One more time," she said. "Please do it once more."

"All right, but this time I'm going to make it a little harder!"

"But I haven't figured out the easy one yet!"

Felix, dozing with his cheek on his hand, opened one eye slightly and watched Glenn and Eliane. He grinned, then closed his eye again.

Listening to the two of them was quite entertaining, but for now, he wanted to get a little shut-eye. He'd sacrificed a lot of sleep the previous night to finish his thesis.

*Ah, when I meet Lady Everett, what should we talk about first...?*

Like a boy about to meet his first love, his heart soared in anticipation as he happily drifted off to sleep.

"That isn't fair. It isn't fair at all. You must have played a trick with the

cards...”

“No tricks here! You’re just really bad at strategy, Elly.”

“I... I’m sure that with more experience, I’d be able to strategize with the best of them...”

“And there we go. I won.”

“Ugh! No!”

Glenn and Eliane seemed to be neck-deep in a card game now. He was glad to see them having fun.

*It was a stroke of good luck Dudley came along, he thought. This winter break was shaping up to be much more enjoyable than he’d imagined.*

\* \* \*

The Duchy of Rehnberg was located in the southeast of the Kingdom of Ridill in a warm, fertile land of abundant forests and orchards. The duke’s estate was on a hill between one of each—a gorgeous building with white walls.

In the stable behind the estate, a man swung a hammer as he fixed a door that had fallen into disrepair. He wore a well-tailored worker’s uniform provided by the estate. Because of how warm it was that day, he’d removed the coat and rolled up his sleeves. A tool pouch hung from his belt.

Once he’d finished with his work, he opened and closed the wooden door several times. It had been creaking something awful lately, but now it moved without a sound. As a finishing touch, he hung a winter solstice wreath on it and laughed in satisfaction.

“Wah-hah! That should do it.”

The man’s name was Bartholomeus Baal. He was a former engineer who had forsaken his homeland and spent his time eking out a meager existence doing odd jobs. Once he’d returned his tools to the pouch on his belt, a young maid watching nearby bowed gratefully.

“I apologize,” she said. “Leston the butler told me to have it fixed earlier, but I completely forgot...”

“Hey, no worries. Anything else troubling you, you come to me.”

Bartholomeus winked at her.

The maid bowed several more times, then left.

Bartholomeus had recently been hired as a laborer at the duke's estate. He served as a handyman and was frequently asked to fix things around the property and help with small-scale repairs.

In short, he basically did miscellaneous chores; when he'd been living hand to mouth prior to landing this position, he'd been doing much the same thing. And now he could earn a stable income for it—he couldn't ask for a better arrangement.

Bartholomeus was just leaving the stable, humming a tune to himself, when he saw a man appear from behind a tree. The rather skinny, bearded fellow ran a hand through his ashen hair—he was a servant named Peter Summs.

Peter narrowed his eyes in a gentle smile and looked at the stable door Bartholomeus had just fixed.

“Handy as ever, Bartholomeus.”

“Heh. Well, it's about all I'm good for.” Bartholomeus flashed an insincere smile and tried to leave.

He didn't particularly like this servant. Peter seemed like a kind, laid-back old man, a little over sixty. But he was always dishing out bitter criticism, and all without letting his kind mask slip. This time was no different.

“It's fine and good to show off in front of the maids,” said Peter, “but that one is in love with a young groom.”

Apparently, Peter had mistakenly assumed Bartholomeus was in love with the young maid from earlier.

*He must just love spreading rumors...*

Out of the servants currently at the estate, Peter was a relatively new addition. But he loved gossip and knew a lot about all the other employees' relationships.





JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES  
Bartholomeus

Bartholomeus flashed the man a light-hearted grin so that he wouldn't misunderstand, then brushed back his black hair. "That's what we call a groundless suspicion, Peter. I already have my heart set on a *goddess*."

He pictured the divine creature who had stolen his heart. Her beautiful, doll-like features and smooth blond hair. Her maid outfit suited her supple body well, and her breasts were large enough to be noticed even under her apron. Her arms and legs were long and slender, and yet she had held on to him so firmly.

He was thinking of the beautiful maid who had saved him on the night of the festival in Corlapton. And he knew exactly who she was, too. That woman, who had controlled the wind so freely without even having to chant, was none other than Monica Everett, the Silent Witch.

He wanted nothing more than to see her again, which was why he'd decided to stay in Ridill and save up his money.

To be honest, he'd been quite flush after receiving a request to make some Serendia Academy uniforms a short while back. But in an attempt to increase his funds ever further, he'd started gambling...leading to his current, all too predictable situation.

*But my luck's finally turned around. I've found an employer who pays me well...and soon I'll even get to meet the Silent Witch!*

Starting that day, the second prince would be staying at the estate, and Bartholomeus had heard the Silent Witch herself would be with him as a bodyguard.

He figured it must have been karma for all the good deeds he'd done. He was nodding to himself as the middle-aged butler hastened over to him. The man, named Leston, had thin blond hair with a sprinkle of white in it. He had been riding in the carriage with the duke on his way back from Serendia Academy's festival when they'd picked up Bartholomeus. He was the duke's most trusted employee.

When they'd met Bartholomeus during their journey, he had been the most reluctant to allow him to repair their carriage. But at the same time, he had

thanked him the most politely once it was fixed.

Leston was famously strict with his subordinates, and he glared sharply at Bartholomeus and Peter. “Enough slacking. Lady Eliane has returned. You are both to get back to your posts.”

*...Oh?*

Bartholomeus pasted on a smile and narrowed his eyes.

Eliane was supposed to return alongside the second prince, Felix. But Leston had only announced the young lady’s arrival. In other words, for Leston, a long-time employee of the Hyatts, the first priority was Eliane, whom he had watched over since she was a child.

*If anything were to happen to that pampered young lady, we’d all be in a mess of trouble.* He silently resolved himself never to make any silly mistakes around her.

The high-strung butler then gave Bartholomeus another order. “The Silent Witch will be here soon, so please do one more check of the drawing room—”

“On it, sir! I’d be delighted to!” exclaimed Bartholomeus, leaning forward a little. “I’ll check it real good, I promise!”

Leston looked a little overwhelmed. He quietly cleared his throat and nodded. “I’m pleased you’re so enthusiastic. Do be courteous around the young lady’s party.”

Precisely because Leston was so strict and serious, he was the sort to praise a good work ethic. As Leston’s gaze softened, however, Peter’s grew increasingly unpleasant.

Seeming kind and *being* kind were two completely different things. Peter might wear a gentle smile, but it only served to mask his envy whenever someone else received a compliment. He probably knew so much gossip precisely because of how much attention he paid to such things.

Hoping to avoid any more involvement with this troublesome older servant, Bartholomeus quickly fled the scene. Right now, he needed to focus on how to get close to the Silent Witch.

Felix arrived at Duke Rehnberg's estate in the afternoon three days after leaving Serendia Academy. Thanks to Glenn, the journey had been quite entertaining. After all, the other boy had Eliane—who was always begging for the prince's attention—twisted around his finger the whole time. Thanks to him, Felix had enjoyed himself quite a bit.

"Phew, we're finally here," said Glenn. "I'm so glad I brought all those games to pass the time! Are you still sulking, Elly?"

"I am most certainly *not* frustrated that I lost... This is simply one aspect of my studies—learning about the culture of petty townspeople. I am not upset in the slightest..."

Felix wasn't sure whether Glenn was entertaining Eliane or the other way around, but he was glad they were getting along.

As they arrived at the estate and disembarked from the carriage, a group of servants greeted them. Two stepped forward—a middle-aged butler with perfectly combed blond hair, and a gray-headed elderly servant.

"We are delighted to have you, Your Royal Highness. And welcome home, Lady Eliane."

"We'll take your things, Your Highness."

As Felix casually looked over the two servants, he couldn't help feeling he'd seen the gray-haired man somewhere before.

"I remember your face," he said. "Were you previously at my grandfather's estate?"

The elderly servant's eyes widened in surprise. Panic flashed across his face for moment, but he quickly calmed himself and gave a servant's formal bow. "I am honored you remember me, sir. Indeed I was. My name is Peter Summs, and it is true that I was once employed at Duke Clockford's estate."

The dukes of Clockford and Rehnberg were quite close, and it was not uncommon for servants to pass from one house to the other.

But Felix was awfully curious about that brief look of panic. Had the man made some sort of mistake while working for Duke Clockford and been sent

away? Or was he an informant passing information between the two dukes?

Either way, he figured it wasn't worth pointing out right now, so he kept his reply short and to the point. "Thank you for having me... May I ask if the Silent Witch has arrived yet?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid... Oh!"

Peter looked up, seeming to notice something in the sky. Felix, Eliane, and Glenn all followed suit.

Two dark figures had appeared against the ashen, overcast skies: a petite woman and a tall man, both astride a staff.

The figures traced a large circle in the air, climbing higher and higher—until a shining gate appeared above them.

Glenn's eyes widened in shock. "What?!" he exclaimed. "Wait, it can't be..."

Felix continued for him and spoke the name of the miracle they were all witnessing.

"...A spirit king summoning."

The shining gate opened, and wind blew out from within it, carrying particles of light. This was only a portion of the power belonging to Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits.

The witch who had brought about the miracle then slowly floated down to the ground, landing along with a black-haired man who appeared to be her servant.

She wore a gorgeous robe with gold embroidery and held a staff taller than she was—a length only the Seven Sages were permitted to use. Her hood was pulled low over her face, and she wore a veil over her mouth, making it impossible to see her expression.

Felix put a hand to his heart, trying to calm himself down, and desperately held back the urge to sigh in admiration.

She had appeared wrapped in shining wind, as beautiful as an emissary of the spirit king himself. And now here she was, the kingdom's hero, and the woman he never stopped pining for.



One of the seven most talented mages in Ridill—a Sage called the Silent Witch.

\* \* \*

In order to protect the second prince in her official capacity as the Silent Witch, Monica had to engage in several acts of subterfuge before arriving at Duke Rehnberg's estate.

First, when leaving Serendia Academy, she'd gotten onto Isabelle's carriage as though she were going home with her. Then, at an inn on the way to County Kerbeck, she'd swapped places with a body double Isabelle had arranged for.

Perhaps they hadn't needed to go so far, but Isabelle had insisted they should be thorough, so Monica had gone along with her plans.

After parting ways with Isabelle, Monica and Nero—whom she'd hidden in her luggage—had set off for the Duchy of Rehnberg.

But since she'd already traveled partway to Kerbeck, she'd never catch up with Felix using normal modes of transportation. Ryn, Louis's contracted spirit, could have gotten Monica there with wind magic, but she was required to stay with the Barrier Mage and help defend the capital.

So instead, Monica had decided to use flight magecraft.

Her skills were rough around the edges, and her takeoffs and landings were still unpredictable. But if she was just flying in a straight line, she could keep it up for a while.

"Wow, you've really improved," said Nero, sitting on her shoulder in cat form. He rumbled his throat good-humoredly.

Monica kept her eyes forward and nodded. "I realized something. The faster you fly, the easier it is to keep your balance."

Back when she was just starting, she would keep her balance by moving her body up and down. But that was no longer necessary, so long as she was flying in a straight line. Her balance wasn't perfect, but when she remembered how she used to cling to her broom and scream for dear life, it was obvious how much she'd grown.

Since flight magecraft consumed a lot of mana, Monica had made her way to

the duke's estate little by little, fitting in lots of breaks. Eventually, once she'd reached a forested area, she'd spotted the grand mansion atop a small hill set among the trees and orchards.

She'd consulted a map beforehand and was sure she'd arrived at the correct spot.

Monica gave herself a quick once-over. She'd changed into her Sage robe and hidden her mouth behind a veil, just in case. Her hood was low over her face, too. As long as she didn't accidentally say anything, nobody would ever know who she was.

Then Nero, still on her shoulder, seemed to remember something. "Come to think of it, I'm gonna be your attendant for this whole shebang, right?"

"Um, yes."

Monica wouldn't be able to speak during the mission, so Nero was supposed to transform into a human and act as her attendant. If anyone spoke to her, she'd have Nero respond in her stead. What's more, Nero's human form was that of a tall young man, so he'd be easy to hide behind.

"That means I should change into human form before we get there, right?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

But before she could say "I'll take us down for a moment," she felt the back of her staff suddenly get heavier.

"Huh?"

An arm wrapped around her shoulders from behind—and it didn't belong to a cat. That was a man's hand.

"Okay, we're all good."

In a flash, Nero had transformed into a young man and was now sitting on the staff behind Monica.

Instantly, she paled. "W-w-wait... I'm... I'm not ready to do this with a passenger...!"

Her body tilted to one side, and her staff started wobbling violently up and

down. She wasn't experienced enough to compensate for a passenger, especially an adult male.

"N-N-N-N-N-N-Neroooo, go back! Go back to being a cat!"

"Now?! If I have to hold on to you with my *paw*, I'll be flung right off this stick!"

"Hyaaaaaahhhhhh!"

The staff, now under their combined weight, had started making circles in the sky.

If Monica didn't do something, she was going to fall. If she wanted to stay in the sky, she figured she ought to start climbing. And so she set her sights higher and higher.

"What the heck are you doing?!" Nero shouted.

"Eeeeeee! Augh! Waaaahhhh!"

Forgetting how to land, Monica began to panic. Her first priority was getting safely to the ground. What would she need to achieve that? She thought, and soon she arrived at an answer: carefully controlled wind magecraft. And of all the spells she knew, the one that could control wind the most effectively was...

"In the name of Monica Everett, the Silent Witch and one of the Seven Sages, I command this gate to open!"

...the one to summon the King of the Wind Spirits.

If she'd been able to keep calm, she might've come up with any number of simpler strategies. But she was far too flustered for that. And so she cast the most advanced spell in her repertoire.

"Come forth from the edge of stillness... Sheffield...King of the Wind Spirits—Whoaaa!"

She was still too new to flight magecraft to stay properly airborne while casting such a monster spell. So she disengaged her flight and let the shining wind envelop her and Nero and gently set them on the ground.

And that was how Monica Everett, the Silent Witch, wasted an immense

amount of mana and skill, simply to touch down in front of Duke Rehnberg's estate.





Later, those who witnessed it would say that the Silent Witch had descended from the skies wrapped in the shining wind of the spirit king himself.

\* \* \*

A small crowd had formed in front of the duke's estate. The servants who had come to welcome Felix and Eliane were soon joined by others from inside, there to take in the spirit king summoning—a very rare and grand kind of magecraft.

At the front of the crowd was the one Monica had been tasked to protect: Felix Arc Ridill, the second prince.

Disengaging her summoning spell and causing the gate to disappear, Monica hastily steadied the hem of her hood. If anyone saw her face, it would affect her other, top secret mission.

In all honesty, she felt like she'd already exhausted her energy reserves with that little airborne display, but it was only now that her real job would begin. From this point on, she had to protect Felix without him realizing that she and Monica Norton were the same person.

Just as she was about to have Nero greet the prince, she saw Felix staring at him, his eyes wide.

"Why, you're...!" he said, clearly shocked. Eliane and Glenn looked at him in confusion.

Monica did as well. What was he so surprised about?

Then Nero grinned. "Oh yeah, I've met you once before, Prince."

*...What?*

Felix's surprise lasted only a few moments. Very quickly, he resumed his elegant, princely demeanor and smiled at Nero. "Good to see you again, Sir Bartholomew Alexander."

"Indeed, it is I, Bartholomew Alexander, attendant to the Silent Witch."

Monica thought her heart would leap out of her throat. *Wait! Stop! Give me a moment! What?!*

She tugged on the sleeve of Nero's robe, and he looked down at her, still



grinning. “What’s up, Master?”

She then dragged him over behind the mansion’s gate and quietly asked, “Wh-why do you know the prince?!”

“Huh? Didn’t I tell you? It was back when you first started your mission at the school—remember when that chilly guy lost control in the forest and collapsed?”

By “chilly guy,” Nero meant Cyril Ashley, who used ice magecraft. He must have been referring to the time when Cyril contracted mana poisoning. But that had been right after Monica became a student council member—three whole months had passed since then.

How could something like this have happened so long ago? Monica was at a loss.

Nero, however, seemed completely unbothered. “When I was carrying the chilly guy back to his dorm, I ran into the prince.”

“Y-you never told me that!”

She remembered Nero bringing the unconscious Cyril back to the boys’ dorm that night. But to think he’d encountered Felix on the way!

*All he said was that he’d returned Cyril to his dorm!*

If she’d known that Nero had met Felix in human form, she’d never have made him her attendant like this.

“And what’s with the name Bartholomew Alexander?!” she asked. “Didn’t we agree on a completely different alias?!”

Bartholomew Alexander was the name of the main character in a famous series of adventure novels. Anyone who heard it would know it was fake and start getting suspicious.

But Nero didn’t see the problem. “Oh, hmm... I forgot about that. I mean, I just can’t remember the names of people I don’t care about, y’know?”

“You can’t even remember your own alias?!”

“What’s wrong with Bartholomew Alexander? I’ll never forget that!”

Monica buried her face in her hands and fell to her knees.

But Nero continued, unfazed. “It’s no big deal, right? Since you started your mission, almost no one has seen me in human form.”

He was right about that. Aside from her collaborators, the only ones who had seen Monica with Nero while he was in human form were Casey, during her failed attempt to assassinate the prince with a Spiralflame, and Bernie, at the chess competition.

Here, at least, there was no one who could connect Nero in human form with Monica Norton.

“You didn’t mention my name when you met the prince three months ago, right?”

“What? Of course not. Gimme a little more credit—I’m *smart*.”

“I’ll need you to tell me everything you said to him, later... For now, just act like a serious, hardworking attendant, okay?”

Nero puffed out his chest and thumped it. “You can leave it to me!”

Well, now she was worried. Extremely worried. But she couldn’t afford to leave Felix and the others waiting in front of the estate, either.

Monica pulled her hood down over her eyes, then spurred her nervous, trembling legs to take her back to the others.

Once she was standing before Felix, she got down on one knee and placed her staff on the ground. With her right hand atop her staff and her left against her chest, she bowed. This gesture was the highest form of respect a mage could give, and Louis had pounded it into her when she’d first become a Sage.

But while Monica was doing her best to be polite, Nero remained standing self-importantly to her side.

*Nero?!*

She glanced up at him in a panic as he began addressing the prince. He was still standing.

“This is my master, the Silent Witch. Like her name says, she doesn’t talk. So if

you've got any questions, you can tell 'em to me."

Everyone present was baffled by her attendant's bold behavior.

"Your master is kneeling," Felix replied with a strained smile. "Are you sure you should be standing?"

"Why would I kneel in front of you?" asked Nero. "My master is the Silent Witch."

"My rank is higher than your master's. Royalty outranks a Sage, you know."

"I don't really care about royalty. I only kneel before people who are cooler than I am."

*Neeeeeroooo!*

Silently, Monica stood up and began punching Nero lightly on the back. *You can't! Be rude! To the prince!*

Seeming to get the message, Nero pursed his lips in dissatisfaction. Monica tried to physically push down his head, but she was too short to reach it.

As she tried, Felix giggled, seeming amused. Despite Nero's rudeness, the prince didn't seem angry or displeased in the slightest. This made him seem quite mature.

"I see," said the prince. "Then I shall strive to be someone you want to kneel before."

"That's the spirit! Do your best."

Using unchanted magecraft, Monica whipped up a wind above Nero's head. As it pressed down on him, he grunted and fell to the ground on all fours.

*Ahhh, I need to apologize to Felix quickly,* she thought. Nero's attitude was unheard-of. If they were accused of disrespecting royalty, she couldn't even complain.

But while Monica panicked, Felix gazed at her, utterly impressed.

"So that was unchanted magecraft...," he murmured. Then he directed an elegant bow at her. "I have seen you on numerous occasions at ceremonies, but this is the first time I've been able to greet you directly, Lady Everett."

*Oh, thank goodness! He's not mad! What a nice person!* thought Monica, secretly relieved.

Felix looked a little entranced as he offered her a beautiful smile. Softly, he added, "So it really was you who saved Cyril in the woods near the academy."

"...?!"

Monica desperately fought down the urge to cry out.

She *had* saved Cyril in the woods that day, but Felix wasn't supposed to know about it!

*Nooooo! It's because he ran into Nero, isn't it?! H-how should I react?!*

Felix took the flustered Monica's hand, then lowered his lips to touch it.

"It is an honor to finally meet you."

As he gazed at the Silent Witch, Felix's cheeks flushed red, and his blue eyes melted in ecstasy. He was like a young man in love.

Monica had seen him speaking passionately about the Silent Witch a few times before, but now that she was the target of that ardor, she could feel her stomach twisting into knots.

As Monica's cheeks twitched behind her veil, Eliane spoke up, sounding annoyed.

"Leston!" she said. "Please show our guests inside and prepare tea for them!"

"Yes, my lady."

The servants reacted quickly to the noble girl's command, and they prompted the group to enter the mansion.

Released from Felix's hold, Monica lifted a hand to her heart and tried to calm its incessant beating. She didn't know what to do. She was so nervous, she felt like she was going to throw up.

As she tried to muffle her rough breathing, Felix addressed her. "Let's be off, Lady Everett."

*My stomach... There's no way it's gonna last through all this...*

Clutching her staff to her chest and shrinking into herself, Monica followed the rest of the party inside.

“Hey! Don’t leave me behind! I’m too cool to be ignored!” complained Nero as he scrambled to his feet and chased after them.





## CHAPTER 3

### The Whereabouts of Secret Recipe Number Three

Once their things had been brought into the mansion and they'd all finished greeting Duke Rehnberg, the group was shown to a comfortable, spacious room. The idea seemed to be that they could relax and have a pleasant chat there.

Glenn Dudley, the son of a butcher, remained standing at the entrance, glancing around restlessly.

*This is some mansion...*, he thought.

The duke's estate was decidedly magnificent, both inside and out. The wallpaper and curtains were adorned with all kinds of patterns and decorations; just looking at it all hurt his eyes.

Taking a breather inside the room were Felix, the Silent Witch, and the latter's attendant, Bartholomew Alexander.

Speaking of the attendant, Glenn found him extremely suspicious. First of all, he acted considerably more important than his supposed master. His robe was also extremely old-fashioned, and his name was obviously fake. *The Adventures of Bartholomew Alexander* was such a famous novel series that even Glenn had heard of it. Using the main character's name as his own was very suspicious. *Too suspicious.*

Now the guy was leaning back on the couch, yawning without a care in the world. He kept acting like he was the most important person here. In contrast, his master was sitting still and quiet, bunched up to one side.

*I can't believe this little kid is the Silent Witch...* Glenn gulped, remembering the spirit king summoning he'd just witnessed. Back when his master had assigned him this mission, he'd told Glenn a horrifying tale about her.

\* \* \*

After Glenn returned from the winter market where he'd rung the Alteria chimes, his dorm's housemaster had summoned him and told him Louis was

there to see him.

He'd gone straight to the dorm's meeting room, where his master, the Barrier Mage, had charged him with this mission to protect the second prince.

After hearing the details, Glenn was full of vigor. To think, the very same day he'd rung the Alteria chimes and sworn to work hard at his magecraft training, he'd been assigned to guard a prince! It felt like destiny.

Even better, the prince he was to protect was already an acquaintance who treated him well. Not only did Felix overlook Glenn's outdoor grill sessions, but he had even provided storage space for the necessary cooking supplies.

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Glenn said. "I'll give it my all!"

"...I appreciate your enthusiasm," replied Louis, looking tired. He probably didn't agree with Glenn taking on this mission. "But keep in mind that your role is to provide support and nothing more. You must follow the Sage's instructions."

"Ummm, by 'the Sage'...you mean...the whatsit witch, right?"

Louis's cheek twitched in irritation. Behind his monocle, his purple-gray eye glinted. "Glenn... Please tell me you can name all seven of the Sages. You can, right?"

"Urk. Um, well, there's you, Master...and the Starseer Witch..." Glenn counted these off on his fingers, his gaze wandering—and then stopped. He'd only managed two.

Louis rubbed the spot between his brows and sighed. He looked crestfallen.

"How truly sad. I had thought a pupil of the Seven Sages would at least be able to recall their names. Very well, then. I will explain them so that you don't embarrass me in front of Duke Rehnberg. You've got plenty of room in that head of yours, so make sure to burn this into your memory."

"Yes, sir!" said Glenn, straightening up like a well-trained dog.

Louis held up one finger. "First is the one you already know—Mary Harvey, the Starseer Witch. She is the foremost prophet in the kingdom, and a master of astrology. Despite her appearance, she's the eldest of the Sages. She loves

beautiful young men, and if she manages to make eye contact with one, she'll try to take him home with her."

"I'm not very good-looking, so I guess I'm in the clear."

Louis held up a second finger. "Next is the Witch of Thorns, Raul Roseburg."

"Isn't her name kind of manly?"

"That's because he's a man. The title is hereditary."

In elite magecraft families, the current family head would assume their forebears' mage title. Raul Roseburg was the fifth Witch of Thorns.

"The fifth Witch of Thorns is a titan in terms of mana capacity. He has more than anyone else in Ridill. That said, he doesn't often use magecraft, preferring instead to leisurely research flora—a complete waste of his talents. Lock eyes with him and you'll end up with a basket of homegrown vegetables."

"He sounds kind of like an old woman who lives down the street."

Ignoring Glenn's amicable comment, Louis held up a third finger. "Third is Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman. He's a very shady character who, when he locks eyes with a young woman, will abruptly storm up to her and ask her if she loves him."

"I'm not a girl, so I shouldn't have to worry about that."

"Fourth is Bradford Firestone, the Artillery Mage. He's an old guy who likes saying *kaboom* a lot and jumps at any opportunity to fight. Lock eyes with him and he'll challenge you to a mage battle."

"...It sounds like you're already tired of this, Master," said Glenn, narrowing his eyes.

Louis nodded smoothly. "I'm glad you noticed. On to number five: Emanuel Darwin, the Gem Mage. He's a master of imbuecraft and creating magical items. He's your classic petty villain, skilled at brownnosing greedy nobles."

Louis's tone was filled with malice, but as far as Glenn was concerned, number five seemed like the most normal person his master had described so far.

Louis scowled and continued. “He’s also one of the second prince’s supporters, is attached at the hip to Duke Clockford, and views me as an enemy. Lock eyes with him and he’s sure to pick a fight with you, since you’re my pupil.”

The Gem Mage was the most politically involved of the Seven Sages, and he was the mortal enemy of Louis, a supporter of the first prince.

Glenn didn’t understand politics very well, but even he had managed to put together that this second prince was Serendia’s student council president.

*Wait, if my master supports the first prince, does that make the prez my enemy?*

Glenn owed the student president a lot and didn’t want to be at odds with him. He also wanted to believe that anyone who enjoyed his family’s meat was a decent fellow.

*But I’m sure he knows I’m the Barrier Mage’s pupil, so...maybe he already thinks of me as an enemy.*

Glenn felt a little sad at that. He liked the student council president—he never made fun of Glenn for being a commoner.

As Glenn folded his arms and hummed in thought, Louis held up a sixth finger.

“The sixth is the youngest, and the one you’ll be working with on this mission—Monica Everett, the Silent Witch.”

“Hey, I’ve got a friend named Monica, too.”

“A simple coincidence and nothing more. The name is very common.”

Louis was right; the name Monica wasn’t exactly rare. *Coincidences like that happen sometimes*, thought Glenn, easily convinced. And having a friend with the same name would make the Sage’s easier to remember.

“The Silent Witch became a Sage at the same time I did, so you might say we’re in the same ‘class.’ She’s currently the only mage in the world who can use unchanted magecraft.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right! During that magic battle at the Sage qualifiers, she really wiped the floor with yo—”

Louis kicked Glenn in the shin, his beautiful smile never faltering. *He's such a child*, thought Glenn. He rubbed his stinging leg, then looked bitterly at his master and asked, "So the Silent Witch is even more terrifying than you?"

"....."

Louis clasped his hands together and nodded, his expression dead serious. "Yes. Just as you say, she's terrifying. She loathes people, and she's cruel and merciless. Using unchanted magecraft, she can slay her enemies instantly, making her absurdly powerful and extremely dangerous. Displease her, and before you know it, she'll... Oh, it's simply too gruesome to say out loud."

Glenn audibly gulped as Louis continued in a low voice.

"Be sure never to make the Silent Witch mad... Keep any contact with her to a minimum. Don't address her unnecessarily, either. Assume that if you meet her gaze, she will kill you."

"H-holy cow, she sounds pretty intimidating..."

"She is. She's an inhuman monster, utterly unreasonable."

For a moment, Glenn wondered why such a dangerous person had been asked to guard a prince. But if someone as morally bankrupt as Louis had been trusted to defend the castle, it probably wasn't an issue. That was how Glenn understood it anyway.

The morally bankrupt Louis assumed a grave tone and repeated himself for good measure. "I'll say it again. If you value your life, do not get too close to the Silent Witch or attempt to engage her in conversation... Do you understand?"

Glenn nodded quickly and forcefully. Then he began to mentally organize this new information in his own words.

Barrier Mage: My master. Scary when mad.

Starseer Witch: A prophet. Lock eyes and she'll take you home (pretty boys only).

Rose Witch: Actually a man. Lock eyes and he'll give you vegetables.

Abyss Shaman: Curse guy. Lock eyes and he'll ask if you love him (girls only).

Artillery Mage: The *kaboom* man. Lock eyes and he'll ask you to fight him.

Gem Mage: Doesn't like my master. Lock eyes and he'll pick a fight (Glenn only).

Silent Witch: Wiped the floor with my master. Lock eyes and she'll kill you.

It was then that Glenn realized something important.

"Master, this means I can't lock eyes with almost half the Sages." This was particularly true of the last three.

Louis smiled at his troubled pupil, a little proud. "Have you realized how competent and sane I am yet? Don't you think I deserve a little more respect?"

"Miss Rosalie said it's not good to put others down in order to make yourself look better."

Louis remained smiling at this mention of his wife, but veins appeared on his temples, and he kicked Glenn in the shin again, twice.

Watching the boy writhe in pain out of the corner of his eye, the mage cleared his throat and continued. "That concludes my explanation of the Seven Sages. Do you have it down now?"

Glenn, rubbing his shin, gave his honest opinion. "They seem less like the Seven Sages and more like the Seven Weirdos."

"May I assume you are excluding me, idiot pupil?"

Seeing his master start to ball his hand into a fist, Glenn panicked and began frantically nodding. His master's punches hurt so much, you'd think he was smacking you with a metal plate. Glenn would rather be blown away by wind magecraft.

Remembering his master's warning, Glenn covertly watched the Silent Witch as she sat snug on the couch, head down.

Her baggy robe seemed like a sack on her tiny body, and she grasped her staff as if clinging to it for dear life. She looked like a little kid pretending to be a mage. With her hood so far down and a veil covering her mouth, he couldn't tell what kind of face she was making.

But according to Louis, she was a terrifying witch who despised people and would brutally attack anyone she didn't like.

*Hmm, he thought. She doesn't seem like someone who could wipe the floor with my master...*

Then again, when she'd appeared in the sky over the mansion, she'd summoned a spirit king. That kind of advanced magecraft could only be used by a select few. Maybe she'd been trying to intimidate them, implying she'd kill them all at once with the power of the spirit king if they dared defy her.

As Glenn stood around, groaning in thought and refusing to sit down, Felix called out to him from his spot opposite the Silent Witch.

"Why not take a seat, Dudley?"

"I suppose I will..." he replied, moving over to the couches. The Silent Witch was sitting next to her attendant on one, so Glenn took the empty spot next to Felix, putting him across from the man who called himself Bartholomew Alexander.

*He said that if I wanted to talk to her, I should talk to him instead... Maybe it's okay to ask him what I want to know.*

Bored of staying quiet for so long, Glenn turned to Bartholomew, who was still leaning back arrogantly and yawning. Nervously, he asked, "Ummm, so I heard that the Silent Witch totally destroyed my master during the Seven Sages qualifiers."

The Silent Witch's drooping shoulders suddenly jerked up.

*I wonder if it's okay to ask something like this, so long as I ask her attendant.* Trembling, Glenn said, "If you can, please tell me how she won!"

The Silent Witch tugged on Bartholomew's robe. That was probably a demand that he answer for her.

But her attendant simply yawned again and said, "Not sure. I may be great, but I don't know much about what happened back then. I'm pretty sure my master could've killed any opponent instantly, though."

The Silent Witch shook her head, but her attendant didn't seem to get the



message.

Then Felix, who had been quietly listening, joined in. “That’s an excellent question, Dudley. I deeply regret that I wasn’t able to attend the Seven Sages’ qualifying competition two years ago, but from the records I’ve seen, Lady Everett used several wide-area attack spells in quick succession during the fight, never letting the other candidates get close. Of particular note was a compound spell involving a remote formula and a moderation formula, which she cast without chanting. It was an incredible feat that had the other Sages singing her praises. The moderation formula was the reason she could cast high-power, wide-area spells so quickly, and it’s what allowed her to emerge victorious against the Barrier Mage.”

Was it just him, or was Felix speaking more quickly than usual? And even though Glenn was studying magecraft, he only understood about half of what the prince had just said.

“I don’t really get it, but she sounds amazing!”

Felix smiled at him and continued without missing a beat. “A moderation formula is a special kind that takes a horribly long time to chant, but it allows you to greatly decrease the amount of mana you consume. Using it with simple, beginner magecraft can take thirty minutes, and working it into more advanced spells takes even longer. Normally, the immense time required makes it unsuited to combat. I’m sure anyone who knows anything about magecraft would understand how incredible it is to use such a technique without chanting. If she wanted to, Lady Everett could use large-scale spells over and over again by halving the mana cost. That was how she overwhelmed the Barrier Mage.”

Once again, Glenn wasn’t really comprehending what Felix was saying. Impressed, he said, “You really know a lot about this stuff, Prez.”

Felix put on a perfect smile and answered, “I am royalty, after all.”

“Man, royals are something else!”

\* \* \*

*The fact he’s royalty has absolutely nothing to do with it!*

Monica’s lips trembled behind her veil as she made herself small on the

couch.

It seemed Glenn hadn't noticed, but ever since they'd been brought to this room, Felix had clearly been desperate to talk to the Silent Witch. His eyes sparkled as he spoke, and he was far more loquacious than usual—and more open, Monica thought. Glenn paid this no mind, of course.

Felix truly idolized the Silent Witch. Only an ardent fan would have read records of magic battles from two years ago so closely. The only one who'd believed Felix's excuse about being royalty was Glenn.

"Huh," said the man beside her. "I don't really get it, but this royalty stuff sounds intense."

Correction—it had worked on Glenn *and* Nero.

*Oh, I see... Nero doesn't know what the prince thinks of the Silent Witch...* In other words, of those present, only Monica was aware of his feelings about the Sage.

To make matters worse, Glenn seemed terrified of her. *Is Glenn, um, scared of me or something? ...Wait, what in the world did you tell him about me, Mister Louis?!*

Having a normally cheerful and energetic friend look at her like that made her heart ache.

With one boy looking at her with deep respect and the other with abject terror, Monica's stomach showed no signs of unknotting anytime soon.

The estate's kitchen was in a state of pandemonium. Not only had the young lady Eliane returned from her studies halfway across the kingdom, but the second prince and one of the Seven Sages were staying as guests.

And that was only the beginning. Envoys from a neighboring country would be visiting the very next day. The kitchen staff would have to prepare luxurious meals nonstop.

Following dinner on the first day, it was as though a battle had taken place in the kitchen. And there were still things to be done, such as cleaning up and preparing for the following day.

Bartholomeus, working another one of his odd jobs, stood in a corner of the kitchen peeling carrots and thinking.

*That was the Silent Witch? What's goin' on here? She's not the Silent Witch I know.*

From a window, he'd witnessed her summoning a spirit king and descending out of the sky. But the girl he'd seen was not the beautiful blond woman who had so swiftly seized his heart. She was far shorter—and, if he had to say, her chest was like a sheer cliff.

He wanted to get closer to the tiny witch and get a better look at her face. But since he was new here, he wouldn't be allowed to interact directly with any of the guests unless one specifically asked for him. Seeing to guests was important work reserved for veteran staff. So instead, Bartholomeus had to steal glances through the doors in the brief moments available to him, such as when he brought food or utensils to the waitstaff.

And based on his observations, he had arrived at a single conclusion.

*I know what the real Silent Witch is like. She's a tall, cool, blond-haired beauty... And that means the one out there has got to be a fake.*

But who would take a lowly laborer like Bartholomeus at his word? Everyone else believed the short one was the real Silent Witch.

*I wish I could somehow catch the fake doing something incriminating... Wonder if there's a way to do that.*

Just as Bartholomeus finished peeling the carrots, Leston, the middle-aged butler, rushed into the kitchen.

"His Royal Highness enjoyed tonight's dinner," said Leston. "Keep it up tomorrow."

The kitchen staff breathed a collective sigh of relief. The estate's owner, Duke Rehnberg, was a mild-mannered man; Leston was much more critical of the staff's work. Now that they had his approval, the tension in the kitchen began to wind down.

Then Leston looked at each of them in turn, his expression subdued. "...Lady

Eliane tells me she'd like a drink she can bring to His Highness. Prepare a batch of Secret Recipe Number Three at once."

*What's Secret Recipe Number Three?* wondered Bartholomeus, pausing his work and cocking his head curiously.

Peter, who was washing dishes nearby, whispered into his ear, "It's a cocktail of pleasant fruit water, high-proof liquor, spices, and herbs. Perfect for a nighttime seduction."

"Ha-ha. I see. Yes, I see..." A light aphrodisiac, in other words. It seemed the lovely young lady wanted to turn up the charm for her gorgeous prince that evening.

The servants with longer service records, such as Leston, all seemed emotional over this development. "She used to be so little, and now..." said one; "Ah, so she...with the prince..."

As he watched them, Bartholomeus had an idea. *Secret Recipe Number Three, eh? I might be able to use that.*

At the end of the workstation was a fruitcake they'd made for the Silent Witch. When nobody was looking, he borrowed a little Secret Recipe Number Three and let it seep into the cake. The cocktail had a distinctive sweet scent that came from its herbs and spices, but since the cake used alcohol in its flavoring, he should be able to play it off quite nicely.

*Ha-ha! Get ready, you fake witch! Once you eat this cake, you won't be able to lie to me!*

\* \* \*

"Uuurgh, it's finally over... I'm so tired..."

With the first day's dinner out of the way, Monica returned to her guest quarters, took off the veil hiding her mouth, and collapsed onto the couch. The staff had assigned her a room suitable for a Sage—it contained a bed and a writing desk in the back, with a low table and a couch to relax on closer to the door.

Nero, who had come with her, eyed the big bed in the back, his eyes sparkling. "Man, this mansion is somethin' else! I just saw my own room, and

the bed is *huge*.”

Imitating Monica, he collapsed onto the bed and rolled around. Despite looking like an adult man, he was carrying on like a child. Nero had a separate room next door for once, and Monica wished he'd roll around in his own bed instead of hers. She glared at him from the sofa.

“Check it out, Monica!” he exclaimed, clearly in high spirits. “My legs don't hang off the end of the bed!”

In human form, Nero looked like a man in his midtwenties, and even then he was on the tall side. His legs would probably hang off the small bed in Monica's attic room, at any rate.

Sprawled out on the bed, Nero hummed a tune, then took some cheese out of his robe's pocket. He must have snatched it from the kitchen.

“Want some?” he asked. “You didn't eat, did you?”

“...I don't need any.”

While Monica had, of course, been offered a seat at the dinner table, she'd firmly declined to partake. Eating would mean removing her veil. No matter how low she kept her hood, anyone sitting at the same table would see her face.

Felix and Glenn had politely asked her to join them; Glenn had even offered to eat in shifts. But she'd stubbornly refused, sticking to the wall throughout the meal.

While she was standing through dinner, Nero wandered around the mansion; he'd probably picked up the cheese then. And if he'd stolen one thing, he was bound to have stolen another. Monica stared hard at his robe.

“Heh,” he said, and sat up, still munching on the cheese. “I bet you want it now that you've seen me eating it.”

Monica turned over on the couch, facing away from him. “No, I don't. I have no appetite.”

“It's only the first day, you know. You'll never last if you're already this pooped.”

*And whose fault is that?* thought Monica. *At least half of my exhaustion is due to your behavior.* She slowly rose from the couch and fixed Nero with a bitter glare.

“...You never told me you met the prince,” she said with a scowl, remembering his exchange with Felix shortly after their arrival.

But Nero simply tossed the last scrap of cheese into his mouth, unbothered. “It’s really no big deal, y’know? I gave the chilly guy to him, and we chatted for a minute. That’s all.”

“You’re absolutely sure he doesn’t know who I am?”

“Yep. He tried to use some kinda lizard to figure me out, but I caught it right away.”

“A lizard?” *What could he have been doing with a lizard?* she wondered, just as someone knocked on the door.

“Lady Everett, I apologize for visiting you so late. Do you have a few moments?”

Felix’s voice came from the other side of the door. Monica looked at Nero anxiously. He gulped down the cheese and looked back.

“What’s the plan?” he asked. “Should we send him away?”

“We can’t do that. Let him in... And be on your best behavior, okay?”

“Right, right,” said Nero noncommittally.

Once Monica had her hood and veil back on, Nero opened the door. Felix was standing in the hallway, wearing the same brilliant clothing he’d had on at dinner—but now a plain basket hung from his arm, a complete mismatch with his outfit.

When Felix realized it was Nero who had opened the door, he looked a little surprised.

“...You’re here, too?”

“I can go wherever I want, y’know. It’s called *privilege*. Anyway, what do you want? It’s late.” Nero stuck out his chin intimidatingly.

Felix held up the basket on his arm. It contained a bottle of liquid, a small enameled metal pot, some bread, and a fruitcake.

“Lady Everett didn’t eat anything at dinner, and I didn’t hear of her eating anything after, either. So I brought her a little something.”

Nero’s eyes glinted. “You’re a good guy, you know that? Come on in.”

He wasn’t following Monica’s instructions at all. But she hadn’t planned to send Felix away to begin with, so she nervously gestured for him to sit down on the other couch.

Felix thanked her, then took a seat, placing his basket on the low table. Nero immediately sat down across from him and peered at what he’d brought.

“Hey, what’s in this bottle here?”

“I was told it’s fruit water—”

Before he could finish, Nero had his mouth on the lip of the bottle. With loud gulps, he downed its whole contents.

“Hey, that’s real good. A ton of different spices. A real mature flavor, y’know? And it warms up your stomach real nice.”

“...?” Felix looked confused. “It should just be fruit water. There shouldn’t be any alcohol in it.” As he spoke, he opened the lid of the pot; inside was steaming-hot soup. “Lady Everett, would you like some warm soup?”

Monica, who had stood throughout dinner, wavered for a moment. Then she took a seat next to Nero and tugged on his robe.

Her familiar, as oblivious as always, did not catch on to her unspoken request—to tell Felix that she’d eat later. Instead, he started jovially popping pieces of fruitcake into his mouth.

Monica gave up on having him speak for her and instead used a piece of paper from the desk to write “*I’ll have the soup later*” and showed it to Felix.

Nero, a piece of cake in one hand, lit up when he saw it. “So I can eat everything but the soup, right? Man, this cake is something else. That boozy flavor is so good.”



“They used fruit pickled in a famous liquor from this region. And if I might ask... What is your relationship to Lady Everett?”

Crumbs of cake still stuck to his mouth, Nero gave a bold, clear answer. “I’m her attendant. Can’t ya tell?”

“You seem quite close to her for a mere attendant. Could you be her pupil? A family member? ...Or perhaps a lover?”

Monica nearly squealed; she quickly put a hand up to her veil and covered her mouth.

Finished with the fruitcake for now, Nero let out a hearty cackle. “Not on your life! She ain’t my type anyway.”

Well, of course not. Nero had mentioned his type before—females with good-looking tails.

But Felix didn’t seem convinced. As Monica fretted over how to explain their relationship, Nero folded his arms and said, “I’m one of those, y’know—a familiar... No, that’s not it. Hmm...,” he grumbled, trying to find a word to replace *familiar*. “Oh, wait! That’s it!” He clapped a fist into his hand. “I’m her manservant!”

Monica shook her head as hard as she could, making sure to hold her hood down.

Felix seemed troubled as well. He glanced between the two of them. “You’re her...manservant?”

“Yep. She saved my life, after all. Had a bird bone caught in my throat. Was about to die when she—”

Frantically, Monica tugged on Nero’s sleeve.

Figuring he was saying too much, Nero stuffed his face full of fruitcake to shut his mouth. He took his time chewing it, then swallowed and set his golden eyes on Felix.

“That was close. You almost caught me off guard with that leading question.”

“I wasn’t trying to trick you,” said Felix. “I honestly just wanted to know.”

“I didn’t realize you were so interested in me...”

But Felix *wasn’t* interested in Nero; he wanted to learn more about the Silent Witch.

With a wry smile, the prince took a stack of papers out of his basket. “I’m not here to pry into your affairs,” he said. “I wanted to have a personal conversation with Lady Everett. My lady, if you don’t mind, would you take a look at this?”

Monica gingerly held out her hand and took the papers. What was written on them? Did he want to discuss trade with Farfolia? Or was it a plan for guarding him during the negotiations?

But as she nervously flipped through the pages, her eyes went wide beneath her hood.

*Is this...a magecraft formula?*

The handwriting was neat and easy to read, but small, the words packed onto each page. It described ideas about the effects of water flow and water pressure when deploying wide-area spells underwater. And the deployment method at the heart of it was one she was particularly familiar with—after all, she’d thought of it herself.

Without thinking, Monica looked up.

Felix smiled bashfully. “My friend is actually a huge fan of yours... When he heard I’d be meeting you, he asked me to have you look over his paper...”

*C-could...this friend be, um, Ike...?* In other words, he was talking about himself.

Felix clasped his hands on his lap and gazed at her, his eyes full of expectation. Unable to refuse, she began to read.

*...Oh, wow. This is really well done.*

There wasn’t much accompanying material, and a few parts were a bit off the mark, but the essay itself was extremely well put together. He’d chosen a good theme, too. Research was still lacking when it came to casting spells underwater, and Monica was personally very interested in the subject.

*You can't write something like this without a very good understanding of water-aspected magecraft. If the prince thought this up all on his own, his knowledge must be on par with an upperclassman's at Minerva's...*

But Monica also knew that Felix had been forbidden to study magecraft by his grandfather. Since he wasn't allowed to have any technical books on the subject, he'd had to secretly collect periodicals published by Minerva's Mage Training Institution.

And yet even with such limitations, he'd *still* managed to write this thesis.

*He...really, really loves magecraft, doesn't he?*

It tickled her pride as a mage to know he'd put so much earnest effort into coming up with applications for one of her formulae. To be perfectly honest, it made her very happy.

Monica moved to the writing desk, then made some notes in the paper's margins with a feather pen. As a mage, she wanted to give a response equal to his passion. Despite his position as the second prince, she had no intention of going easy on him, especially when it came to mathematics and magecraft formulae. Fudging her handwriting a little so that it wouldn't give her away, she pointed out mistakes and ideas she judged underdeveloped. And then, in the remaining blank space, she wrote the following: *"This is a fascinating paper. It will be even better if you revise the issues I marked and supply more data concerning the amount of mana in flux."*

At that point, Monica snapped back to reality.

*W-wait, does that sound really rude...? Oh, dear! Wh-what if he says something like, "Who do you think you are?!" I, um, I should probably white out that last part...*

But just as she made her decision, she heard someone gasp directly behind her. Turning around, she saw Felix standing right there, peering over her shoulder at the paper.

*Nooooo! Will I be e-e-e-e-executed?! Executed for disrespecting the prince...?!*

Beneath her hood, Monica was in a state of total panic. Felix, however, showed no sign of displeasure. In fact, he was gripping his clothes at his breast,

looking positively *moved*.

Monica remained seated at the desk as Felix took her hand and gazed at her with such passion, she thought he might propose.

“To receive such an evaluation from you... I am beyond honored, Lady Everett.”

Nero, who was busy eating bread, said in a confused tone, “Wasn’t this about your friend?”

“...Yes. If he were here, I’m sure that is what he would have said,” Felix added smoothly, clutching the marked-up papers to his chest. “Thank you so much, my lady. I’m sure he’ll be delighted.”

“.....”

After a few moments of hesitation, she pulled one of the pieces of paper from his hands and wrote on the back in small letters.

*“I’d like to see another of your papers one day.”*

And oh, the absolute joy that appeared on Felix’s face! His sapphire eyes glittered like stars, and the edges of his lips trembled.

Monica probably shouldn’t have done such a thing—not if she wanted to keep protecting him while maintaining her secret identity. But as a mage, Monica Everett meant every word of what she’d just written.

She thought back to what Felix had said when they were looking at the stars after the festival ball—that he didn’t have much freedom left.

*Even so, I...don’t want you to give up.*

If Felix had some personal fantasy about what kind of person the Silent Witch was, she swore to herself that she’d do her best not to shatter it. Felix had said that his feelings for the Sage were like first love, but Monica was convinced he was wrong.

What Felix felt for the Silent Witch wasn’t anything romantic. It was pure adoration and respect for her as one of the Seven Sages.

And in that case, she simply needed to continue filling her seat there—as the

Silent Witch he looked up to.

And she would, so she wanted him to do the same—to keep pursuing this thing he so sincerely loved.

\* \* \*

Eliane Hyatt fumed as she stood in the shadows and watched Felix enter the Silent Witch's room.

*Oh? What's this? What could this be? What could be going on here?*

After dinner, she'd ordered a servant to prepare a batch of Secret Recipe Number Three, a drink passed down through generations of Hyatt women. But just as she was about to fetch it, Felix mistook it for fruit water and carried it away.

Eliane had then changed tack, deciding to visit the prince's room on a different pretext. "I'm still too wound up from the journey and can't get to sleep," she'd say. "Could we talk for a bit?" Then, once he'd finished his Secret Recipe Number Three, they'd have a splendid, unforgettable night... So why was he carrying that very drink into the Silent Witch's room? Eliane gnashed her teeth in frustration.

"Oh, hey, Elly. What are you doing here?"

Glenn again. Why was it always this oaf who spoke to her, and not Felix?

"Why, hello there, Lord Dudley. I should ask you the same," she said, masking her irritation.

Glenn's affable smile drew back into a tight, serious grimace. "Actually, I really need to ask you for something."

*Oh? Oh my, my, my! Could this be a love confession? I only have eyes for Felix, of course. So if this boor asks for my heart, then I shall have to refu—*

"I need to go to the bathroom. But it's dark and scary. Could you please come with me?!"

"....."

And so Eliane Hyatt's wonderful night came to a close as she escorted Glenn Dudley to the bathroom.

\* \* \*

Bartholomeus, who had staked out the Silent Witch's room, was almost at his wit's end.

He *knew* that tiny girl was a fake, so he'd spiked the fruitcake with Secret Recipe Number Three and waited for one of the servants to fetch it for her. Later, when the Silent Witch was intoxicated, he'd demand to know her real identity. "Who are you?" he'd say. "And what did you do with the real Silent Witch, that golden-haired beauty?"

But instead of a servant, the one to fetch the fruitcake had been—of all people—the second prince, Felix Arc Ridill. He'd even brought the bottle with the rest of the Secret Recipe Number Three—the stuff Eliane was meant to give to *him*.

*Oh, man*, he thought, standing outside her door. *The second prince and the fake witch are gonna have one hell of a night...*

Bartholomeus didn't realize that Nero had gulped down the whole bottle of Secret Recipe Number Three *and* gobbled up the fruitcake.

Just as Bartholomeus crept over to try and sneak a glance into the room, Felix emerged. His clothes were in perfect form, without a single rumple. But the beautiful prince wore a look of pure ecstasy. His cheeks were red, and his sapphire eyes were wet and glistening. It was the face of a man fulfilled.

The tiny witch had seen him to the door, and he whispered ever so softly to her, "Good night, Lady Everett...and sweet dreams."

Bartholomeus could come to only one conclusion.

*Are the second prince and the fake witch lovers?! ...Sheesh, I stumbled onto one hell of a secret!*

He clenched a fist. This was his chance to put the fake witch on the back foot. He'd use this info to threaten her, then have her bring him to the real Silent Witch—that blond beauty.

But as he was rallying his resolve, Peter—seemingly by coincidence—happened to walk by.

"Bartholomeus?" he said, sounding confused. "What are you doing? Leston

has been looking for you. He says he wants to discuss the carriage inspection.”

“Oh? Hey, Peter. I wasn’t doing much. Nothin’ at all, in fact. Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’ll get right on it.”

The problem would be finding a good opportunity to threaten the fake. He’d have to come up with some reason for them to be alone together.





## CHAPTER 4

### Bartholomeus Baal's Proposition

On the morning of his second day at the estate, Glenn woke up early and full of energy, then dressed himself and went out into the yard. Ever since receiving this escort mission, he had been waking up early almost every day—something he wasn't used to—to practice his magecraft.

First, he used flight magecraft to lift himself off the ground just slightly. Then, maintaining this, he chanted another spell to produce a flame at his fingertip. The latter spell was extremely simple, its power restrained—but as soon as he had to maintain both spells at once, it became much harder.

In terms of difficulty, it felt kind of like juggling while walking a tightrope. Focus on the tightrope too much and the balls would fall, focus on the balls too much and *he* would fall.

While Glenn had never seen it personally, he'd heard one former Sage was a prodigy who could maintain *seven* spells at the same time. A feat that impressive seemed positively superhuman to him.

“Whoa... Hup... Ack, ack...!”

As the tiny flame flickered to life above his finger, his floating body wavered. Ultimately, he didn't even last three seconds before falling to the ground, landing on his rear.

“Ugh. That smarts. Two at once is so hard...,” he muttered to himself.

But if he could learn to do it, he'd be able to use flight magecraft to evade incoming attacks while fighting back. According to his master, this was a better use of his time than trying to learn a wider variety of spells.

*Mastering a bunch of new spells one after the other would be a lot cooler and more impressive, though...*

Glenn had learned about other kinds of magecraft—those outside his area of expertise—during his classes at Serendia. If he put his mind to it, he should be able to manage them. Briefly, he wondered if he should just switch his training

routine to learning new spells. Then he caught himself and smacked his cheeks.

*“Can’t get distracted. Gotta keep plugging away...”*

He’d made an oath to do his best before the Alteria chimes and an upperclassman he respected. He couldn’t take the easy way out—that would just be running away. He could hear that very same upperclassman in his mind angrily shouting “Finish what you started!” and turning the air around him frosty.

*Yeah. Okay, one more time...*

After chanting his flight spell and lifting himself up again, he noticed something. A short distance away, someone was watching him. It was a petite girl wearing a hooded robe and a veil over her mouth—the Silent Witch.

*Oh no! It’s the monster who beat my master to a pulp!*

Glenn disengaged his flight spell and stood there for a few moments. Eventually, the Silent Witch, clutching her staff to her chest, scampered over to him.

*Now what? Why’s she coming this way?! Is she gonna yell at me?! Did I do something?! What if she sends me flying just because she doesn’t like me?!*

The Silent Witch stopped, then looked up at Glenn from beneath her hood. According to his master, she was a cruel, merciless witch who hated people.

Whatever the case, he had to say something to her. Greetings were important in situations like these. Wasn’t that what the vice president was always telling him? Yes, Serendia students must always remember to be courteous and respectful.

Grimacing, Glenn cried out, “G-g’ mornin’!” His voice cracked a little.

*Ack! How embarrassing!* he thought as the Silent Witch used her long staff to write something in the dirt at their feet. At first, he was terrified she was announcing that she was going to beat the life out of him. But the words that appeared were much less hostile.

*“Practicing simultaneous maintenance?”*

Glenn, who had been mentally bracing himself, breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s right!” he said. “I still can’t even manage two at once...”

The Silent Witch wrote more words on the ground. *“Try maintaining two fire spells at once.”*

“...Huh?”

Glenn stared hard at her. She used one small hand to pull down the edge of her hood and wrote some more.

*“It’s easier to maintain more than one if the spells are the same. Once you get used to that, then you can practice it with a different one, like flight magecraft.”*

Not sure whether to believe her, Glenn chanted the spell and produced a small flame over his right index finger. Then, keeping it burning, he chanted the same spell again. This time, a flame lit up over his left index finger.

“Hup, okay... Whoa, whoa, whoa...”

Glenn looked at each hand in turn.

If, instead of using a single spell to shoot ten fire arrows, one used two spells simultaneously that each shot five, the precision of the arrows would increase, but so would the difficulty. Glenn’s two fireball spells followed more or less the same principle.

The flames were unstable, as if they might flicker out at any moment. But somehow, he managed to maintain them both for twenty whole seconds.

“Hey, you’re right! I think it worked!” he said.

While he was still a long way from his ultimate goal—using flight magecraft and fire magecraft at the same time—he felt like he now had something of a grasp on what it felt like to maintain two spells at once.

*“When maintaining multiple spells simultaneously, it’s important to get down the feel. Keep practicing until you’re used to it.”*

Once she was done writing, the Silent Witch bowed slightly and turned around.

She was nice. *Really nice. I guess my master lied again,* Glenn thought with resignation. He was probably just bad-mouthing her because she’d beaten the

crap out of him, and he still held a grudge.

“Miss Silent Witch!” he called out after her, waving enthusiastically. “Thanks so much!”

\* \* \*

After turning her back to Glenn, Monica held a hand to her chest, trying to calm her beating heart as she hastened away.

*I, um, hope I didn't go too far...*

She was trying to keep her identity hidden; it was best to keep contact with everyone to a minimum. Louis had probably fed Glenn a bunch of scary lies for that very reason.

Nevertheless, she wanted to support Glenn in his efforts. He was her friend, and he was trying so hard. This was her field of expertise, too, so she was especially keen to help.

Once Monica had walked far enough that she could no longer see Glenn, she decided to tour the vast garden. But she wasn't walking around this early in the morning just to take a stroll. She was patrolling. Today was the day the envoy from the Kingdom of Farfolia was set to arrive. She wanted to make sure there was nothing strange or suspicious around the estate.

The duke's mansion had a very large yard with many places to hide. But even setting that aside, the building was situated between a forest and an orchard. If an intruder fled into the trees, they'd be pretty difficult to follow.

*It seems like they have a lot of hunting dogs skilled at tracking... Maybe I should think of some countermeasures in case something like that happens,* she thought as she reached a corner of the building.

From around the corner, she could hear barking—the estate's hunting dogs. And in between barks, she could hear people talking.

She paused, then peeked around the corner. There were two men with the dogs, taking care of them. One was a middle-aged butler with combed-back blond hair speckled with white, and the other was an elderly servant in his sixties with a mustache and gray hair.

The dogs seemed to love the butler, but they weren't very attached to the

servant. They were barking at him, and he seemed a bit shaken up.

Troubled, the butler said, “The dogs never seem to enjoy your company, Peter. Were you in contact with any other animals?”

“Not that I can think of, sir...,” replied Peter, frowning. “It’s always been this way. Animals just seem to hate me.”

Something dawned on the butler then, and he said, “Come to think of it, it’s the same with Lord Alexander—you know, the Silent Witch’s attendant. The dogs simply can’t stay calm when he’s nearby.”

Monica quietly sucked in her breath. *My attendant... They’re talking about Nero, right?*

The butler frowned fussily. “What am I to do?” he complained. “The plan was to invite the Farfolian delegation along on a hunt to facilitate good relations. But we can’t do that if the hunting dogs are scared.”

“You’re right, sir.”

“Lady Eliane will likely come along on the hunt as well, and I can’t do anything that might trouble her...”

Monica had an idea about why the dogs might hate Nero, but it wasn’t something she could divulge. *Maybe I should tell him to stay away from the animals...*

Meaning to leave, Monica quietly stepped back a few paces, then turned around. But right as she was about to run off, she smacked into something and fell backward onto the ground.

“Oof!”

“Whoops! Real sorry about that, my lady.”

Someone had evidently been standing behind her. Still sitting on the ground, she rubbed her nose through her veil and looked up at the person.

It was a tall man with combed-back black hair. He looked to be in his midtwenties or so, and he wore the estate’s uniform for male servants.

She’d met this man before—somewhere other than the estate.

*This person, he's...*

The last time she saw him, he'd had a bandanna and work clothes on, and he gave off a very different impression now. But Monica had memorized all the numbers that made up his facial structure, so she was sure. This was the man she'd met in Corlaption about two months ago—Bartholomeus.

Bartholomeus had been suspected of stealing an ancient magical item called Starweaving Mira, and Ryn had supposedly handed him over to the Starseer Witch. But Monica didn't know what had happened to him after that.

*What...? Why is he here?!*

She couldn't spend too much time with him. He might blow her cover.

"Out for a walk so early in the morning?" he asked. "I can show you around the gardens if you want!"

Monica shook her head, trying as hard as she could to convey the message "no thank you."

Bartholomeus, not to be dissuaded, smiled and took a step to block her from leaving. "Hey, no need to be shy! If I neglected an honored guest like you, Leston would never let me hear the end of it! Come, come! This way!"

He'd already started walking, taking the lead. Monica didn't know what to do. *Would it be weird to turn him down...? I was planning on looking around the garden anyway...*

Without much of a choice, she let him get a few more steps away, then began following him.

As they walked, Bartholomeus made light conversation, pointing out one tree that birds liked to perch in and another planted the year the young lady was born—things like that.

Monica listened idly as they made their way to the back of the estate. This was a particularly remote part of the vast property. It would be best to carefully check potential hiding spots and look for anything suspicious.

As she glanced around, observing, someone suddenly grabbed her by the wrist. It was Bartholomeus.



From point-blank range, he looked down at her and grinned. “Ha-ha! Caught you, you little faker.”

“...?!”

Why had he grabbed her? Why was he calling her a fake? Monica was confused; she didn’t understand what was happening. It was so sudden, she didn’t even think to use uncharmed magecraft.

Bartholomeus brought his hand to her veil. “Time to see who you really are!” Then he roughly pulled the cloth from her mouth.

Monica whimpered just as Bartholomeus paused and let out an awkward “Huh?”

“Why do I feel like I’ve seen you before...?” he muttered. “Oh, that’s it. The festival. You were that little mage with the squirrel hood.” He peered carefully at her face, then frowned, confused. “What’re you doing pretending to be the Silent Witch?”

“P-pretending?!” He’d suddenly grabbed her wrist, removed her veil, and now he was calling her a fake? Monica was just about at her limit. She didn’t know what was going on anymore. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Looking mildly shocked, Bartholomeus released her wrist. “Hey, wait. Don’t cry. Don’t cry! I know I’m the one who upset you, but— *Hraaaagh?!*”

His rapid stream of excuses abruptly transformed into an unseemly shriek.

Nero, in human form, had dropped right onto Bartholomeus’s head. He must have jumped out of a second-story window.

Without sparing a glance at the man he’d just crushed under his feet, Nero turned to Monica. “Heya, Monica. If you were going for a walk, you should’ve taken me along.”

“You said it was too cold and you didn’t want to get out of bed!” she shot back, teary-eyed.

Nero folded his arms behind his head and pursed his lips. “And can ya blame me? I really hate the cold... Also, who’s this guy?” he asked, glancing down at Bartholomeus.

The man, in turn, looked up at Monica. “Who...? Who are you, kid?”

“I, um, I’m the Silent Witch... I—I *promiph...*,” she said, faltering.

“Now, it’s not good to lie. I know the truth, after all.”

*The truth about what?* wondered Monica and Nero.

Bartholomeus continued, his words firm and clear. “The real Silent Witch is the beautiful, blond-haired maid who saved me in Corlapton! I saw everything, you know. I saw her control the wind without chanting!”

Monica and Nero exchanged glances. Nero had stayed behind in the dorm the night Monica had been in Corlapton, but when they heard Bartholomeus describe a beautiful, blond-haired maid who controlled the wind, they both thought of the same person—or rather, the same spirit.

Nero’s golden eyes swept over the scene, then returned to Monica. “I, the greatest detective alive, know exactly what’s happened here.”

“...Yeah, me too.”

You didn’t have to be a detective to figure it out. The maid Bartholomeus was going on about was the Barrier Mage Louis Miller’s contracted spirit, Rynzbelfeid. She had indeed manipulated the wind without chanting when she’d leaped through the air with Bartholomeus in her arms. He must have mistaken her power for unchanted magecraft, for which a certain witch was famous.

“Ummm, the woman you saw is named Ryn,” explained Monica, squatting down to speak to him. “And she’s not a human; she’s a spirit.”

“What?” Still at Nero’s feet, Bartholomeus didn’t seem to believe what Monica was saying.

Rather than try to persuade him with words, she decided it would be faster to prove she was the real deal. So, without chanting, she produced a small bubble of water at her fingertip, then caused it to morph into a butterfly and flutter off through the air. At last, it landed on the man’s nose and popped.

Bartholomeus was baffled. Monica stiffened and said firmly, “I... I am one of the Seven Sages... Monica Everett, the Silent *Wiffh*.”

But she put so much energy into sounding genuine that she choked at the end and embarrassed herself.

As she looked down, inwardly disappointed, Nero jumped off Bartholomeus and threw his head back proudly. “And I am the Silent Witch’s incredibly cool, super-awesome attendant, Bartholomew Alexander! And that’s *sir* to you!”

Monica was skeptical that the situation had called for an introduction from Nero. Most likely, he was just jumping on any opportunity to sing his own praises.

Bartholomeus remained on the ground and stared fixedly at the petite girl as she looked back down at him.

It had taken him a moment after he’d removed her veil to remember who she was. She was just that unremarkable—the kind of girl you could find anywhere.

But this little kid, all skin and bones, professed to be the real Silent Witch, in the flesh—Monica Everett. And then she’d shown him her uncharmed magecraft.

*And the blond beauty who stole my heart is a spirit named Ryn! Wah-ha! Even your name is adorable, Rynny...!*

Bartholomeus’s head spun as he tried to figure out how to meet his beloved “Rynny.” He was sure this kid in front of him would be key. Could he win her over and convince her to introduce him to the lady of his dreams?

He stood up slowly, then moved toward Monica, who had taken out a spare veil and put it on. She jumped in fright as he approached, then scurried behind her attendant.

She reminded him of a squirrel, but he stopped himself from saying so and asked in a coaxing voice, “Hey, kid. Want to make a deal with me?”

“A... A deal...?” Monica peered at him from behind her attendant.

The look on Bartholomeus’s face was all business. “I want you to introduce me to Rynny.”

“Huh? Ryn? B-but why...?”

“Well, because I’m in love with her. Y’know, love! I’m head over heels.”

Monica's eyes went wide, and her mouth fell open. "Ummm... Well, Ryn is a spirit, so..."

"Such things mean nothing in the face of love!" he declared.

"Whuh...?" Monica looked very confused.

*One more push*, Bartholomeus thought, the corners of his thick lips lifting into a smile. "If you introduce me to her... I'll keep your secret safe."

"My, um, my secret...?"

"The guy you were looking for during the Bell-Ringing Festival," he explained. "The one dressed up as the underworld watchman. That was Prince Felix. Am I right?"

"?!" Monica's eyes went wide again.

*I knew it*, he thought, grinning. "If you set me up with Ryn, I promise to keep quiet about your relationship with the prince."

*The prince and this kid are together, and it's a big secret. They're lovers who can't tell a soul. That's why they got dressed up to meet at the festival, and why she's here with the prince under the pretense of guarding him. And it explains their little rendezvous last night.* Bartholomeus was sure of it.

Ignorant of the man's misunderstanding, Monica paled behind her veil.

*Wha...? Oh no, oh no! What do I do? Our secret relationship! He means my mission to protect him, right?! How I'm the prince's secret bodyguard?! He knows everything!*

As she panicked, trying to figure out the right move, Nero poked her.

"Hey, Monica. You know what situations like this call for, right?"

"What?" If Nero had a plan to solve everything, she wanted to know. She stared at him expectantly.

"We gotta shut him up," Nero said confidently. "For good."

"Noooo! Wait, hold on..."

Utterly confused, Monica racked her brain. For whatever reason, Bartholomeus knew that Monica was hiding her identity and protecting Felix.

And if she didn't want him telling the whole world, she had to introduce him to Ryn.

*But I didn't think spirits had a gender,* she thought, now covered in sweat as she continued to think.

Bartholomeus gave her the look of an understanding adult. "Now, now. It's nothing to panic over. Just play matchmaker for me and Ryn and I'll help you be with the prince as much as I can."

He'd help her be with the prince—he meant he'd help her with her mission.

But the undercover mission was top secret. If Louis realized that someone had found her out... She was too terrified to think of the consequences. This was completely different from Ray, who was another Sage.

"Ummm, this..." she began. "It's really, really important to keep it secret... You, you can't tell anyone about it, not a soul..."

"Yeah, I get it. These things have to stay under wraps." He nodded, looking completely confident, and even winked at her. "I won't tell anyone, and you don't have to tell anyone else about me. I'll be your ally in secret. Sound good?"

Monica groaned, but Nero seemed receptive. "So you want to be Monica's errand boy, huh? Very good! You can be my henchman."

"Heh-heh-heh! See? This guy agrees with me, so... Nice to be working with you, kid!"

*How is Nero so adaptable?*

Monica, unable to accept the proposition right away, stammered out a few *but*s before Bartholomeus took her hand, his eyes glinting oppressively.

"Please! I'm serious about this! I really am head over heels!" he repeated passionately.

Just at that moment, Monica heard footsteps coming from behind her. It was the sound of someone launching into a run.

She turned around and saw Felix rushing over.

*Noooo... P-Pr-Pr-Prince...!* Monica's stomach contracted painfully.

Felix grabbed the arm Bartholomeus was using to hold Monica's hand, then peeled him off her.

"...Hands off the lady," he said.

His eyes were as cold as a lake in winter. But when he turned to Monica, he broke into a warm smile, like springtime sunlight.

"It's almost time for breakfast, my lady," he said. "Why don't we go together?" He took Monica's hand as if escorting a noblewoman and began to walk away. Nervously, she followed him; as did Nero, looking very entertained.

Once they'd rounded a corner in the gardens and Bartholomeus was out of sight, Felix turned to Monica with a serious look in his eyes.

"It would seem you've run into a troublesome servant. If he has offended you in any way, I'll tell the duke not to let him near you."

Monica shook her head. If the duke got rid of Bartholomeus, he might spill the beans about her secret mission to protect the prince. That was the one thing she needed to avoid at any cost.

She grabbed hold of Nero's robe, pulled him down into a crouch, and whispered in his ear. "Tell him...not to worry about Mister Bartholomeus!"

Nero nodded, then turned to Felix and boldly proclaimed, "That man is now my henchman. No need to worry about him."

*I didn't mean like thaaat!* Monica silently wailed.

Felix narrowed his eyes slightly and searched Nero's face. His own smile never faltered, but it took on an intimidating cast. "...I see. In that case, please discipline your new henchman so he stops being rude to Lady Everett."

Clutching her stomach, Monica desperately fought back the urge to cry. This had turned into a huge mess. Now her only options were to cooperate with Bartholomeus or shut him up for good.

*How am I supposed to set him up with Ryn...? She isn't even my contracted spirit...*

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Monica, when Bartholomeus saw Felix's cold reaction, it only cemented his suspicions once and for all.

...Also unbeknownst to Monica, the real trouble had yet to even begin.





## CHAPTER 5

### Meat-Eaters Talk About Meat

On the morning of the second day of Felix's stay at Duke Rehnberg's estate, the delegation from the Kingdom of Farfolia arrived right on schedule. Their party included eight envoys and their bodyguards, and all of the former were diplomatic veterans of advanced age.

Talks began as soon as greetings were exchanged, and it didn't take long for Felix to realize this would be anything but easy.

Farfolia was once two separate nations—the Kingdom of Far and the Kingdom of Folia. They formed a confederation, changing their name to the Federated Kingdoms of Far-Folia and, as time passed, eventually became the modern Kingdom of Farfolia.

The country's history had led to a tendency for conflicts to arise between the descendants of the old Kingdom of Far and those of Folia, both in daily life and in politics. This, in turn, had resulted in a rather unstable domestic administration.

Of the eight envoys present, it seemed the two foremost diplomats—the Count of Barrow and the Count of Malé—plus their subordinates were at odds, four against four.

The Count of Barrow was a descendant of the old Kingdom of Far, and he was friendly toward Ridill—or perhaps *humble* was a better word. The Count of Malé, on the other hand, was descended from the old Kingdom of Folia, and he disapproved of expanding trade with Ridill.

*Count Malé is probably more interested in improving relations with the Empire,* thought Felix. The old Kingdom of Folia and the Empire were neighbors and had traditionally cooperated with each other.

*...And that means he's the one I need to convince.*

Felix casually observed the Farfolian delegation as he read over the diplomatic materials provided. The plump Count Barrow probably wanted to strengthen

his country's alliance with Ridill. He kept showering Felix with flattery—very easy to understand. The skinnier Count Malé, however, wore a difficult expression; he'd barely looked at the prince's face since arriving.

Felix purposely turned toward the latter and smiled at him. "Farfolia's wine is truly extraordinary. I came into possession of this year's Perle Dande the other day, and I must say, this new batch is particularly incredible."

He'd purposely brought up wine rather than wheat, which was to be the main focus of their talks; Count Malé narrowed his eyes even further and looked at Felix carefully.

"...Yes, we are particularly proud of our high-quality wines. But I'm sure you're not here to talk about wine, Your Royal Highness. Rather, your interest lies in the bread served with it."

The count was right. The main topic of today's discussion was securing a greater quantity of imported wheat from Farfolia. Count Barrow was all for it, but Count Malé was blatantly opposed.

"After all," he continued, "we've heard Ridill plans to add a Dragon Knight outpost here in the Rehnberg Duchy."

*I knew he'd point that out,* thought Felix behind his smile.

The eastern part of Ridill was particularly prone to dragonraids, and one of the area's biggest concerns was the time it took to dispatch the Dragon Knights from the royal capital. In the interest of alleviating this issue, the government was constructing a fortress in the southeast of the kingdom as a permanent Dragon Knight outpost.

But other nations were sure to view this development in a different light.

The Dragon Knights were, as their name implied, a group of knights with the skill needed to slay dragons. But they didn't spend all their time fighting such beasts. During wartime, they would, of course, be used against the kingdom's enemies.

This new facility for housing Dragon Knights was to be built in the Duchy of Rehnberg, near the kingdom's borders with both Farfolia and the Empire. From their perspectives, it must look like an act of aggression. And since Count Malé

was sympathetic to the Empire, too, he couldn't overlook such a development.

*...He's right to be concerned, of course.*

The central figure in the new outpost project was Felix's grandfather, Duke Clockford. And *he* was more than ready to wage war on the Empire.

*If we go to war, he probably intends to make the outpost into a resupply base.*

The duke was hoping to strengthen his military forces, using the dragonraids as a pretext—an ulterior motive evidently not lost on Count Malé.

The skinny man fiddled with his mustache and fixed a searching gaze on Felix. "I'm sure you'll need major stockpiles if you want to build a new outpost here. Better to have more wheat and wine than less."

Yes, that was exactly why Ridill wanted to secure additional imports from Farfolia. Duke Rehnberg's territory was especially close to the other country, meaning it would be easy to transport the imported foodstuffs to the newly built base—which in turn meant they could save a fortune on shipping costs.

"But is this outpost of yours really necessary?" the count asked. "Forgive my rudeness, but doesn't Ridill have its dragonraids under control?"

"Only through the efforts of local nobility, some of whom are suffering under the burden... So, yes, the base is necessary."

Despite Felix's fluid answer, Count Malé still seemed unconvinced.

Then the other count, Barrow, leaned in and spoke as if to excuse his colleague. "We're terribly sorry for butting into another nation's matters, Your Royal Highness. Count Malé's territory is situated in the old Kingdom of Folia—a place with relatively few dragonraids. He doesn't fully understand the terror they can bring."

"Hmph. Are expendable mercenaries not enough?"

Felix suppressed a wry grin as he listened to the two counts bicker. This was supposed to be about wheat imports, but now the conversation had turned to the new outpost and dragonraids.

*I'll need to regroup and think of a way to persuade Count Malé...*

With the royal succession so close at hand, he couldn't afford to screw up these talks.

*And most importantly, he thought, glancing at the Silent Witch standing by the wall, I can't help but want to look my best in front of the one I so admire.*

It surprised him somewhat to learn he still had such feelings.

As she stood near the wall watching the proceedings, Monica found herself quietly impressed by how boldly Felix dealt with the foreign delegation.

*He's really amazing...*

Once, in the student council room, Cyril had ardently described Felix's incredible diplomatic skills. At the time, Monica had wondered if Cyril's ability to remember the entirety of the prince's record was not even more impressive. But now that she saw the prince at work, it was easy to see how amazing he really was.

Of course, he was quite bold as Serendia's student council president as well. But here, everyone else was a veteran at least twice his age. Ridill's nobility had trusted Felix to handle these talks, and the Farfolian delegation knew he was no pushover. No one was underestimating him because of his youth.

All this was a result of Felix's outstanding past achievements.

It set Monica on edge to have someone so amazing tripping over himself to demonstrate how much he respected her.

*It seems the prince saw me using uncharmed magecraft once before... He also knew I was the one who stopped Cyril when he lost control of his mana. But how much else does he know...?*

He didn't seem to have realized that Monica Norton was the Silent Witch, but she was sure he wanted to get a look at her face. She needed to come up with a plan to make sure that didn't happen.

*Mister Bartholomeus said he'd help me with my mission... Maybe I should ask him.*

On that night in Corlaption, Felix had seen Bartholomeus's face when he brought Monica, who had gotten lost, to the prince. But Felix didn't seem to

remember him. It had been nighttime, and they'd only been together for a minute or two, so she couldn't blame him.

Ever since offering to help her, Bartholomeus had kept his distance. But whenever she saw him in the hallway, he'd give her an enthusiastic wink, as if to say, "I'm on your side!" Every time that happened, however, the air around Felix would take on a palpable chill. Personally, the whole thing was giving Monica chronic stomach pain.

*Ugh... What should I do...?*

There were too many things to consider, and her mind was starting to spin. So she started thinking about "Old Man Sam's Pigs" instead.

In her head, the pigs multiplied. First one, then one again, then two, then three, then five...

By the time the talks reached a stopping point, she'd counted up to 10,610,209,857,723 pigs and had calmed down a fair bit.

As she left the world of pigs and returned to reality, she heard Felix call out to her gently, "I'm sorry for the long wait, my lady."

Monica shook her head a little, trying to convey that she didn't mind. To avoid leaking state secrets, Nero and Glenn had been asked to wait in the adjacent room—which meant that nobody was here to speak for her.

*Ummm, right, so the plan after this is...* She watched as the Farfolian delegation filed out of the room.

Felix followed her gaze. "We're all going hunting after lunch," he said. "Do you have any horseback riding experience?"

\* \* \*

Next door, Glenn and the Silent Witch's attendant Bartholomew Alexander sat around a table, playing cards. They had nothing else to do.

Earlier in their visit, Glenn had been avoiding Bartholomew. Not only had the young man seemed extremely arrogant, but he'd also given everyone the name of a famous adventure novel protagonist, claiming it was his own. All this, combined with his noticeably old-fashioned robe, made him seem incredibly suspicious.

But after talking to him, Glenn found him surprisingly friendly and easy to get along with. Plus, he was brimming with curiosity despite being an adult and seemed very interested in the card games Glenn had brought.

Right now, they were playing a game that involved collecting claws and fangs to complete dragons.

“And there’s a finished water dragon,” said Glenn. “Looks like I win.”

“Nooooo! I lost again?!” Bartholomew said, groaning in frustration, setting his hand face up on the table.

Glenn’s eyes went wide when he saw the man’s cards. “Were you going for a black dragon again?”

The two highest-scoring—and most difficult—winning hands in the game were the black dragon and the white dragon. Glenn had been around the block when it came to this game, and he’d never seen anyone successfully complete either of them.

“If you’re gonna play, you might as well aim for the big points, right? Who cares about some weaselly little dragons? I ain’t makin’ one of those losers.”

“But you’ve lost every round so far. And water dragons are hardly ‘weaselly.’”

“Actually, they are. They can’t even communicate properly. That makes them *lesser* dragons.”

Dragons came in many varieties, but you could generally categorize them into greater dragons and lesser dragons. The most common lesser dragons were pterodragons and herbivorous dragons. After that came fire dragons, water dragons, and earth dragons. Some academic circles put those three in an intermediate class of their own, but in general, people treated them the same as lesser dragons.

The greater dragons were all those with colors for names: red dragons, blue dragons, yellow dragons, green dragons, white dragons, and black dragons. They said red dragons were a higher form of fire dragons. The same was said of blue dragons and water dragons, and of green dragons and pterodragons. But while their scale coloring and body structures were indeed similar, the greater versions were incomparably larger and had far higher mana capacity.

Most importantly, though, greater dragons could understand the languages of humans. Glenn had heard that some could even use advanced magic.

White and black dragons, however, were unique varieties without any lesser form. They were sometimes considered to be more legendary than real. That was why they were the highest-scoring hands in the game.

“You know,” said Glenn, “you almost never see greater dragons. Can they all talk like people do?”

It was said that greater dragons were of equal intelligence to or greater intelligence than humans. That was why they almost never showed themselves to people and why they so rarely attacked them.

Bartholomew looked at the patterns on the cards as he answered. “Greater dragons can understand human language, sure. But their bodies aren’t made to talk like humans do. They speak the same language as spirits, which most people are clueless about.”

“Really?”

“Well, if a greater dragon transforms and creates human vocal cords, they can speak with a human voice.”

Glenn had taken this attendant for an arrogant, discourteous buffoon. But he seemed surprisingly erudite. Glenn was honestly impressed.

Bartholomew started toying with the case containing the extra cards. “Hey, loud guy?”

“Could you just call me Glenn?”

“What are these cards for?” he asked, pulling out one with the word *curse* written on it.

“Oh, those? There’s a special rule that deals with cursed dragons. I left them out. Want to play with them next?”

“What’s the rule?”

“You can make whatever kind of dragon you want, as long as you have a curse card in your hand, too. That makes a new kind of winning hand called a curse dragon.”

Glenn gathered up the scattered cards and put together a complete fire dragon, then added the curse card to it.

Bartholomew folded his arms and cocked his head. “Are they worth a lot?”

“If you have one in your hand, then if someone else wins, you can make them lose the amount of points they would have won.”

Any dragon that bore a curse, lesser or greater, was called a cursed dragon. They were like natural disasters—creatures that spread their curse wherever they went. This was the worst kind of dragonraid you could face. Of course, they were just as rare as black dragons and white dragons; you could count the number of eyewitnesses in recorded history on one hand.

“Oh, cool. Whoever made this game did a good job. Let’s go another round,” said Bartholomew.

As he was picking up his cards, there was a knock at the door, and a servant entered. It was an elderly man with combed-back gray hair named Peter.

“Please excuse the interruption,” he said. “Ahem... The duke and his guests will be going on a hunt after their lunch, and he’d like all the escorts to accompany them.”

“Hunting?” repeated Glenn. “You do that around here?”

“Yes, in the forest a short ride away. We have horses ready for you as well.”

Bartholomew rolled his golden eyes and looked at Glenn. “Hey, loud guy, can you ride a horse?”

“I’ve never tried. I’ve prepared their meat, though,” added the butcher’s son.

The others looked at him in shock.

\* \* \*

Eliane burned with quiet irritation. She had intended to use this visit to get closer to Felix, and yet she’d hardly had a chance. The prince had consulted with the duke the day before the Farfolian delegation arrived, and now that they were here, he was even busier. So when she heard they’d be going hunting, delegation and all, she knew it was her chance.

Hunting was something only men did, but Eliane and her mother could ride in



a carriage alongside them, then cheer them on when they broke to have a picnic. Her idea was to show how thoughtful and considerate she could be, thus drawing Felix's attention. Unfortunately, the prince had gone straight to the hunting grounds without so much as a glance in her direction.

"I heard they're hunting pheasant today," said Glenn. "Pheasants are really good. They don't have much fat, so you gotta stuff them, then roast them in the oven. Best bird you've ever had!"

"Heh. I can't get enough of birds myself," replied Bartholomew. "Their bones are so tiny, though. It's such a pain to pick 'em all out."

"Oh, yeah. Pheasants have a lot of small bones in the legs."

"I know! Learned that lesson once the hard way."

Sitting with Eliane on the picnic mat were Glenn and the Silent Witch's attendant, Bartholomew. Neither of them had any riding experience, so they were acting as escorts for the picnickers. The only ones mounted up with Felix and the delegation were the Silent Witch and a few of Duke Rehnberg's subordinates.

Glenn could use flight magecraft, but it consumed a lot of mana, and he couldn't stay in the sky for the whole hunt. So here he was, waiting with the others in the picnic group.

As Eliane listened to him go on and on about what to do with this or that meat, or how delicious it was, she maintained a perfect smile. But inside, she was seething.

*Why isn't Prince Felix at my side? Why are these lowly peasants sitting here instead? And how I wish they were only sitting. Why must I endure this talk of meat? It's simply barbaric. Can't they talk about something a little more civilized? Shouldn't they be more considerate of the duchess? ...Ahhh, I wonder if Mother will say something to them for me.*

Eliane glanced at her mother. But the Duchess of Rehnberg simply held a folding fan in front of her face, behind which she maintained a refined smile.

"My, my, young Dudley," she said. "You know quite a bit about meat."

“Yes, ma’am! My father’s a butcher!”

“Oh! Is that right? In that case, if you’ll allow me to ask a question... What is your recommended way of preparing rabbit? Eliane can be a picky eater, and she doesn’t tend to like it.”

Eliane kept her ladylike smile intact—but mentally, she was screaming. *Mother! What are you doing joining in on this barbaric conversation?!*

The duchess went on, listing the methods they’d tried. Glenn listened with a serious face and nodded along.

“When it comes to rabbit meat,” he said, “you’ve got to go with the females. They taste better because they’re juicier. Rabbit stew is always a good choice, but you can also boil it with pork and make it into a paste, or...”

As Glenn explained the ins and outs of rabbit preparation, his face took on an uncharacteristically sharp, intelligent expression. Eliane supposed it was rather nice to look at, if she didn’t have any other options. But they were *still* talking about meat.

“Rabbit soup is also very good,” he went on. “The trick for that is to hit the bones with a hammer to get a better-tasting stock, and...”

As it happened, Eliane only shied away from rabbit meat because she’d once seen a cook skinning a rabbit when she was little. How was she supposed to enjoy a conversation involving hammering bones to get the juices out?

Quietly, she stood up and mounted her horse, which was equipped for sidesaddle riding. She was by no means a master rider, but she could get on and off herself and bring a horse around at a slow pace.

She was about to call for a servant when Glenn piped up.

“Need to use the bathroom?” he asked.

Wouldn’t someone hit this insensitive man upside the head for her? Annoyed, but never dropping her prim smile, she answered, “I’d like to take a short stroll around the area.”

“Oh, then you should take either me or Bartholomew with you.”

“No, I’ll be fine. This forest is like my backyard. I’d never get lost.”

In such situations, Leston would be the first to offer to accompany her. Today, though, he wasn't here. He was busy overseeing dinner preparations back at the estate.

There were two servants who weren't currently engaged. One had black hair—he was a new hire—and the other was Peter, a gray-haired old man who had a few more years under his belt.

She didn't know the new one's name, so she addressed Peter instead. "Come along, Peter."

"Ah, um. Yes, ma'am."

Peter seemed briefly confused by Eliane's whimsical request but did as she asked and started the horse walking.

The animal snorted as Eliane took up the reins, sounding a little unhappy but obediently beginning to walk. Animals didn't seem to like Peter very much. Still, this was better than leaving it up to the new hire.

As she rode sidesaddle and gripped the reins, she sighed. *Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a chance run-in with Felix in the forest?*

\* \* \*

"I wonder if Elly's gonna be all right," said Glenn, glancing after her. The duchess first offered him a drink, then a refined smile.

"Please don't be too offended," she said. "My daughter can be a little self-centered at times."

"Huh? She didn't do anything to offend me," he answered as he gulped down some hot tea.

"Oh, well!" replied the duchess, laughing.

*The way she smiles reminds me of Elly,* thought Glenn as he sipped more of his tea.

Then the Silent Witch's attendant raised his voice. "Forget the tea—I want some alcohol! And something to eat! Like meat!"

"I gotcha covered, Boss." The younger, black-haired servant hustled over and placed booze and dried meat on the mat in front of Bartholomew.

The young man grinned like a happy cat and made a guttural sound in his throat. “Excellent work, henchman!”

Glenn was baffled. Had this man seriously made another family’s servant his *henchman*?

The duchess, however, smiled warmly. “You two certainly get along well. Is it because your names are the same?”

“...Their names?” Glenn cocked his head.

The black-haired servant gave a formal bow. “My name’s Bartholomeus, you see. In the language of Ridill, that would be Bartholomew.”

“That’s kinda confusing,” replied Glenn. “Bartholomew and Bartholomeus...”

“Then please just call me Baal instead.”

*I see,* thought Glenn. *Bartholomew and Baal. That should be a little easier to remember.*

Just then, as Bartholomew was chewing on a piece of dried meat, his head suddenly popped up and he started looking around.

“What is it?” asked Glenn.

“Something’s heading toward us. Like, *really* fast... What *is* this weird mana?” Even as he answered, his golden eyes busily searched their surroundings.

Then he stopped dead. His sharp gaze was pointed straight at where Eliane had gone.

“Hey. Henchman. And you, loud guy. Bring that fluffy-haired girl back here. Something bad is on its way.”

“Something bad?” asked Bartholomeus. “What do you mean, Boss?”

“I can’t quite tell. But it’s *really* bad. The shape, and the size...” Alexander fumbled for the right words, making it hard to feel a sense of urgency. The other servants were all looking at him, confused.

Then he inhaled sharply, and his eyebrows shot up. “Dragon!” he shouted. “... Or, uh, something really, really close to a dragon! It’s headed right for us!”



## CHAPTER 6

### Cursed

Despite the Duchy of Rehnberg's eastern location, it wasn't a particularly frequent target for dragonraids. There was one forest with a high concentration of mana in which a few dragons and spirits lived, but for the most part, they'd only see an herbivorous dragon stray from its pack and wander into a human settlement a few times a year, and that was it. Since Eliane's birth, there had only been a handful of incidents involving larger dragons.

So from Eliane's point of view, bears and boars were a much more present threat than dragons. And the woods in which the hunt was taking place were home to few such beasts, making it perfect for strolls.

*Oh, if only I happened to run into Prince Felix out here. How wonderful that would be! He would look a little surprised at first, but then he would smile. "Come here, Eliane," he'd say, extending a hand to me. I would hesitate, but then I'd reach out... And he'd take me in his arms, a little forcefully, but not too much. Then I'd be embarrassed, but he'd tell me to hang on tight, so I'd nervously reach for his chest, and...*

As she was busy having a wonderful daydream, her horse suddenly stopped.

"Oh? What's the matter?" she said.

"Not sure, ma'am. The horse got frightened all of a sudden..."

Peter gave the horse a once-over but didn't see any injuries. And yet the creature was clearly excited—afraid of something. Peter readied his hunting gun, in case there was some large animal nearby. But the forest was very quiet. Eliane couldn't hear the sound of any beasts parting the foliage.

The wind picked up, causing her skirt's hem to flutter. The air chilled her skin; had the sun gone behind the clouds? She looked up to check...and her mind blanked.

"...Huh?"

There was something blotting out the sun—but it wasn't a cloud. It was some

large creature, circling over the treetops. The sight of its huge silhouette made Eliane's blood run cold.

"...A dragon?"

The first flying dragon that came to mind was a pterodragon. They were usually as big as a bull, if not a little bigger. But the dragon overhead was twice that size, at least. It had tough, thick scales and a vivid green coloration.

"Green... It's a greater dragon...," she murmured.

Peter looked up as well, and his face went white. He pulled at the horse's reins, meaning to fulfill his duty as a servant. But the frightened horse wouldn't take a single step. In fact, it seemed ready to start thrashing about if he kept prodding it.

"My lady, please get down from there!"

"B-but wouldn't it be faster to escape on horseba—?"

"Horses always go crazy when a dragon's around! You'll be tossed off your saddle!"

Frantically, Eliane released the reins, held down her skirt, and tried to get off the horse. But just then, the dragon let out a shrill cry overhead. The horse neighed in fright, lifting its front legs high into the air. As Eliane lost her balance and tumbled from the saddle, Peter took her hand and pulled her far enough from the horse that she wouldn't be kicked.

Then an even stronger gust of wind blew through. The green dragon was rapidly descending toward them. Panicked, Peter and Eliane fled through the trees.

Once it was down on the ground, the green dragon dug into the horse's body with its thick, sharp claws, crushing it along with the sturdy saddle.

As the horse cried out its last whinny, Eliane quickly covered her ears and looked away. Peter was pulling on her arm.

"We need to get away from here, ma'am! Immediately!"

"W-wait a minute! Wouldn't it be safer to hide...?"

The dragon didn't pause to eat the horse's remains. It just kept carving into it with its claws, crushing it even further. It's behavior was clearly abnormal. Greater dragons were supposed to be intelligent, unlike lesser dragons. They weren't supposed to attack people from out of nowhere like this.

*So then why...?!*

As she watched the green dragon, Eliane felt something was amiss. Running over the surface of its vivid green scales, she thought she could see a black, belt-shaped shadow. It was like a snake, coiling around the dragon's body.

*Could that...be...?*

She'd never seen a dragon like that. But she'd read about them in stories.

When mana merged with negative emotions, it caused a locus of stagnation in the world. People called this stagnation a "curse." And when one of these curses, which spread through creatures like a disease and ruined their bodies, affected a dragon, it became a "cursed dragon."

An attack by a cursed dragon was the worst disaster imaginable. They spread their curse just by existing and were every bit as dangerous as black dragons, if just as rare.

*"Ooorrr...ooorrrggghhh..."*

The cursed green dragon let out a hoarse cry. It sounded like the sides of its throat were scraping against each other. Then part of the shadow around its body lifted up and coiled around the horse's remains.

The flesh of the once-living creature rapidly turned black as it melted into the snakelike shadow.

Eliane sensed what had happened intuitively. The curse had eaten the horse.

*"Peter. Oh no, Peter..."*

*"No, no. Oh no... I'll be next... I'll... I'll... Nooo...!"*

Peter bit the thumbnail of his left hand and scratched madly at his head with his right. He was delusional. The adult escorting Eliane was in a complete panic, and his terror and confusion infected her, too.



“No!” she screamed. “I don’t want this! No! Not here! Not now! ...I don’t want to die...!”

After absorbing the horse, the shadow slithered back to the green dragon’s body. The beast slowly turned its thick neck, then focused its eyes on Eliane and Peter’s hiding place. It had found its next prey.

*It’s okay. We’re okay,* thought Eliane. *The trees are too dense here. A big dragon like that won’t be able to pass through...*

But her tiny ray of hope was destroyed by a single flap of the green dragon’s wings.

As they rose and fell, their thick membranes created a gust of wind like an invisible blade that chopped through all the trees nearby.

Just as red dragons used fire and blue dragons water, green dragons could control the wind. And it was this ability that made them the greater counterpart of pterodragons.

“Nooo... No, no. Oh no...!”

The dark shadow coiled around the dragon lifted up again, this time crawling toward them. That shadow was the curse itself. If it touched them...well, Eliane had just seen what would happen.

“Nooooooooooooooooo!”

Just as Eliane forced her trembling legs to move, the green dragon flapped its wings again. A powerful gust threw her to the ground. She was trapped.

The dragon’s shadow slowly rose higher, aiming to consume them.

“Elly! ...And your, uh, servant!” Suddenly, someone scooped her up in his strong arms and held her against the side of his body. “You’re not hurt, are you?!”

It was Glenn. Glenn had rescued her. He’d gotten Peter, too. He was flying low through the air, Peter under his right arm, Eliane under his left. But no matter how young and strong Glenn was, their combined weight had to be stretching him to his limit. His face was bright red.

But he kept hold of them, not letting them fall, as he flew through the dense

trees, weaving between them. Flying any higher would make him an easy target for the green dragon.

The dragon flapped its wings again, this time with broader strokes, and lifted itself off the ground to pursue them. The black shadow reached out from its body like a tentacle.

It was said that one could outrun horses using flight magecraft, but Glenn was only moving a little faster than a human could run. The two people in his arms were weighing him down. Compared to when he'd picked her up during the festival play, Eliane could tell that he was less stable and more wobbly.

Keeping up the flight spell, he tried to quickly chant something else. But nothing happened. He probably wasn't used to maintaining two spells at once.

With the shadow almost upon them, Peter shrieked. "Ah! Nooo! It's going to reach us!"

But moments before it touched their feet, Glenn jerked in another direction, fleeing around a large tree. Keeping them airborne, he hid behind the tree, then finished his chant.

"How do you like...this?!"

A ball of fire appeared out of thin air, then soared straight toward the green dragon's eyes. Glenn couldn't move around with flight magecraft and use attack spells at the same time. So he'd stopped in place first, then cast his second spell. And since he'd kept them floating, he could immediately resume his low-altitude flight.

"Now's our chance...!" Glenn groaned under the strain but managed to carry them away.

Eliane bent her neck as far as it would go to look behind them as Glenn carried her through the air.

There was a burst of flame. Beyond it, the shadow writhed, almost like a snake being burned alive.

But Eliane knew something of magecraft, and she could tell that the flame spell wasn't very powerful. It was probably lacking in firepower because Glenn

wasn't accustomed to simultaneous casting.

*But it was loud, and fire's easy to see. Someone will realize something's wrong...!*

Then, as if her fleeting hope had cursed them, the fire dissipated. Glenn's flame had lost to the green dragon's wind.

Because they'd fled into a very dense part of the woods, the green dragon didn't come after them—but the shadow did, slithering along like a cobra. And it was *fast*.

Glenn let out a piercing roar.

“Raaaaaaaaggghhhhh!”

Then he threw Eliane and Peter into the nearby brush. They tumbled across the mossy ground.

“Eek!”

“Ahhh!”

The branches and hard leaves cut Eliane's soft skin and got tangled in her fluffy hair. *What a way to treat a lady! I must complain to him this instant!* she thought, getting up. That was when she saw it.

The black shadow had wrapped around Glenn's leg just after he'd thrown them to the side. It slithered up from his ankle to his torso, then to his neck, then to his face. He was still in the air at that point—but then he dropped like a bird shot out of the sky.

“Aghaaaaaaahhgrrahhhhhhahahhhhhhhh, gwahhhhhh!”

He let out a bloodcurdling scream. Eliane was terrified. She wanted to shut her ears against his pitiful cry.

Black shadows mottled his body. Just like with the horse's corpse, the curse was trying to absorb Glenn.

His face, always so cheerful and lively, was now warped in agony. Eliane could only watch, trembling.

*No... No, I don't want this... No...*

Half of his body had already been engulfed by the shadow. His eyes lost focus, and his mouth opened and closed as soft whimpers escaped. They weren't cries of anguish, though—it was a last, desperate chant.

“...Guh... Burn... Burn, damn it!”

A fireball appeared in his palm and flew out of his shaking hand. With a sharp, painful noise, it struck the green dragon in the face. Unlike before, this one was very powerful.

The shadow engulfing Glenn's body slithered back to the dragon, leaving a part of itself behind.

The dragon, however, was fine, despite taking the fireball to the face. A dragon's scales were heat-resistant, and attacks had little effect unless directed at the spot right between their eyes.

Nevertheless, it seemed to have sensed a threat from the high-powered flame, and the green dragon—still enveloped in the snakelike curse—turned around and left.

“Are...? Are we saved...?” asked Peter as he gasped for breath.

Eliane didn't even notice him. Legs trembling, she made her way to Glenn.

“L-Lord Glenn...?”

No response. He lay on the ground, face down, not moving. Only the remnants of the curse writhed and slithered along his body.

“No... No... You're gonna be okay, right? Get up... Please, I'm begging you, get up...”

“Don't touch him!”

She heard a sharp shout from behind as someone grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, like a mother cat grabbing a kitten. It was the tall young man with black hair—the Silent Witch's attendant, Bartholomew Alexander.

“L-let go of me. Lord Glenn... Lord Glenn saved us, and then...”

“He's cursed right now. If you touch him, it'll spread to you, too.”

“But... But I... If I don't do something... Lord Glenn... He'll die...”

When she began to hiccup and whimper, Bartholomew frowned in distaste and released her. He then squatted in front of Glenn and observed the shadow engulfing his body.

“This thing works a lot faster on creatures with less mana...,” he muttered. “Yeah, I knew it. This guy’s got a lot for a human... He might have even more than my master.” He poked the shadow with a finger.

It began to crawl up his hand, then suddenly reeled away.

“Hmm. Yep, looks like I can touch it just fine.”

Bartholomew threw Glenn over his shoulder, then looked at Eliane and Peter in turn. “Anyway, let’s get back to safety. Once we’re at the mansion, call a curse expert. This is no job for an amateur.”

\* \* \*

The hunting party had no shortage of people. In addition to Felix and Duke Rehnberg, there were eight more nobles from Ridill, plus the eight Farfolian envoys, and then everyone’s servants and escorts. Monica was pretty sure the hunt would be more efficient if they split up. But instead, everyone kept trotting around on their horses exchanging casual conversation. Rather than a real hunt, this was more of a social activity meant to deepen ties with the foreign delegation.

*I suppose if we all stay together, it will make it easier for me to protect the prince...*

Monica, who was accompanying them as an escort, rode sidesaddle, since her robe made it difficult to straddle the animal normally. Her staff had proved a hindrance, so she’d given it to Nero.

While she’d learned the basics of horseback riding at Serendia Academy, this was her first time riding sidesaddle. It made it difficult to trot or gallop and afforded her less stability than mounting normally. Still, she managed not to look too embarrassing—maybe the classes were coming in handy after all. If she hadn’t taken them, she’d have fallen off the horse within minutes.

*It’s really cold...*

Monica gripped and regripped the reins a few times, trying to get her blood

flowing. It was warm in the sunlight that day, but all the shade in the forest made it uncomfortably cool. She regretted not wearing gloves.

Felix's horse came up next to hers. His handling of the reins was as steady as ever.

He looked concerned. "Are you cold in that outfit, my lady?" he asked. "Please, use my gloves."

Monica didn't dare accept such an offer. She shook her head.

Just then, she heard the yelp of a hunting dog behind her, followed by a gunshot. Someone had shot a pheasant cornered by the dog.

The rifle was in the hands of Count Malé, the one who had been aggressive toward Felix during the talks. The dog returned to him, carrying the pheasant in its mouth.

Felix turned his horse to the count and smiled. "Your skill is impressive, Count Malé."

"I've had a lot of years to improve... I've been doing this a long time, after all."

His words were polite but somehow patronizing. In fact, there was something triumphant about his gaze as he looked back at the prince.

Felix didn't take the bait, though. He smiled gently and looked over at the hunting dog waiting by the count's feet. "Animals are particularly perceptive. I see the hunting dogs have recognized you as a man worthy of trust."

The implication that the prince *also* trusted him made the count a bit embarrassed.

"I'd like to be a man others can respect, just as you are," Felix continued. Monica saw the count's nostrils twitch.

It had been some time since they'd started hunting, but Felix had barely used his rifle. He was obviously trying to let the Farfolians reap the bounty of the hunt to put them in a good mood.

*Diplomacy seems really hard...* Even just watching the covert maneuvering was wearing down Monica's nerves. Privately, she sighed.

Then she heard a loud noise in the distance. It was a booming sound, like an explosion—lower and heavier than a gunshot.

“Hey! What is *that*?!”

The first one to raise his voice was Count Malé.

Up in the sky, in the direction of the sound, Monica saw a large dragon, its wings unfurled. Its silhouette resembled a pterodragon, but it was far bigger.

*Is that...a greater dragon? A green one?! What's it doing here?!*

As the guests began to panic, Felix soothed his horse and called out to those around him. “Please, remain calm. It doesn’t seem like the dragon is coming this way. We should stay quiet and head back to the rest area. The women may be worried.”

Felix’s composed words served to calm down the party, if only a little. Meanwhile, Monica clutched the front of her robe near the chest. She had a bad feeling about this. That loud noise she’d just heard was probably an attack of Glenn’s—Nero couldn’t use magecraft, after all.

Quickly, she calculated the distance and direction of the rest area from their current position. *The sound didn’t come from there... Is Glenn acting on his own? What’s Nero doing?*

As if to answer her questions, someone riding a horse approached them from the direction of the rest area. Atop the saddle was a man with deep, pronounced features and combed-back black hair—Bartholomeus.

“Apologies for not dismounting,” he said quickly, his voice strained. “I have a message from the boss—er, the Silent Witch’s attendant, Lord Alexander! He says... *Something bad is coming. Something real, real bad!*”

The message was careless but very like Nero. He was leaving it up to Monica to figure out what to do about the approaching danger.

Duke Rehnberg, a man who easily faded into the background, patted the sweat on his face with a handkerchief. “Did Lord Alexander say exactly *what* was approaching?” he asked. “Though I suppose he probably means the dragon.”

“Uhhh...” Bartholomeus hesitated for a moment. “According to him, it’s something...extremely close to a dragon.”

This uncharacteristically vague expression from Nero only made Monica’s heart beat faster.

\* \* \*

When the hunting party returned to the rest area, they found it in chaos. The servants were all petrified, and Eliane was sobbing. And there on the ground lay Glenn, his entire body engulfed in a black haze, his face pale, his body limp.

Amid the confusion, the Duchess of Rehnberg—normally so unassuming—was quickly and clearly handing out instructions to the servants.

“Send an urgent post to the capital. You may use my husband’s name. If anything happens, I will take responsibility. You, there—go back to the estate and get the doctor.”

The duchess glanced at Eliane, still crying next to her, and gave her a sharp scolding. “How long are you going to keep that up, Eliane? Tears won’t help anything. If you’ve nothing else to do, at least get into a carriage so you’re not in the way.”

Finally, Eliane broke down into full-blown sobs.

The normally timid duke ran up to his wife. “...Wh-what is this? What happened?”

“A cursed dragon, dear. Lord Dudley was cursed protecting Eliane.”

A cursed dragon. Those words seemed to freeze the air around them.

Cursed dragons were semi-mythical creatures. Nobody here had ever seen one before. But people still spoke of the towns they’d destroyed in the past.

The term referred to any dragon under the effect of a curse, but the nature of these curses was not fully understood, even in modern times. This was because while curses were natural phenomena, they were extremely rare.

Shamanic techniques used magecraft to create curses and control them—a field known as *cursecraft*. Shamans specialized in this area, though there were very few of them. Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman of the Seven Sages, was one



such practitioner.

House Albright kept tight control over all knowledge of curses and cursecraft. In other words, even Monica—another Sage—knew almost nothing about the topic.

“Hey. You’re back.”

As Monica got off her horse, Nero walked over to her; he’d been watching Glenn.

Before she could open her mouth, Felix dismounted and said, “Thanks for notifying us of the danger. How is Dudley doing?”

“Real bad,” said Nero. “A normal guy would’ve been toast by now. But he’s got a high mana capacity, so he’s just barely holding out against the curse... Don’t touch him, no matter what. You’ll catch the curse.”

“Then how are we to carry him?”

“I can touch him. ‘Cause I’m great and all that.”

As she listened to their exchange, Monica cast a detection spell without chanting and observed Glenn. A black, ribbonlike shadow was wrapped around his body—this was the curse. It changed in shape from moment to moment, like a serpent crawling across his skin.

*The curse is trying to absorb him, but his mana is just barely managing to stop it... That must mean mana is resistant to it, to some extent. But I don’t think a regular defensive barrier will block it out completely. If I were to compose a formula specifically to counteract it...and since cursecraft has similar properties to dark-aspected magecraft...*

But then someone shrieked, interrupting her train of thought. It was Peter, the gray-haired servant.

“Dra... Drag... Dragon!” he yelled, pointing. Then he screamed. “Aaahhhhhhhhh!”

The green dragon, its body mottled with black, was soaring toward them through the sky. As it spread its wings, Monica realized it was as big as her mountain cabin. And as it flew, it carried with it a gust of wind laced with mana

and that black, ribbonlike shadow. If its attack hit her dead-on, she wouldn't stand a chance.

Immediately, she used unchartered magecraft to create a defensive barrier. But while it could block the dragon's physical momentum and the wind, it couldn't block the curse.

Her concerns had proved justified; the shadow slithering over the green dragon lifted up and off its body and attacked them from overhead. It easily made it through Monica's barrier.

While those around her cried out in hopelessness, Monica picked up her staff from where it lay on the ground and activated a magecraft formula she'd just come up with. The decorations on the staff jingled.

*Please work...!*

The hastily devised formula was meant to create a defensive barrier that would block curses. Her theory was full of holes, and normally Monica would never use an unverified spell in live combat. But there was no time now to worry about appearances.

Her desperate attempt at an anti-curse barrier successfully activated and repelled the black shadow. It had worked. Her improvised barrier was effective.

Nearby, she heard people sighing in relief, but Monica paled. The situation was hopeless.

*This won't work. I can't attack like this!*

Monica could only maintain two spells at once. And right now, she was already using two: the regular barrier to block the dragon's physical assault, and the second to stave off the curse. That meant she couldn't launch any attacks of her own.

Some people in the group were carrying hunting rifles, but her regular barrier would block the bullets. Unless there was a mage who could use attack magic from outside the barriers, they would have no way to mount an offensive. And the only person here who could feasibly use attack magecraft strong enough to deal a fatal blow to the dragon was Glenn, who was currently unconscious.

*I need more attack options...!*

Meanwhile, the black shadow never waned in strength—far from it. It was now eating through her barrier. The spell was untested; of course it had holes to exploit. It was only a matter of time before the curse broke through and they lost. What's more, Monica couldn't maintain a barrier spell for that long to begin with.

*Mister Louis could have combined the two barriers into one and made them stronger and sturdier, but I can't!*

The Barrier Mage was a genius who could imbue a barrier with multiple effects. If he'd been here, he could have combined Monica's barriers into a single one of his own, then used his free hand to cast offensive magecraft.

Monica's ability to cast spells without chanting was so powerful because it took so little time. As long as she could seize the initiative, she was practically invincible. But when she was on the back foot, locked in a defensive battle, she lost her advantage. And that was just what was happening now.

*I have to do something. Anything... I'm one of the Seven Sages. I'm the Silent Witch...!*

She wanted to get everyone away from here, at least. However, the barriers she had up were hemispheres. While they protected everyone inside them, they also locked them in, preventing escape.

*Could I expand the barrier to the rear, then get everyone as far away as possible? No, if I expand them any more than this, they'll lose strength... Should I momentarily disengage the normal barrier and use an attack spell? But if I don't block the green dragon's wind blades, people could be killed...!*

It was hopeless. She felt like she'd been deadlocked in a game of chess. She considered option after option, but none of them would be enough to put her enemy in check.

*Something... Anything...*

Then, as Monica racked her brain in desperation, someone began to move.

It was Felix. He walked up to Monica where she stood, staff aloft, maintaining

her barriers.

*No, Prince! It's not safe! Stay back...!* she cried out in her mind.

Next to her, Felix readied his hunting rifle. "Can you partially disengage your regular defensive barrier, my lady? A hole the size of a fist would do."

Monica realized what Felix was up to, and his recklessness left her shocked. Still, she nodded. As he faced down the cursed dragon, he wore the same calm smile as he did in the student council room. With practiced motions, he took aim with his rifle.

"I'll shoot it between the eyes."

Monica instantly used the angle of the rifle to measure the bullet's trajectory, then opened a fist-sized hole in the barrier to let it through.

Felix squeezed the trigger.

*Bang!* The gunshot came from right next to her, causing Monica to cringe away for a moment. A sulfuric odor attacked her nose.

*"...Oooooaanhhhhhh-ahhhhhh, ahhhhhhh!"*

The green dragon, shot right between the eyes, let out one last roar and fell to the ground. When she heard it, Monica froze.

*Was that just—?*

She looked at the fallen green dragon, but it was already an unspeaking corpse. The black shadow clinging to the creature, too, immediately stopped moving.

"Thank you for believing in me, Lady Everett," said Felix with a smile as he lowered the muzzle of his rifle.

People around them cheered. "Prince Felix and the Silent Witch have slain a legendary cursed dragon!"

But Monica wasn't listening to their cries of adulation, nor to Felix's honeyed voice.

All she could think of were the dragon's dying words.



## CHAPTER 7

### What the Puppet Felt on the Brink of Death

Glenn was brought back to Duke Rehnberg's estate, but even as night fell, he still hadn't regained consciousness. The only ones in the room with him were Monica and Nero. No servants were permitted to enter, since it was possible the remaining curse would attack someone else.

The black shadow was visible in the candlelight, still clinging to his body. It had stopped moving after they'd killed the source—the green dragon. But just as the shadow had remained on the dragon's corpse, so it remained on the unconscious Glenn.

He would occasionally moan in pain, but even then his voice was faint. Anyone could tell that the flame of his life was about to burn out.

"...Nero," said Monica as she watched the shadow. "The dragon's last words... You heard them, right?"

"Yep."

Greater dragons were highly intelligent and could understand human language. But their vocal organs weren't made to speak human words, so instead, they spoke the same language as the spirits.

Monica had studied spiritspeak back at Minerva's Mage Training Institution, so she could make out simple words.

*Never forgive. That human. Never forgive.*

The green dragon had clearly held a grudge against a human. And not all humans, but someone in particular.

"The poor girl was already pretty weak by the time I sensed her," said Nero.

Normally, greater dragons possessed at least as much mana as spirits did. And yet this one had been terribly weak—to the point that even Nero had difficulty detecting its presence.

"I only sensed the mana from the curse," he continued. "Its snaky shape felt

about as big as a typical dragon, so I thought maybe that's what it was. Turns out I was right."

The green dragon had been in such a state because the curse had eaten away at it. *That dragon was the source, so shouldn't killing it have been enough to take out the curse? At this rate, Glenn won't make it...*

If Monica channeled a large quantity of mana into Glenn, she might be able to drive away the curse. But the fix would only be temporary, and if she messed up, Glenn would contract mana poisoning. She could also try to tear the curse off by force, but she didn't know if his body would be able to endure the process.

Monica had far too little knowledge about curses to decide the best course of action. All she could do was wait for an expert to arrive.

*...I'm sorry I couldn't protect you, Glenn.*

Monica's friend was suffering, and she couldn't do a thing about it. Even though she was a Sage—one of the greatest mages in the country. She bit her lip. It made her feel so useless.

Then they heard a modest rapping at the room's door. Quickly, Nero checked to make sure Monica's hood was up and her veil was on, then he cracked open the door.

Peeking in through the gap was Eliane. Her eyes were swollen from crying. She was on her tiptoes, trying to get a look over Nero's shoulder.

"Ummm, is Lord Glenn...? How is he...?"

"Didn't anyone tell you to stay away from here?" Nero replied. He tried to close the door, but Eliane frantically clung to it.

"Will he make it?" she asked. "He... He will, right? One of the Seven Sages is here, so—"

"Curses ain't like magecraft, missy," said Nero bluntly. "You gotta be an expert in the field, or else you can't do anything."

Eliane desperately pressed on. "Wait! The Silent Witch blocked the curse with a barrier, right? Couldn't she do the same for Glenn?"

“Blocking it with a barrier and dispelling it are two different things. If she tries to rip it off, he could die from shock.”

Eliane let out a frightened yelp; she hadn't expected that. Apparently, Glenn had been protecting her and a servant named Peter when he'd contracted the curse. Eliane probably felt responsible. It was as if the pretty girl's perpetual flowery smile had wilted.

“I'm terribly sorry...for bothering you,” said Eliane, her voice shaking. Then she quietly closed the door.

They heard whimpering from the other side. Once the sobs grew distant, Nero sighed in annoyance.

“Sheesh. Does everyone think the Seven Sages are some kinda cure-all?”

Monica couldn't blame them for thinking that. From a normal person's perspective, magecraft and cursecraft must have seemed more or less the same. The Sages were the supreme mages in the land, so why wouldn't they be able to handle curses?

Monica had created a makeshift anti-curse barrier using what little knowledge she'd gleaned from books and from Glenn's symptoms, but even that wasn't something just anyone could do. And yet Monica couldn't help but blame herself. Wasn't there something more she could have done?

“Cursed dragons are disasters of legendary proportions,” said Nero. “Even I've never seen one before. They've razed whole towns, haven't they? It's a miracle no one else was hurt.”

“But I couldn't save Glenn... What am I supposed to say to Mister Louis...?”

Just then, they heard Glenn moan from his spot on the bed. Monica reflexively turned to look, and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

The shadow seeping into his body had begun to twitch.

“Get back, Monica!” Nero tore her away from the bedside, then glared at the curse eating away at Glenn. “The loud guy's mana level is dropping... No, wait... It's being absorbed?”

But if the curse was absorbing Glenn's mana, wouldn't the shadow have



gotten more active?

*Is it sending the mana somewhere else? Wait, could it be—?*

Nero and Monica caught on and looked up at the same time.

“Could it be sending his mana back to the green dragon?” she said.

“It’s possible,” said Nero. “Maybe the secondary curses drain mana from prey and send it back to the source.”

He went over to the window and looked in the direction of the hunting grounds. The sun had long since set, and it was pitch-black outside, but he could see small sources of light. It came from flowers in the estate’s garden that shone when they absorbed mana.

Mana-absorbing flowers came in several varieties, but they were all called spiritrests, since the light made it seem like spirits were resting among their petals.

Nero stared past these into the deep, dark forest and narrowed his eyes. “Seems like we were right on the mark. The curse is getting closer and closer to us.”

“So is the green dragon still alive?” Monica wondered aloud. “Or did it die, and only the curse survived...?”

“Need my help with this one?”

Monica thought for a moment, then shook her head and grabbed her staff from where it was leaning against the wall. “First, I’ll give it a try myself... But could you come with me?”

Nero flashed her a toothy grin. “Of course!”

\* \* \*

Once he’d finished dining with the guests from Farfolia, Felix returned to his quarters. There, he loosened his tie and sighed.

The Silent Witch and her attendant hadn’t participated in the dinner party that night. They were both caring for Glenn Dudley. Except they weren’t “caring” for him as much as they were standing watch over his unconscious body.

Many people at the estate were concerned that the curse eating away at Glenn could attack others. A few even thought killing him would be for the best. Naturally, Felix had quickly ordered Glenn to be isolated and put under guard so that wouldn't happen.

*Ironically, this has benefited our negotiations with the Farfolians.*

Specifically, the way the Silent Witch had blocked the curse and kept damage to a minimum, and how Felix had made the killing shot. The Farfolians, particularly the stubborn Count Malé, had been very impressed.

The count had seemed to be in a great mood during dinner as he praised the prince's rifle skills. Personally experiencing a dragon attack also seemed to have made him more understanding of the need for the Dragon Knights' new base.

*What's more, he came face-to-face with a legendary calamity and survived. I'm sure he'll be telling that tale to everyone who will listen.*

Once the Farfolian delegation went home, they were sure to spread word of how terrifying cursed dragons were all across their nation. They'd conveniently gloss over how they all panicked, unable to do anything, and make themselves out to be heroes just for surviving.

Even the Duke and Duchess of Rehnberg were calling Felix a hero. Word of the second prince and the Silent Witch working together to slay a cursed dragon was sure to spread through Ridill like wildfire.

*...It's like the script of a play.*

Felix smiled sardonically, then glanced at an envelope he'd tossed onto his desk. He'd been given it upon his arrival at the estate, and it had no sender. The message in it was simple.

*"Signs of disease in the king. Handle everything perfectly."*

It was an order from Duke Clockford.

Anyone who didn't know better would think that it was telling him to handle all of his affairs perfectly so as not to burden the king while he was unwell. But Felix knew better. He knew exactly what the duke meant.

*The king is close to death. Handle yourself perfectly and seize the throne as his*

*successor.*

The cursed dragon was all part of the plan.

“...Despicable,” he said in a low voice, tossing the envelope into the fireplace. As he pushed back the ashes with a poker, a white lizard—Wildianu—entered the room through a gap in the window.

He’d been keeping watch outside, and now his voice was frantic. “Master, it’s an emergency. The cursed dragon from this afternoon is approaching the mansion.”

“Really, now? I thought I shot it right between the eyes. It survived? I’m impressed.”

Felix’s expression betrayed no sign of alarm. He went over and picked up his hunting rifle, which he’d left leaning against the wall.

Wildianu, despite his impassive reptilian face, seemed disturbed as he looked up at the prince. “Master...?”

“I must handle myself perfectly. Those were his orders.”

The expression vanished from Felix’s face. His gentle smile disappeared, and he took on a cold, empty look that would send a chill up anyone’s spine.

“I’ll be Duke Clockford’s good little puppet and clean up this mess without anyone noticing.”

Felix changed into simple clothes that were easier to move around in, then slipped out of his room. Carrying his hunting rifle, he ran through the dark. He would have liked to bring a horse, but he saw a groom by the stable, so he gave up on the idea. He couldn’t afford for anyone to see what he was about to do.

“Wil, where’s the cursed dragon right now?”

Wildianu, in his white lizard form, poked his head out of the prince’s chest pocket and answered apologetically. “North-northeast, at a distance of... I’m sorry, I can’t quite tell.”

“Okay. Let me know as soon as you can.”

Wildianu’s detection abilities weren’t very good, so he could only make out a

vague direction. Still, considering the dragon's size, Felix should be able to see it once he was close enough.

The prince continued to move, making sure to stay downwind from the cursed dragon. If he could find a spot with good elevation, it would be easier to shoot. After a short run, he found just the right hill—not too low, not too high. And it had enough tree cover, too, making it a perfect hiding spot. The dark of night would also help conceal him.

Felix took a small ammunition case out of his pocket, opened it, and fed the contents into his rifle.

“Wil?” he said.

In response, Wildianu channeled mana into the bullets. A spirit imbuing an object with mana had the same effect as imbuecraft—only far stronger. Ammunition enhanced with mana would ensure the dragon stayed down for good this time.

Felix loaded up his rifle, then looked down the hill. It was almost time.

After a moment or two, he heard the sound of something giant slithering along the ground. He didn't need to ask what it was.

The *thing* that was once a green dragon crawled forward, dragged along by the black shadow squirming all over its body. It had none of the dignity characteristic of greater dragons.

Felix pitied it. No matter what species one was, to have one's dignity stripped away like that was deserving of sympathy.

“I'll put you out of your misery,” he said.

Aiming wasn't difficult. His target was large and moved at a sluggish pace. Small pheasants were much harder to hit.

Felix pulled the trigger.

The mana-shrouded bullet struck the cursed dragon precisely between the eyes, as if drawn there magnetically. That would stop the green dragon in its tracks.

Or, at least, it should have. But the creature kept moving.

In fact, it changed direction and started heading for Felix. The serpentine black shadow leading the dragon forward had chosen him as its next target.

Felix knew the green dragon was already dead. The curse was simply pulling the corpse along in its wake.

*Reduced to a curse's puppet, even in death. What a wretched creature.*

His lips turned up in a thin, self-mocking smile.

“How can this be...?” murmured Wildianu from his pocket. “When the dragon dies, the curse should dissipate as well...”

Felix held a hand up to his pocket so the spirit wouldn't fall out, then shouldered his rifle and began to run.

“Then it must not be a normal curse. Usually, these creatures are possessed by naturally occurring curses. But this one is probably the result of cursecraft... In other words, it was artificially created.”

“I don't understand,” said Wildianu, confused. “Why would anyone...?”

“Because this whole cursed dragon affair was set up by Duke Clockford—all to make the second prince, Felix Arc Ridill, into a hero.”

The cursed dragon was now locked onto Felix. The prince tried to use the trees to aid his escape, but the shadow blended into the night, sneaking ever closer. It was only a matter of time before it caught up.

*With cursecraft this powerful, there must be a cursed tool somewhere, serving as a medium.*

As Felix ran, he observed the dragon approaching from behind. He couldn't make out any visible shamanic tools.

*If it were me, how would I get a tool like that into the dragon? The answer came immediately. I'd put it in its food.*

If the tool was inside the dragon's stomach, it would be nearly impossible to interfere with it from outside. A dragon's body was protected by thick scales. It would be very difficult to make an attack reach that far into the creature.

*Whoever did this must not have expected such an outcome... The cursecraft*

*was probably too strong, and now they can't control it.*

Felix loaded another round into his rifle, then burst out from behind a tree and fired into the dragon's lolling mouth. The projectile tore away at the oral cavity, but Felix doubted it had reached as far as the stomach.

The dragon brought up one of its thick front legs. Felix smiled hollowly, envisioning the moment it would swing its sharp claws down at him.

*...What an ironic way to die.*

Duke Clockford probably hadn't predicted any of this, either.

With death fast approaching, one thought came to the prince's sobered mind: If he were to die here, how many people would remember him?

*"The prince who gave his life trying to protect the people from a cursed dragon..." I suppose that would give me a passing mark, just barely.*

The prince was still caught in his obsession, even on the brink of death. The dragon's claws sliced through the air toward him—only to be flung away with a hard noise at the last moment.

Felix's eyes went wide, and an exasperated voice rang out behind him.

"Seems like you really like the nightlife, huh, Prince?"

A black-haired man in an old-fashioned robe trotted over to him from behind the cursed dragon. It was Bartholomew Alexander, carrying the Silent Witch on his back.

Staff in hand, she'd formed a defensive barrier that had saved Felix in the nick of time.

Bartholomew let her down from his back, then smirked as if they weren't in any danger. "Check it out, Master. Guess this guy finally got tired of fooling around with women. Now he's chasing around female dragons!"

Felix, far too calm for someone who'd just had a brush with death, responded to the other man's banter. "Oh? That dragon was female?"

"Well, duh. Didn't you see her sexy tail?"

Next to Bartholomew, the Silent Witch waved her staff. A moment later, ten

or so ice spears appeared over the cursed dragon's head, before skewering its giant wings and pinning them to the ground.

Unlike its scale-covered torso, its wings were more vulnerable. Nevertheless, you'd have trouble piercing them without high-powered magecraft. And the Silent Witch had done it so easily, without even chanting.

Now that the dragon was pinned to the ground, the black shadow rose up to attack them. The Silent Witch waved her staff again, its decorations ringing. An anti-curse barrier appeared, and the shadow bounced off of it.

"My lady! It's cursecraft," Felix called out to her. "There should be a shamanic tool somewhere in its body!"

Bartholomew's eyes widened in shock. "What? Cursecraft?! But *humans* use that! I've never heard of anyone using cursecraft to control a dragon before!"

Naturally, neither had Felix. But he was almost sure of it. This had all been set up by some shaman in Duke Clockford's employ.

Originally, the curse was probably meant to give its user control over the dragon. The shaman would then set the dragon upon the Farfolian guests, creating a situation where Felix could work with the Silent Witch to slay the creature. It would provide powerful evidence of the danger of dragonraids, simultaneously convincing the Farfolians of the need for a Dragon Knight outpost in the area and boosting Felix's status by having him slay a legendary cursed dragon. And if Felix could give everyone the impression he was trusted by the Seven Sages, even better.

...But the shaman had lost control of the curse, and it was now running amok.

Bartholomew was still in a state of disbelief, but the ever-sharp Silent Witch immediately sprang into action. With a swing of her long staff, she made the ice spears skewering the cursed dragon disappear, and she summoned spears of flame in their place.

Blazing with crimson fire, they entered the dragon through its oral cavity and roasted it from within along with the tool.

Even as this happened, the black shadow desperately tried to resist, only to hit the anti-curse barrier and bounce uselessly back.

If the green dragon were still able to use its abilities, it might have attacked them with wind blades. But the dragon had almost no mana left. Its body was moving through the power of the curse, but it couldn't produce any more wind.

As the shadow continued its futile resistance, they heard a muffled boom from the dragon's belly. The Silent Witch's flames had exploded inside the creature's stomach.

It must have destroyed the shamanic tool, because the black shadow finally began to thin. Eventually, it disappeared completely, melting away into the night.

All it left behind was the dragon's mangled corpse. Its green scales showed no signs of the shadowy curse.

Felix sighed and turned to look at the Silent Witch.

*She saved me again.*

His heart, so cold even in the face of death, began to beat again as though only now remembering its purpose. The warmth returned to his chilled fingers, and he could hear blood pounding in his ears.

He took a step toward the Silent Witch.

"Lady Everett," he said. His voice trembled with such emotion that it surprised even him. "...Once again, I've been saved by one of your miracles."

Reverence, adoration, yearning, longing—several powerful emotions shook his heart, causing Felix to act on impulse. He took the lady's hand, intending to kiss it as a sign of gratitude.

But the Silent Witch shook her hand away.

"My lady?"

".....Ah!"

A muffled yelp came from behind her veil, and she suddenly fell to her knees. A black thread, slender as a hair, was wrapped around her left hand.

"Blast!" shouted Bartholomew, violently swatting at the thread. It snapped in midair. Part of it remained on the Silent Witch's hand, while the rest slithered



back to the green dragon's remains.

That was when Felix finally realized what was going on. The curse—the cursecraft—was still active.

The Silent Witch, the shadow now infecting her left hand, gripped her staff and hunched over on the ground.

By the time Monica noticed the hairlike shadow creeping toward her through the dark, it was already coiled around her left hand.

She was too late; even an uncharmed barrier spell wouldn't make it in time. All she could do was swat away Felix's hand before he could touch her, then back away and focus her mana around the curse so that it wouldn't spread to the rest of her body.

Thanks to Nero swatting it away so quickly, only a tiny, tiny piece of it was still attached to her.

*It's not much. I might be able to hold it back with my mana...*, she thought.

But the moment she tried to focus her mana, an intense pain shot through her forearm. It felt like nails were being driven into her blood vessels.

She lost control of the mana in her left hand, and it flowed into the staff she'd been clinging to. The staff fell to the ground, its decorations clattering.

Letting go of it, Monica bit down on her right arm to stop herself from screaming. Nero scooped up Monica as she huffed and groaned. He and Felix were both panicking and shouting something at her, but she couldn't hear them. The only sound in her ears was the terribly loud beating of her own heart.

“...Haaah... Hoo... Ngh...”

Trying to slow the curse's advance by any amount she could, Monica focused her mana in her left arm and fought against it. She felt dizzy. Red and black flashed before her eyes, and her vision blurred.

And in that haziness, Monica saw an illusion.

She could see a fallen dragon, but not the green one with the curse. The dragon had green scales, but it was only around half as big. It must have been a baby.

Eighty percent of its body was covered in the black shadow, and it was no longer moving.

Someone stood next to the young dragon's corpse—a human. Their face was a blur, but they had the silhouette of an adult man.

“It was all going so well. It swallowed the shamanic tool... But it didn't work. Another failure. Damn it!”

The man's voice was bitter and hateful as he turned his back on the dragon's corpse and began to walk away.

Then a huge, magnificent green dragon landed before him. It was probably the young one's mother. Enraged, the large dragon chased after the human, but the human was quick and hid behind a cluster of large rocks.

At this rate, she would lose sight of the wretched man.

*Never forgive! Never forgive! Never forgive!*

The green dragon had only gotten a glimpse of the human's face. If he escaped into a crowd, she would never be able to find him again.

*No escape! No escape! No escape!*

The green dragon returned to what remained of her child and looked down at its body, eaten away by the cursed tool.

And then the green dragon opened her mouth wide and bit into her child's corpse. Her sharp fangs tore through the still-soft scales and skin, digging into the meat beneath—and the tool that had killed her child.

The tool contained a large amount of the shaman's mana. If the dragon followed the mana...she would find the man.

*I'll tear him limb from limb!*

And so the green dragon, now cursed, spread its wings and took flight.

She would find that hateful man that had cursed her child and kill him.

*Ah...*

Monica had gotten a glimpse of the green dragon's memories. Was it because she'd come into contact with the curse?

As her consciousness faded, she understood.

*Someone cursed her child with a shamanic tool... That's why she was so angry...*

The black shadow coiled around her left arm absorbed Monica's mana and sent it to the green dragon, and the dragon's body began to twitch and move once again. Its wings were battered and torn, its gut incinerated from within... It should have been long dead. But the cursed green dragon's single-minded loathing continued to animate its corpse.

All she wanted was revenge on the man that had killed her child.

Her resentful cries echoed in Monica's mind, over and over.

Before Felix's eyes, the green dragon's body slowly raised itself up off the ground and began to move.

He clenched his teeth. This was the worst-case scenario.

The Silent Witch's body hung limp in her attendant's arms. She'd probably passed out.

Felix gripped his hunting rifle tighter.

The gun could destroy the dragon's body, but it couldn't dispel the curse. Still, he wouldn't simply stand by and let it kill him.

His beloved Silent Witch had fallen while protecting him, and he wasn't going to let her die.

"...I'll buy you time. Take Lady Everett and run," said Felix. His expression was hard as he readied his weapon.

But Bartholomew didn't even glance in the prince's direction. Instead, he lay the Silent Witch down on the ground. Then he walked smoothly past the prince, and with unnaturally natural steps, he approached the cursed dragon.

The black shadow reached out like a belt and wrapped itself around Bartholomew's body.

Just touching the curse was intensely painful. The Silent Witch had passed out after coming into contact with a piece of it no bigger than a hair.

“As your fellow, I know you don’t wish to live in such wretched misery. So I’ll do you a favor and turn you into dust in an instant.”

The darkness surrounding Bartholomew Alexander solidified and swelled.

It was a different kind of darkness than the curse eating the green dragon—it was blacker than the night sky, purer.

It grew to twice the green dragon’s size, and from it spread a pair of wings, blocking out the moon.

An overwhelming, violent aura fanned out as the creature veiled in darkness revealed the fullness of its form.

Fangs that could rip through a bull like butter. Sharp claws that could kill hundreds with a single stroke. Scales like obsidian.

All came together to form a gigantic silhouette.

This was the most feared creature in all of Ridill—a black dragon.





Inside Felix's pocket, Wildianu trembled. Felix barely managed to stop himself from doing the same, but he couldn't hide his utter shock. He felt a cold sweat break out on his palms.

*The Silent Witch's attendant is a black dragon? Could it be...?*

Like cursed dragons, black dragons were the stuff of legends. They almost never showed themselves before people.

But Felix had seen one before. How could he forget? Half a year ago, a miracle had happened in the County of Kerbeck. The Silent Witch was said to have slain a black dragon.

It had come to roost in County Kerbeck's Worgan Mountains, with twenty pterodragons under its command.

"The Black Dragon...of Worgan..."

The black dragon opened its mouth wide and spat jet-black flames. They were deeper and blacker than both the curse's shadow and the dark of night, and within three blinks of an eye, the cursed dragon had been burned from existence.

A black dragon's flames were the flames of the underworld. Nothing could block them—neither defensive barriers nor curses.

Once it unleashed them, there was no way to protect yourself. They reduced everything to ash.

The black dragon slowly reared its head, then looked down at the paralyzed Felix. Its golden eyes stared at him with a cold, reptilian gaze. They seemed to plumb the very depths of his soul.

At that point, Felix realized that he'd forgotten to breathe.

He clenched his cold, sweat-soaked hands and inhaled and exhaled a few times. His white breath faded into the night. His body began to tremble from something other than the cold, but he stopped it and looked up, meeting that golden gaze.

The black dragon let out an exhalation of air through its nose, like a laugh.

But Bartholomew's face remained steady. He peeled the shadow off his body...and then, shockingly, he bit down on it.

Even Felix was rendered speechless by the sight.

"Tastes like crap," said Bartholomew.

After chewing on it a few times, he spat it out on the ground. The piece of shadow slithered back to the green dragon's body like a frightened snake.

Bartholomew narrowed his golden eyes. They glinted as he fixed the dragon's curse-eaten body with a nasty glare.

"You broke my master, didn't you?" he asked.

There was no wind, and yet his black hair rustled.

Then Bartholomew's body began to turn black, little by little, as if melting into the night. Only his golden eyes remained unchanged, glittering in the dark.

Then, abruptly, its body became a black blur, like ink dissolving into water. Eventually, the blur condensed into the shape of an adult man with black hair and golden eyes, wearing an old-fashioned robe. He was once again Bartholomew Alexander, the Silent Witch's attendant.

"Heh, I see you're not running," he said. "You've got guts, Prince."

"I'm still quite shocked."

Quite shocked? What an empty show of courage. The prince smiled bitterly and carefully evened his voice.

"I thought Lady Everett had slain you."

"Yeah. We pretended she did. Better for you humans that way."

Felix swallowed his objection. The dragon was right. If anyone knew a legendary black dragon had become the familiar of one of the Seven Sages, the kingdom would erupt into chaos.

Having a dragon familiar was unprecedented. And this was a *black* dragon. No



such mage had ever existed in all of history.

If this became public knowledge, many would want to use the Silent Witch and her black dragon as weapons of war, or at least as a deterrent against other nations attacking. Duke Clockford certainly would.

And the Silent Witch wouldn't want that.

Felix grew quiet, and the black dragon in human form flashed him a toothy grin.

“Worried? Terrified? Well, don't be. I'm the Silent Witch's familiar. As long as she's my master, I ain't attacking any humans.”

The black dragon picked up his master's tiny body, then slowly turned his head to look at Felix.

“But I gotta warn you. You tell anyone about me, and...” His smile took on a vicious cast, and his sharp teeth clacked together. “...I'll devour you headfirst.”



## CHAPTER 8

### Looking for Love at the Rehnberg Estate

Five days after the cursed dragon appeared in the Duchy of Rehnberg, a man arrived at the duke's estate just after noon. He had striking, uneven violet hair, and the moment he saw the maid assigned to guide him, he clung to her with a look of desperation as his pink eyes darted about.

"I-if I'm needed, that means I'm loved, right? That's what I should assume, yes? Please, I'm begging you, tell me you love me. Please love me. Love me, love me, love me..."

This love-starved man was Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman, and he'd managed to put off all the maids within moments of arriving.

Like Monica, he was one of the Seven Sages. And he was the foremost expert on shamanic techniques and cursecraft in the kingdom.

\* \* \*

Bartholomeus gave Monica's staff a shake to make sure the decorations were firmly attached, then nodded in satisfaction.

"There we go, kid. All fixed."

Monica nervously reached out and took the staff with her right hand. She was sitting on the couch in her room, wearing her Sage robe and trying to make herself as small as possible. Her staff's ornaments were back to normal, at least visually, and the tool made a high-pitched jingle when she shook it.

She channeled her mana into it as a test and felt it travel into the staff without any issues. It even made it through the spot where the decorations had been broken.

"Wow..." Monica gasped in admiration despite herself.

The Seven Sages' staffs were magical items embedded with extremely precise and complex magecraft. To repair one, one had to understand magecraft formulae and possess the skills and techniques of a craftsman. Monica had spent a little time studying magical item engineering at Minerva's, but she

didn't have anywhere near the skills required to repair something as advanced as a Sage's staff.

Nero poked the staff's decorations. Then he looked at Bartholomeus, impressed. "Hey, you're pretty handy. Glad to have you around, henchman."

"Heh, well, a looong time ago, I worked at a magical item workshop. I gotta say, that curse was really something. It takes a lot to wreck an advanced magical item like this. Hey, kid, how's your left hand? Still not moving?"

Monica leaned the staff against the sofa, then nodded a little, rubbing her left hand with her right.

No one but Felix and Nero knew about what had happened that night five days prior—about how she and Felix had confronted the cursed dragon and how Nero had incinerated it with his black flames. Felix had told Duke Rehnberg and the others that the cursed dragon's remains had disappeared at some point, likely devoured by the curse and destroyed. Regarding Monica's injury, he'd said she sustained it during the battle with the cursed dragon, and that it had gotten worse after the fact.

Those excuses were best for both Felix and Monica. Felix didn't have to reveal that he'd snuck out of the estate at night, and Monica and Nero's identities could remain hidden.

With the complete destruction of the shamanic tool, the curse eating away at Glenn and Monica had disappeared, but Glenn still hadn't regained consciousness. Both Glenn's body and Monica's hand were also dark red and bruised—possibly an aftereffect of the curse. The bruise itself had a branched pattern, like blood vessels or the branches of a tree. Meanwhile, Monica had essentially lost the ability to hold anything in her left hand. It was fine if she kept it still, but even bending a finger slightly resulted in stinging pain.

The situation was inconvenient, but her self-professed collaborator, Bartholomeus Baal, was helping her out. He frequently went to check on Glenn, and now he'd fixed her broken staff. He'd even gotten one of the maids he was friendly with to help Monica change clothes and bathe. At the end of the day, it was nice to be able to ask him for help without having to write out little notes, like she had to with the other servants.

*The problem is, how do I introduce him to Miss Ryn...?*

As she was mulling this over, Bartholomeus seemed to notice something and glanced toward the hallway.

“What’s that? There’s a lotta commotion around the front door... I’ll go check it out,” he said, hurrying out of the room.

Monica checked to make sure the door was closed, then flopped down on the couch.

Nero, who was standing behind it, leaned over the back and peered into her face. “Good job hangin’ in there, Master.”

“Mm. But now there’s so much to do, I don’t even know where to start...”

Introducing Bartholomeus to Ryn would be difficult, but at the moment, Monica was more concerned about Felix knowing Nero’s true identity. He’d barely visited her since they’d slain the cursed dragon. And the few times he *had* come to check on her, he’d had escorts and servants with him, so they couldn’t talk about Nero.

*Nero says he made Felix promise not to tell anyone, but... Ugh. Not even Mister Louis knows Nero is the Black Dragon of Worgan...*

She buried her face in a couch cushion and groaned.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Bartholomeus called to her from the hallway.

“Hey, uh, there’s a guest for the Silent Witch.”

*For me? Who could it be?*

Monica pulled her robe’s hood down, hid her mouth behind her veil, and glanced at Nero. Her familiar nodded once, then opened the door.

Through the gap, she could see a pair of glowing pink eyes and uneven violet hair.

“D-do you...love me?”

Nero shut the door.

“Um, Nero,” said Monica, “please let him in...”

“I think we should send him away,” her familiar replied.

“We can’t do that!”

Nero scrunched up his nose, then pulled open the door.

Ray had plastered himself to the outside of it, and now he slid down the surface and crumpled onto the floor. Crawling, he made his way across the room. Monica wished he would just come in like a normal person.

Bartholomeus, who was in the hallway, cast a troubled glance at Nero. “Uh, Boss... Who is this?”

“Thanks for bringing him,” Nero replied. “Keep everyone away from this room for a while. That’ll be all.” Then he closed the door and locked it.

Ray slithered across the floor. Eventually, when he reached the couch Monica was sitting on, he looked up at her from below.

“It’s, um, good to see you again, Lord Abyss Shaman...,” Monica began awkwardly. “And, ummm, you arrived quite...quickly.”

“I had the Barrier Mage’s contracted spirit take me...”

“Miss Ryn?”

Louis’s contracted spirit, Rynzbelfeid, was a high wind spirit. She would have been able to fly him here quickly no matter how far away he was.

“Is Miss Ryn here?” she asked.

“She dropped me off, then went straight back to the royal capital... They’re busy preparing for the New Year’s ceremony.”

It was a shame that she wouldn’t be able to take Ray back to the capital, but Monica was also secretly relieved. If Ryn had stayed, Bartholomeus would have put a lot of pressure on Monica to introduce them.

*That would make everything infinitely more complicated...*

Ray, still on the floor, tugged at the hem of Monica’s robe. “I heard nobody died... A cursed dragon appeared, and somehow nobody died... You can’t block curses with normal defensive barriers... What in the world happened...?”

“Oh, um... I tried making my own anti-curse barrier, and... It seemed to work

just fine...”

Ray’s expression visibly tensed.

“...You made...an anti-curse barrier?”

“Ummm, well, based on the victim’s symptoms, I hypothesized that curses are similar to dark-aspected magecraft, so I constructed a compound circuit at clauses seven and ten of the barrier...”

The anti-curse barrier was still unresearched and unverified. Actual examples of curses were few and far between, so they weren’t easy to look into.

Monica didn’t think it was worth getting excited over yet, but Ray rolled over on the floor and stared up at the ceiling.

“That’s an incredible feat... They’re going to have to add pages to all the textbooks...”

“No, ummm, there’s still a lot of work to be done before—”

“Now shamans are basically useless... Nobody needs me now...”

“Um, I d-d-d-didn’t *shay* that!” she said, fumbling her words.

Ray clung to Monica’s boots, tossing and turning on the floor. She wished he’d sit down.

“...Am I...needed?”

Feeling a cold sweat break out across her forehead, Monica quickly nodded. “Yes! Um, of course...!”

“If I’m needed, then that means I’m loved, right? Then please, tell me you love me... I want to be loved, I want to be loved, I want to be loved...”

Nero grabbed Ray by the scruff of his neck and lifted him up. He then tossed the Sage like a toy onto the couch across from Monica.

“If all you need is someone to say they love you, I’ll say it as many times as you want,” said Nero. “I love you, I love you. See? I said it. Now, can we get to the medical exam?”

“...I don’t want a man to say it. It has to be a girl.” Ray turned away and pouted.

Nero looked over at Monica, truly exasperated. “Hey, Monica, can I throw this guy out? I’m gonna do it.”

“W-wait! Wait, don’t...”

Ray was the kingdom’s foremost expert on curses. Monica had a million questions for him regarding the cursed dragon incident, and she couldn’t afford to upset him. Unfortunately, however, she wasn’t the kind of person who could just force a smile and say “I love you.”

“Ummm, well... I’m not sure I’d use the word *love*, but, um, you’re my senior in the Seven Sages, so I, um, I do admire and respect you a *loffph!*”

She choked miserably at the end of her sentence, but her words seemed to have reached him.

“Admiration. Respect. Admiration. Respect...,” he muttered to himself, the edges of his lips slowly curling into a creepy smile. He looked ecstatic. “Oh, that’s good. Admiration... What an unusual feeling. Quite unusual... Heh. Respect... Heh. Heh-heh.”

“Okay, that’s enough. Can we *please* get to the point?” said Nero, quite fed up with Ray’s antics.

“All right,” Ray said easily, nodding. “First, show me where you were cursed.”

Monica rolled up her robe’s sleeve and showed him her left arm. While her upper arm was slender and pale, everything from her elbow down to her fingertips was swollen and covered with a dark-red bruise.

Ray narrowed his pink eyes. “This isn’t a naturally occurring curse,” he declared. “It’s cursecraft.”

Monica couldn’t tell the difference between natural and artificial curses, but it must have been obvious to an expert.

“You can tell that easily?” asked Nero, sounding fascinated.

“Yes. Cursecraft is more liable to leave traces. If there were even a fragment of the tool used as a medium left, the curse on it could last for a very long time.”

This rang true. Even after Monica had attacked the inside of the dragon’s



body, the curse had stubbornly held on. Her flame magecraft must not have been enough to completely incinerate the shamanic tool.

“...You did a good job destroying the item. The curse is completely gone,” said Ray, sounding impressed.

Nero flashed him a smug grin. He’d been the one to destroy it, using his black flames.

“Ummm, will this bruise last for a while?” asked Monica.

“It should go away in two weeks or so, but the pain in your arm and the numbness might last about a month. As long as you get some rest, it will heal.”

Monica was relieved. If the bruise would go away in two weeks, it would be gone by the time she returned to Serendia for the new term. But her relief wasn’t complete, because Glenn was still unconscious.

“Ummm... What about Glenn? His symptoms were much worse than mine.”

Ray frowned and, with the gravity of someone making a terrible prophecy, said, “The Barrier Mage’s pupil, Glenn Dudley... I’d heard the rumors, but he... He...”

Had something happened to him? Monica paled and leaned forward.

Ray scratched his purple hair madly. “He’s tall and genuine, and it’s completely obvious that everyone loves him. Ugh, I hate it... Guys like him are always popular with girls. Everyone falls in love with guys like that... Agh, I’m green with envy... Curse him!”

“Ummm, Glenn is already cursed... And I’d like to know how he’s doing...”

“He woke up earlier. Right when I arrived.”

“Huh?” Monica said, her face blank.

Ray’s tone made it clear that he couldn’t care less about the other boy. “Glenn Dudley has a ridiculous natural mana capacity. He’s very resistant to curses, so you don’t need to worry about him... Ugh, I hate people like that. Chosen from birth... The envy...”

“What do you mean...his mana capacity is ridiculous?”

“This is off the record, but apparently, he’s been measured at over 250.”

“O-over 250?!”

Most normal mages had around 100 mana capacity. You needed 150 to be one of the Seven Sages, and Monica’s capacity was a little over 200. According to official records, only four people in the kingdom had mana capacities higher than 250. Two of them were Sages—the Artillery Mage and the fifth Witch of Thorns.

*Come to think of it, Glenn broke the mana capacity gauge that day I visited the fundamental magecraft class.*

The upper limit of the device Glenn had broken was 250. In other words, he’d had much more mana than the device could handle.

“...Glenn Dudley has so much mana,” said Ray, “that once, when he lost control, it caused a whole incident. No one else could handle him, so the Barrier Mage took him in. That’s what I heard.”

In general, your mana capacity grew the more you used magecraft. But if you started out with a massive amount, it was easy to cause horrific accidents.

*And Glenn caused one in the past...*

Losing control of one’s mana was really frightening. He could have easily developed a fear of using magecraft. *What must he have felt like as he made that promise in front of the Alteria chimes?* she wondered.

“I’m gonna work hard at my magecraft training!”

How difficult had it been to rally his resolve? Monica bit her lip and looked down.

“If you’re worried about him,” muttered Ray, “you don’t need to be. The guy has the thickest skin I’ve ever seen... He is the Barrier Mage’s apprentice, after all...”

\* \* \*

“Gyaaaah! That hurts! Ahhh! It hurts more than my muscles did after Master made me train in the mountains!”

As Glenn writhed on the bed, Felix asked calmly, “You trained in the

mountains? Do mages need to do that?”

“Yeah. He beat the crap out of me while sparring, then kicked me off a cliff and told me to get back up by myself... Wait. Actually, this isn’t so bad, since there’s a bed...”

*Is any of that related to magecraft?* As Felix began to doubt the usefulness of the Barrier Mage’s rather extreme training methods, he observed Glenn’s face.

He was still covered in dark-red bruises, but according to the Abyss Shaman, they would go away eventually. The pain would persist after that, but it would probably heal on its own in a month or so. This filled Felix with genuine relief.

He harbored quite a lot of guilt regarding what had happened to Glenn. The cursed dragon was no coincidence or stroke of bad luck—someone had done this on purpose. And the shaman behind the dragon’s curse probably had ties to Duke Clockford. Nobody would ever know that the whole incident had been set up to make Felix look good. He’d be known as the prince who’d slain a cursed dragon, and that would be that.

Meanwhile, Glenn had gotten mixed up in this ridiculous farce, and it had nearly killed him.

As Felix tried to think of what to say to him, Glenn—still lying on the bed—looked up at him with a gloomy expression.

“Hey, Prez... I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

“I was your escort. But I did a pretty bad job of it...”

It seemed that even this happy-go-lucky young man felt down sometimes.

Felix stifled a wry grin and looked at the door leading out into the hallway. “It’s nothing to be depressed about. You did an excellent job... And I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

Glenn watched blankly as Felix winked at him and quietly moved over to the door. Then, without a word, Felix threw it open.

“Eek!”

With a cute yelp, Eliane stumbled into the room.

She flailed around for a moment, then looked up at Felix and began making excuses. “Oh! I, well, I never intended to do something so vulgar as *eavesdrop*. I was just, well...resting against the door for a moment! That’s all.” She was speaking much more quickly than usual.

Felix covered his mouth with a hand and chuckled. “And you just so happened to choose the door to the room Dudley’s recuperating in?”

“Oh, well,” she stammered. “I happened to see you, Lord Felix, and thought I’d say hello... Yes, that’s all it was.” She fidgeted with her skirt for no reason, then looked at Glenn. “G-good day, Lord Glenn... Ummm... How are you feeling?”

Glenn’s face held no traces of pain—only its usual cheerfulness. He gave her a toothy, energetic grin. “I’m all better! And hungry, too. I could go for some meat.”

Eliane looked surprised. Then she sighed in relief.

Within moments, however, she put on an exasperated expression and lifted her chin in annoyance. “Meat? For a patient? That would never be allowed.”

“But I can’t get going without meat!”

“Whatever shall we do with you?!” said Eliane, turning away from the bed and stalking off.

She exited the room, but just before the door closed, they heard her shout, “Leston! Leston, prepare some meat! The best cuts we have. And cook it so that it’s soft and easy to eat!”

Felix raised his eyebrows and smiled, then looked over at the bed. Glenn was groaning in pain. Felix doubted he’d heard any of what Eliane had said.

“You’re every bit a gentleman, Dudley.”

Glenn fell limp onto the bed and pursed his lips. “I can’t worry a little kid like her...”

Apparently, Eliane was a little kid to him—no different from a child playing on the street. Felix barely suppressed a fit of laughter. As he covered his mouth, he

thought, *I wonder if Lady Everett and the Abyss Shaman are finished talking yet.*

\* \* \*

Ray sighed. “Must be nice... Must be nice to be such a popular guy... Everyone thinks shamans are creepy, and they all say mean things about us behind our backs...”

Ray had driven the conversation further and further off track, and now he was just complaining nonstop.

As Monica sat on the couch, unsure of what to do, Nero made a gesture asking her if he could throw the other boy out. Monica shook her head.

“Every year, when the New Year’s ceremony rolls around, I just want to die... Everyone will be celebrating, wondering why some nasty shaman is there. I mean, that’s what I would think. Mages are so cool and smart, and they get all the attention. Meanwhile, everyone calls shamans gross and creepy... I want to be respected and fawned over and loved, like mages are...” Ray covered his face with his hands.

“Don’t worry,” Nero said, his tone merciless. “I guarantee you’d be just as gloomy and creepy and gross even if you weren’t a shaman.”

Monica hastily tugged on Nero’s robe and scraped together what little vocabulary she had at her disposal. “Ummm, well, I think being a shaman is a wonderful job. It’s not, um, gross at all.”

Ray peeked at her through his fingers. “They call my hair and eye color gross, too... It’s not like I wanted these weird features... If I had my way, I’d be a beautiful, tall boy with blond hair and blue eyes, like a prince...”

*Those are some pretty greedy requests,* thought Monica.

Ray’s brilliant hair and eye color weren’t natural, nor were they something he’d chosen. They were the result of the over two hundred curses engraved in his body. The idea was similar to mana poisoning, which occurred when a person’s body absorbed a large amount of mana. Things like mana and curses were poisonous to humans, and too much exposure brought about changes in the body.

“Um, well, I think your purple hair is really pretty,” said Monica, choosing her

words carefully. "Purple is a noble color, so..."

Ray looked up ever so slowly. His pink eyes, as brilliant as gemstones, shone with an eerie light as they gazed at her.

"A-and there are plenty of things that, um, only shamans can do."

At that point, Monica straightened up in her seat and faced Ray as one of the Seven Sages. There was something she needed to ask him about the incident with the cursed dragon.

"I'd like to ask you something as the Abyss Shaman... Is it possible for a human to use cursecraft to curse a dragon?"

"No." Ray's reply was immediate. "Dragons have incredible resistance to mana. Younger dragons are one thing, but a human would never be able to curse an adult."

Monica recalled the memory she'd seen as the curse ate painfully away at her. The shaman's curse had killed the green dragon's child, and she'd then eaten her child's cursed body in order to exact revenge on the culprit.

"Then... What if a dragon caused itself to be cursed...?"

Ray fell silent for a moment and thought this over. His purple eyelashes lowered, casting a shadow over his vivid irises. "I couldn't say. It's never happened before. There are still many mysteries when it comes to the physiology of greater dragons... Was that what happened here?"

"If the traces on my arm aren't from a naturally occurring curse but from something made by a person...then yes."

Ray grimaced. It seemed he'd thought of a possible connection. "Could it be... the man who betrayed House Albright?"

"I was thinking the same thing," said Monica.

This was something Ray had mentioned before, back when that cursed tool had gotten lost on campus during Serendia Academy's festival. Apparently, ten years ago, a shaman had betrayed House Albright and escaped with a cursed tool.

Ray scratched his purple hair with both hands. "...This is awful."

If this incident was the doing of a shaman, it would mean that shamans could drive dragons berserk with cursecraft. And if the culprit was the same shaman who had betrayed House Albright, then this was a matter of life and death for Ray, the house's current head.

"What kind of person, um, was the shaman who betrayed your family?" asked Monica.

Ray groaned, head in his hands. "At the time, he went by the name Barry Oats. Black hair. Muscular but not tall... He'd be about fifty now. He could have changed his name to anything, and after ten years, he probably looks very different."

Barry Oats began as an outsider but married into the family. A few years after his marriage, his wife died, leaving no children behind.

"I didn't talk to him much... But yeah, he seemed like a nice, kindhearted guy." Ray buried his pale face in his hands, then curled his wan lips into a self-deprecating smile. "...But of course, there's no way a shaman would be nice and kindhearted."

A shudder ran up Monica's spine. She didn't know what burdens Ray carried as the young head of a shaman family, but she suspected it was no walk in the park.

In her lap, Monica clenched her right fist, which she could still move freely. Then she made a proposition to Ray, her voice hard. "Abyss Shaman, will you investigate this matter? And, um, keep it a secret from the others?"

"...Are you sure?"

"Yes! Um, and I'll help, too, so...!"

Monica had her own reasons for keeping the matter secret.

*...I'm not certain, but I think the prince knows something about what's going on.*

When Monica had found Felix and the cursed dragon, the prince had confidently declared that the dragon's curse was due to cursecraft. It was likely he had information she didn't. It was also suspicious that he'd snuck out at

night to confront the dragon alone. It would have made more sense for him to ask someone else from the estate, or his escort, Monica, to come along.

Felix was clearly hiding something. She needed to talk to him.

As she made up her mind, someone grasped Monica's hand. It was Ray, of course. He'd gotten up from the sofa at some point, and his pale cheeks were flushed a rosy red.

"U-ummm, Abyss Shaman...?"

"I had no idea you were so concerned about me..."

From Ray's point of view, Monica's suggestion must have seemed like an attempt to protect his reputation as a shaman. His eyes were full of emotion, and a little moist.

"Does this mean my love is requited? It must be mutual affection. How amazing. Someone loves me..."

"Um, I, uh..." Monica got the feeling the conversation was about to head in a terrifying direction. Desperately, she tried to force it back on course. "A-anyway, we'll investigate the matter of the cursed dragon in secret..."

"A secret for just the two of us... A secret relationship... How wonderful... Sharing secrets deepens love... Heh."

"Hey, I'm in on this secret," Nero said in exasperation. He'd been lounging on the bed, bored by the long conversation. "Does that mean *our* love will deepen, too?"

Just then, there was a reserved knock. Was it Bartholomeus?

Nero got out of bed and opened the door. "Hey, Lackey," he said, annoyed. "I told you to keep everyone away!"

"I'm real sorry, Boss. But Prince Felix says he needs to speak with the Silent Witch..."

Monica tensed. The time had come.

*First, I have to make sure he keeps the truth about Nero a secret... And then I need to find out what he's hiding.*



Having Ray here would make things too difficult. Monica made sure her veil was firmly attached, then said, “Abyss Shaman... Would you excuse me...while I have a short conversation with the p-prince?”

“Heh.” Ray smiled sadly and looked at his feet. “I knew it. All girls love princes... And he *is* a blond-haired, blue-eyed dreamboat—the most attractive of the three royal siblings. Of course *he’s* loved...”

“No, um, it’s about something very important—”

“Royalty doesn’t play fair. They’re loved just for existing... I want to be loved unconditionally, too. I want it so bad...”

Without a word, Nero grabbed the scruff of Ray’s neck and threw the door open. Beyond it were Bartholomeus and Felix. “Move,” he said, pushing past them and tossing Ray into the hallway. He had no respect for either Felix or Ray. “Okay, I just took out the trash. You can come in, Prince.”

“...Thank you.”

After casting a sidelong glance at the ejected Ray, Felix stepped into the room. Once he was inside, Nero quickly shut the door and locked it.

Monica got out a feather pen and paper and wrote, “*Thank you for coming.*” She showed it to Felix, then bowed before adding, “*We should talk.*”

“With pleasure, my lady.” Felix flashed Monica a sweet smile and took the seat across from her.

In the face of his beautiful, opaque expression, Monica’s fingers grew cold.

She needed to confront him at the negotiating table—a place well outside her comfort zone.



## CHAPTER 9

### How Monica and Nero Met

“How are you feeling, Lady Everett? If you’re in pain, don’t force yourself. Please, lie down.”

Felix’s voice was kind. But Monica knew there was more to his words. The prince was frighteningly good at negotiating. If she let his kindness carry her away, he’d take control before she knew it.

*“Let’s skip the pleasantries.”*

“Agreed.” The prince nodded, then looked up at Nero, who stood behind Monica. He had his arms folded and was glaring down at Felix. “May I ask about him first?”

Monica had predicted this. But as she was carefully choosing her words, Nero leaned back and sniffed haughtily.

“You wanna know about me, eh?” he said. “All right. I’ll tell you. My favorite foods are birds and cheese. My favorite author is Dustin Gunther.”

“I didn’t mean your tastes and hobbies. I want to ask about how you became Lady Everett’s familiar... Actually, there’s something else I should ask first.”

Felix narrowed his eyes slightly, chilling the room. After a pause, in which he let the intimidating atmosphere sink in, he said, “Can you tell me why you brought your pterodragon horde to attack County Kerbeck, Black Dragon of Worgan?”

As a member of the royal family, Felix possessed a particularly threatening aura. With his status, he could make anyone yield unconditionally. The Black Dragon of Worgan, however, had no interest in human hierarchy.

Nero stuck out his lower lip and scoffed. “What now? When did I attack anyone? You got any proof? What do you humans call this? ...Oh, right. A false accusation! And I’m sure not friends with any pterodragons.”

“...You deny it?” asked Felix, confused.

Nero continued, his tone implying the whole incident was no big deal. “I used to live in the mountains in the Empire. But then they started making a fuss about *development* or whatever, so I started wandering around, trying to find a new place to live. Then I came across, uh, the Worgan Mountains. I think that’s what you humans call them. And then the young pterodragons there started worshipping me as their boss, for no reason.”

Pterodragons had particularly low intelligence, even among the lesser dragons. In general, they didn’t understand language, so they couldn’t communicate properly with greater dragons.

“Those pterodragons were a bunch of kids, and I heard they attacked some human settlements trying to show off. But I didn’t order them to do any of that.”

“Then how did you end up as Lady Everett’s servant?” asked Felix.

Monica’s right hand wavered as she gripped the feather pen. She would have liked to cradle her head in her hands and groan. *Is... Is it really okay to talk about thiiiiis?*

But as she debated how to respond, Nero answered the prince without a hint of hesitation.

“I was eating a bird, and its bone got stuck in my throat.”

“Yes?”

“It hurt a lot, and she pulled it out for me.”

“...That’s it?”

“Yep.”

That really *was* it.

\* \* \*

About half a year ago, Monica had entered the Worgan Mountains alone to slay the Black Dragon of Worgan. And there she’d found him, curled up deep in the forest, growling and crying out in displeasure.

The creature was bigger than Monica’s cabin in the mountains. Its huge mouth, filled with sharp fangs, could swallow her whole.

Her mission was to slay this dragon. If she used high-powered attack magic and hit the dragon between the eyes before it noticed her, her mission would be complete.

But when she heard its cries, Monica stopped.

She'd taken a course on spiritspeak at Minerva's, so she could make out simple words. The wicked dragon of legend, covered in jet-black scales, was saying this: *It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.*

So Monica left her hiding place among the trees and nervously asked it a question.

"...Ummm, is something, um, wrong?"

Monica was incredibly shy, but she found dragons easier to talk to than humans—even if it was a black dragon, one of the most dangerous kinds.

*My throat. It's stuck. Can't get it out. It hurts.*

"...Your throat? Ummm, could you...open your mouth and...say *ahhh*?"

In response, the black dragon slowly raised its head and opened its mouth wide.

Each and every fang was sharp like a spear, and its red tongue was long enough to easily coil around her. Nevertheless, Monica remembered that black dragons' tongues weren't poisonous, so she awkwardly climbed up the dragon's jaw and entered its mouth.

Going into a black dragon's mouth on purpose was insane—at least, anyone else would have thought so. But from Monica's perspective, it was far scarier to be surrounded by people than to be surrounded by a dragon's fangs.

"Oomph," she grunted as she crawled up the dragon's tongue on all fours. Eventually, she noticed something white stuck deeper in its throat. It was probably the bone from a bird or a small animal. "Ummm, I'm going to pull this out... It might hurt a little..."

Monica grabbed the bone with both hands, then yanked on it with all her might and pulled it free. The black dragon's throat rumbled, and the vibrations caused Monica to lose her balance. She fell back onto its tongue, which was soft

and comfortably broke her fall.

“I got it...”

As Monica exhaled, the black dragon stuck its long tongue out. She tumbled down it like someone falling down a hill.

“Hwahhhhhhhh?!”

Covered in drool, she fell to the ground face-first with a splat. Her eyes were spinning.

The black dragon gazed up to the heavens and gave a spirited cry—and a moment later, a huge black haze covered its body. As the haze condensed, it gradually took the form of a person, starting with the fingers, the toes, and the tips of the hair, then moving inward.

Eventually, the black dragon was replaced by a man with short black hair and golden eyes, wearing an old-fashioned robe. He was quite tall.

He directed his mystical golden gaze at Monica. “Damn, glad that’s finally out of me! I was eating some random bird, and its bone got caught in my throat. I thought I could just incinerate it with my black flames, but it was in a real weird spot I couldn’t quite reach.”

He rattled on, completely absent of any majesty or mystique. Aside from the old-looking robe he wore, he appeared like any other candid, cheerful young man.

*It was easier to talk to him when he was a dragon,* thought Monica. She couldn’t help but find big, tall men terrifying. She froze, still lying face down on the ground.

The dragon, now in human form, squatted in front of her and looked her in the eye. “What’s with you anyway? Speechless? Well, I am pretty freaking amazing.”

“Eee... Ah...”

Monica sprang up into a sitting position and scrambled backward across the ground, shaking fiercely.

The dragon pursed his lips and appeared to sulk. “Why does this form seem to

scare you so much? Don't I look cool?"

"...Aw, waaahhh..." Monica finally started to cry.

The dragon scratched his head, unsure of what to do. "Uhhh... What do human females like? Hmm... Wait, I know just the thing!"

A haze covered the man, and he condensed into an even smaller form. Eventually the haze cleared, revealing a black cat.

"Humans love cats, right? They're the most powerful, most adorable creatures in the world! Look at these paws. You can squeeze them if you want. *Meow, meow.*"

The black cat pressed on Monica's cheek with his paw, and the soft sensation relieved a little bit of her tension.

No matter how she looked at it, the creature in front of her was an adorable black cat. But how could he produce a human voice as a cat when he couldn't as a dragon? His body must not have been 100 percent cat. *The structure of his vocal cords, at least, must be different*, she thought, staring at the cat's tail as it waved back and forth.

"Great! Looks like you've calmed down," said the black cat. He nodded to himself, seeming relieved. "Anyway, what's a human like you doing way out here? Are you lost?"

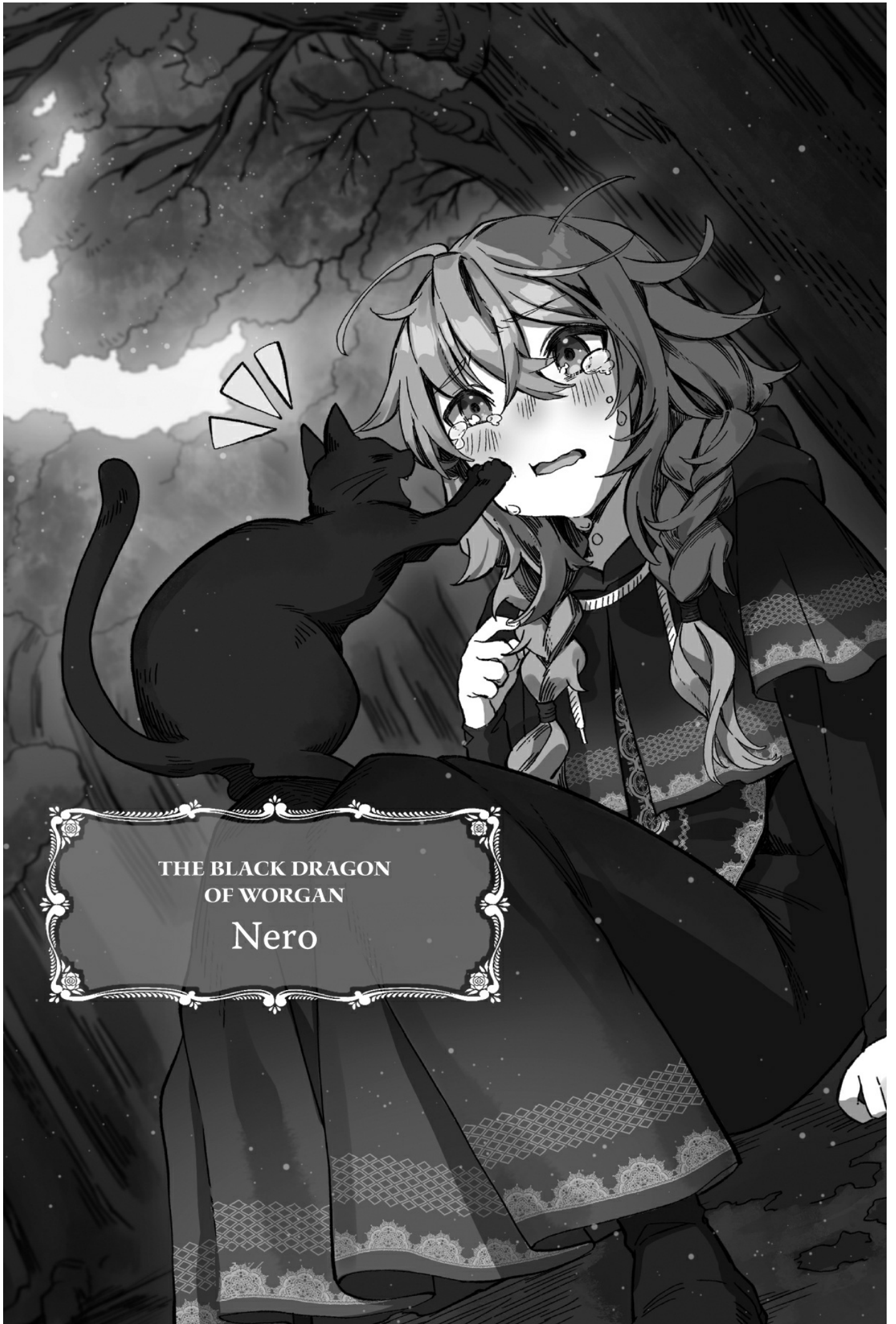
"Oh, ummm, well..." Monica slowly straightened up, then began fiddling with her fingers. "Um, do you think...you could...leave the mountain? The people...down below...are really s-scared..."

"Huh? Oh, come to think of it, there *were* a whole bunch of humans gathered at the foot of the mountain. Wait, they aren't trying to *kill* me, are they?"

"A-actually... The reason I'm here is, well...to exterminate you, I guess..."

Monica's admission, honest to a fault, had the black cat staring at her in astonishment.

"You're real dumb, you know that? If I changed back to my original form, my black flames could burn you alive. Not even your bones would remain."



THE BLACK DRAGON  
OF WORGAN

Nero



“N-no, I’d be fine. I—I think I could...defeat you before...that happened...”

Monica pointed at a nearby tree and used uncharmed magecraft. A spear of ice rammed into the middle of its hefty trunk like a wedge, carving into the bark.

The black cat opened his golden eyes wide. Monica fidgeted with her fingers some more.

“Your black flames take time to use,” she said. “So...I think I could, um, shoot you between the eyes before you managed to, uh, get them out.”

It wasn’t a threat. For Monica, it was just the truth.

The black cat cocked his little head, mystified. “Wait. Then why’d you save me?”

“Huh? Ummm... Because you looked...like you were in pain.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a real weirdo?”

“Aww...”

Monica knew she didn’t fit in with other people. But to have a *dragon* point that out to her was too much. She fell silent, unsure of how to feel.

The black cat stared up at Monica with his golden eyes. “I see,” he said. “You’re not scared of black dragons, and you even climbed inside my mouth! But you’re scared of humans... Yeah, you’re weird, all right. And you know what? I like weird people. You keep things interesting.”

“Oh, um, okay...”

“That settles it. I’m gonna let you have me as a pet.”

Monica was silent for a few moments. Once she’d processed the black cat’s declaration, she muttered an awkward “Huh?”

“You want me to get off this mountain, right?” the cat continued, as if this was all very logical.

“Um, yes.”

“But I don’t have anywhere else to go. Oh, woe is me! Humans are driving me

from my home for stupid human reasons!”

“I guess you, um, have a point.”

“Since you’re the one driving me out, you’ve gotta take responsibility. Make me your pet!”

Monica got the feeling he was trying to coax her into agreeing. But she was weak-willed and had a hard time voicing firm objections at times like these. As she stammered and said more *umms* and *wells*, the black cat jumped onto her shoulder and poked her cheek with his paw.

“Dragons are absolutely obedient to anyone stronger than them. And you’re stronger than me, so I’ll make you my master. You should be honored!”

*I wonder if “absolute obedience” means the same thing to dragons as it does to humans*, she thought as he continued to squish her cheek with his paw.

\* \* \*

As Nero finished his explanation, Felix put on a gentle smile. Despite his expression, however, it was clear that he was very confused.

“I heard the Black Dragon of Worgan filled the air with eerie howls night after night...”

“Yeah. ‘Cause my throat hurt.”

“Then you weren’t calling out to your pterodragon followers and telling them to attack?”

“Nah, it was more like, *Aaagh! This hurts so freakin’ bad!* Ever since then, I always take the bones out of birds before I eat them.”

Monica wanted to hide in shame. The Silent Witch hadn’t exterminated the Black Dragon of Worgan—far from it. She’d only removed a bone stuck in its throat.

Felix viewed the Silent Witch as a hero. He must have been so disappointed in her.

Monica used her feather pen to write a few more words. “*Will you report me?*”

“No.” There was no hesitation in Felix’s response. “Nobody else could have saved a dragon and made it their familiar. I have no less respect for you now that I know the truth. It’s just... How to put it? I suppose I have a different impression of dragons,” he said with difficulty.

“You think way more highly of ’em now, right?” said Nero smugly.

*How can you be so confident?* thought Monica. Felix was probably thinking the same thing. It was much more likely he’d begun to see dragons as “surprisingly silly.”

With a wry grin, Felix turned to Nero and asked, “May I assume you harbor no malice toward humans?”

“Yep. I barely care about humans to begin with!”

Even after being driven from his mountain home, Nero was completely unfazed. He didn’t seem the type to hold grudges. Of course, despite his claim that he didn’t care about humans, he had recently taken a real interest in human culture and art—mainly adventure and detective novels.

“Can you use your black flames even in human form?”

Felix was referring to the powerful flame breath that had made black dragons so infamous. No flames were stronger; they could incinerate cursecraft and defensive barriers alike. A few centuries ago, a select few mages had become able to use those black flames themselves, but these days the art had died out, and its use was forbidden. In fact, it was one of the greatest taboos for mages, right up there with resurrecting the dead and controlling the weather.

If Nero was able to use his black flames in human form, not even Felix would be able to turn a blind eye.

But Nero quickly shook his head and denied it. “Nah. Gotta be in my original form for that. If I could bust that stuff out in human form, I would have been doing it in secret for ages now.”

“...I suppose that’s true.”

Nero wasn’t lying. In human form, his physical abilities were impressive, but he couldn’t fly or breathe black flames.

Apparently convinced, Felix flashed a smile at the uneasy Monica. “No need to worry, my lady. My lips are sealed. This will be our little secret.”

*“Thank you,”* she wrote.

Monica sighed in relief. She’d accomplished her first objective—getting Felix to stay quiet about Nero’s identity. But she couldn’t let the conversation end there. She had another goal.

*I want to know what he’s hiding.*

She moved her pen swiftly, meaning to take over the role of questioner. *“I have something I’d like to ask as well.”*

*“...About the night I confronted the cursed dragon?”*

Monica nodded. She intended to ask why he’d slipped out of the estate that night, but before she could put words to paper, Felix started to explain.

*“That night I felt awfully uneasy. I was worried that maybe a single gunshot to the brow hadn’t actually killed the legendary cursed dragon... I became so concerned that I slipped away to get another look at its remains. When I reached them, the dragon began to move, so I confronted it. I’m truly sorry for going off on my own and causing you so much trouble.”*

Felix’s expression was extremely apologetic. He probably *did* feel guilty about the curse infecting Monica.

*...But he was hiding something.*

*“Why didn’t you take an escort?”*

*“Because if I had told someone about my fears and asked them to come with me, they would have thought me a coward. Everything was to preserve my own honor and pride. Again, I’m very sorry.”*

*He’s lying,* Monica realized intuitively. But she didn’t have enough cards in her hand to make that accusation.

She thought back to the night in question—to Felix’s behavior. He’d said something.

*“My lady! It’s cursecraft. There should be a shamanic tool somewhere in its*

*body!”*

*That’s it, thought Monica, her feather pen moving again.*

*“How could you say for sure that the curse affecting the dragon was cursecraft?”*

Even Monica, one of the Seven Sages, couldn’t tell the difference between a naturally occurring curse and a man-made one. How had Felix known that it was cursecraft?

The prince didn’t seem particularly ruffled. Instead, his expression was uncertain. “Well, I wasn’t sure, actually. But I once saw a shaman using cursecraft on a criminal... And I thought it seemed similar.”

Felix had probably considered what Monica would ask him and prepared answers in advance. Every time she pressed him on something, he slipped away.

*Is there anything else I can use?*

Monica was bad at negotiating, but she tried hard to think of something she could do to gain a foothold.

However, before she could make her next move, Felix casually embarked on a new thread. “By the way, Lady Everett.”

Immediately, Monica looked up and met his gaze. His beautiful eyes, blue with just a drop of green, were narrowed into a smile.

*“Would you happen to have ties to Serendia Academy?” he asked.*

*“...!” She was so startled that her shoulders jerked.*

Felix noticed, and his smile deepened. It was as if he already had his answer.

*...Oh no!*

As Monica began to panic, she could hear the Barrier Mage Louis Miller laughing at her in her memories. It was back when he and the Artillery Mage had dragged her into that card game.

*“My fellow Sage. You might want to fix that habit of jumping out of your skin whenever something unsettles you.”*

He'd been right. And he'd said something else, too: that the game started before one even got to the table.

Unlike Monica, who had come to this negotiation unprepared, Felix had thought things through beforehand. He had strategies for how to avoid Monica's questions while still getting the information he wanted out of her.

"Lady Everett, you once stopped Cyril—one of our students—when he lost control due to mana poisoning, didn't you?"

*That's right*, she thought. Nero had run into Felix that night. She gulped behind her veil, then moved her hand—which threatened to tremble—and wrote a few more words.

*"I just happened to be passing through."*

"I see."

Felix immediately dropped that line of questioning. She'd thought he would press her for more information, so this came as something of a shock.

Instead, he bowed politely. "Please allow me to thank you for that. You saved the student council's secretary."

*...What?*

Monica was silent, but she froze for a moment. Felix could sense her confusion.

*...Oops!* She paled, flustered.

Still smiling, the prince continued. "Oh, my apologies. He's not the secretary, actually. He's the vice president."

Every student at Serendia Academy knew that Cyril Ashley was the student council's vice president. But people on the outside—especially the Silent Witch, who had little social interaction—would have no idea. It would be strange if they did.

And yet Monica had reacted to the mistake.

*He knows... He knows the Silent Witch is at Serendia Academy!*

The prince couldn't quite conceal the hint of joy in his blue eyes as he gazed

at her.

“Oh, but you’re still recovering. I shouldn’t keep you. I’ll be taking my leave, then... Please take care of your left hand, my lady.” With a considerate smile, Felix rose.

But no matter how gentle or beautiful his expression, Monica could only quiver in fear.

She hadn’t gotten Felix to tell her any of his secrets, and yet he’d gotten all the information he’d wanted from her.

The prince had won this negotiation, and Monica had lost.

After Felix left the room, Monica slowly slid off the couch.

“Waaahhh! I messed everything up... Stupid, stupid, stupid...”

Nero, who was standing behind the couch with his arms folded, hadn’t quite grasped the situation. “Mind explaining?” he said.

“He knows! He figured out that the Silent Witch is at Serendia Academy!”

“Wh-what?!”

If she’d known this would happen, she wouldn’t have bothered trying to awkwardly prod the prince for information. She should have just gotten him to keep quiet about Nero’s identity and left it at that. Now she was filled with regret.

Monica could barely talk properly in the first place. How was she supposed to match a skilled diplomat like Felix?

She began to sob. “I wanted to learn his secrets, but instead he learned one of mine!”

Once winter break was over, Felix would surely begin searching for the Silent Witch at the academy. Her mission wasn’t supposed to end for another six months. What was she supposed to do now?

“I wanted to ask how he knew it was cursecraft affecting the dragon, and why he snuck out by himself that night... Aww...”

Seeing Monica looking down, Nero said casually, “I mean, the guy’s got a

contracted spirit with him. He probably knows a lot. And if he's got a spirit on his side, he wouldn't need an escort."

"...Huh?"

Monica didn't understand what Nero was saying. She slowly rose from the bed and looked up at him.

"The prince? He has a contracted spirit?"

"Yeah, like I said. That white lizard you see next to him sometimes. I'm pretty sure that's a high water spirit."

"Wait, wait, wait..."

This was the first Monica was hearing about Felix having a contracted spirit, though she did vaguely remember Nero saying something about a lizard.

*I think he said the prince tried to use a lizard to figure out his secrets...but then our conversation got interrupted.*

Still, that didn't make any sense. How could Felix have formed a contract with a high water spirit? Contracts with high spirits required several things: the spirit's consent, a gem to serve as the contract stone, the knowledge of a high mage, and great mana capacity. Fewer than ten mages in the kingdom were contracted to a high spirit.

And even if Felix did meet all those conditions, there was another thing stopping him from forging a contract with a high water spirit.

"Ummm, Nero, humans are born with an affinity for one specific element... You can't make a contract with a spirit of a different element. The same goes for spirit king summonings."

For example, Monica's strength was wind. She could summon the King of the Wind Spirits but not the other spirit kings.

"Then the prince's must be water, right?" said Nero.

"No, I think his element is actually...earth."

Nero frowned dubiously. "But you've never seen the prince use magecraft before. How do you know?"



“His name—his middle name. It’s Arc, right?”

In the Kingdom of Ridill, there was a custom of working the name of the spirit king matching a baby’s elemental affinity into the child’s middle name. It was like a prayer for the spirit king’s protection. One example close at hand was that of Neil, the student council general affairs officer. His full name was Neil Clay Maywood. His middle name, Clay, was derived from Archraedo, the King of the Earth Spirits.

“Felix’s middle name, Arc, comes from Archraedo. So I think his affinity is earth. He shouldn’t be able to form a contract with a high water spirit...”

“Yeah, I’m not really following you. But can’t your element change as you grow?”

“People generally inherit it from one of their parents, and according to research on the subject, it never changes.”

Monica’s father’s research backed up the claim that genetic factors were involved in a person’s magical abilities. The book Felix had bought her at Porter Used Books touched on this idea as well.

“Still don’t get it,” said Nero. “Is that just, like, how it works?”

“A fire dragon can’t suddenly turn into a water dragon overnight, can it?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess you’re right.” He nodded, then put a hand to his chin in thought. “Then maybe his middle name is just a coincidence and not related to his element or whatever.”

“I somehow doubt that royalty would give their child a middle name that had nothing to do with their element...”

“But hey, it could happen, right?”

It was so simple for Nero—he didn’t care much about names to begin with. But to Monica, something definitely felt off.

*What if this has something to do with why he can’t use magecraft in front of others?*

Ever since the cursed dragon incident, Monica’s questions and doubts about the second prince had slowly begun to expand and grow. His strange attitude

toward the dragon. The high spirit he wouldn't tell anyone about. His fixation on the throne.

But why should she expose his secrets for the mere sake of her curiosity? She was only meant to guard him—none of these things were any of her business. She shouldn't pry into his affairs just because she wanted to know.

...Or at least, that was how she felt at the time.

\* \* \*

*Ahhh, it was just as I thought!*

Felix left the Silent Witch's room feeling like he wanted to dance. His heart was pounding, and he was shaking with glee.

Ever since he found out that a Spiralflame—a magical item used for assassination—had been planted at the school before the festival, he'd had hope. But when he saw how ruffled the Silent Witch had been just now, he became sure of it.

Felix's beloved Silent Witch was at Serendia Academy.

*...I must meet her. I want to see her face, if I can. I want to hear her voice.*

A smile threatened to form on Felix's lips, but he resisted it and headed for his quarters. On the way there, he spotted a man sitting on the floor, knees to his chest, and stopped.

The man held a golden staff and wore an extravagant robe embroidered with gold thread. And from his hood, Felix could see tufts of purple hair sticking out—a very unusual color.

It was Ray Albright of the Seven Sages—the third Abyss Shaman. What was he doing here in the hallway? Did he feel unwell?

*“...Ahhh, I want to be loved, I want to be loved, I want to be loved...”*

Felix had witnessed the shaman begging various maidservants at the royal castle for affection on several different occasions. *Oh, it's just the usual*, he thought.

“Excuse me,” he said. “You must be Lord Albright, the Abyss Shaman, yes? Are you feeling unwell?”

Ray slowly looked up and set his gaze on Felix. Then a moment later, he covered his eyes. “Your royal aura is destroying my eyesight...”

Felix decided he should ignore about 90 percent of what the man said. He had no intention of accusing him of rudeness. After all, the king had known what sort of personality he had when he’d made him a Sage.

“Lord Albright, your arrival has truly saved us. I feel very reassured to have a curse expert around... And because you are such an expert, there is something I wish to ask of you.”

At this, Ray moved his hands slightly and looked up at Felix through the gaps in his fingers.

“Is it possible to control the mind of a creature with cursecraft?” asked Felix.

“...That isn’t what it’s meant for.” Ray slowly stood up. From beneath his unkempt bangs, his eyes—pink, like gemstones—stared at Felix with scorn. “Cursecraft isn’t meant for manipulating others. It’s for making them suffer. If you want to control people, that’s what mental interference magecraft is for.”

“...A reasonable assertion.”

“If someone is trying to use cursecraft to control living creatures, they are utterly unfit to be called a shaman. They’re nothing but trash.”

From a layman’s perspective, controlling someone and causing them to suffer were equally awful things to do. But shamans seemed to have different ideas on the matter.

*So this is the kind of power being used to make me king...*

Duke Clockford’s path for Felix Arc Ridill was soaked in blood and lined with sacrifices. And Felix no longer had the option of turning back. Not anymore.

“Thank you for your wise words, Lord Albright. I will take them to heart.”

With that, Felix turned his back to Ray. The flames of obsession flickered in his eyes as he stared ahead. There was a wish he wanted to grant. It didn’t matter what he had to sacrifice, what he had to give up, or what was taken from him.

*...Wait for me. It won’t be long now.*

On a whim, he glanced out the window. It was still afternoon, and the stars were not yet visible in the winter sky. But even so, Felix could imagine it—that starry sky so loved by his friend, in which the constellations of heroes twinkled.

*I will make sure your name goes down in history...Arc.*



## CHAPTER 10

### Venedict Reyn's Acquaintance

While Monica and Glenn remained in their rooms, recuperating from their injuries, the talks with the Farfolian envoys continued smoothly. Though they'd gotten off to a rocky start, Count Malé—who had expressed concerns about the planned Dragon Knight outpost—seemed to have softened up after experiencing a dragonraid in person.

The talks would wrap up that day, and the following afternoon Felix would depart from the Duchy of Rehnberg. There would be a minor dinner party that night to mark the occasion, and Monica had been encouraged to attend.

When the cursed dragon attacked, Monica had defended everyone from its onslaught, while Felix had slain it. They had both played key roles in resolving the incident, and it seemed the Farfolian delegation wanted to express their appreciation to the Silent Witch for her part in saving their lives.

"...So, Monica? What are you gonna do?"

Monica was lying face down in bed, and at Nero's question, she pulled the covers over her head.

"I don't wanna go... I'm tired of being around people... I just want to think about equations and magecraft formulae... That, or I want to become a cat..."

"Cats don't need equations or magecraft formulae, you know."

Felix had utterly defeated her during their talk that afternoon. It had crushed her spirit. She didn't want to see anyone at the moment—*especially* not him. If she ran into the prince, he might start prying again and completely blow her cover. Just thinking about what was going to happen when she returned to the academy after winter break depressed her.

"I promised I'd do my best at negotiating and talking to people... I promised when I rang the Alteria chimes... I'm sorry, Lord Cyril, but the prince is just too scary. I can't beat him. I wasn't up to the task...the prince is terrifying... Waaaaah, hic..."

Monica curled up under her blanket, buried her face in her pillow, and started whimpering.

“You’re hopeless,” Nero said with a sigh. “Well, I’m gonna go. Can’t miss an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

“...Yeah, okay. Have fun.”

Unfazed by Monica’s dismissive response, Nero began to sing, “Food, food, all for meee,” and made his way out of the room. What a coldhearted familiar.

Even though Felix now knew his true identity, Nero would probably act much the same as he had before. Monica envied his audacity.

*I’m not going to leave this room for the rest of the day...*

Hugging her pillow, Monica rolled over.

*I wonder where that traitorous shaman is... Does the prince know something about the person who made that cursed tool? ...I bet he does. Maybe they’re connected somehow, and the prince is sheltering him... How much does he know?*

Normally, Monica would have dove straight into the world of equations and magecraft formulae. But right now, she couldn’t keep her thoughts from turning to Felix and the cursed dragon.

She tossed and turned a few more times, then looked out the window. The sun set early in the winter; it had already been dark for an hour or two.

In the estate’s gardens, now drowned in black, she saw several flowers faintly glowing, casting little lights this way and that. They were a kind of plant called spiritrests that absorbed and emitted mana.

But then she spotted a flame about the size of a fist between the spiritrests’ faint lights. It appeared suddenly, then vanished. A few seconds later, two flames the same size as the first sprang up—then disappeared again after a few more seconds.

*Those are...*

Monica dragged herself to her feet and went over to the window. Another flame appeared for just a few seconds, illuminating someone—Glenn.

Glenn had his hands out with his palms facing upward, and he was trying to maintain two flames—one in each hand—at the same time. He was doing the simultaneous magecraft training Monica had shown him.

*But he just woke up today...* In the orange glow of the flames, she could see the pain and determination in his expression.

Leaving one hand on the window frame, Monica slid down to the floor.

*...Glenn is working so hard. He's trying to keep the promise he made to the Alteria chimes.*

She pressed her forehead to the wall and stayed like that for several moments. Eventually, she took a deep breath. Then she stood, picked her robe up off her chair and threw it on, and covered her mouth with a veil.

*I'll just go for a few minutes... Just a little while... I'll pay my respects to Duke Rehnberg and the Farfolians, then leave before I run into the prince...*

She picked up her staff, which had been leaning against the wall. The jingle of its decorations reminded her a little of the Alteria chimes reverberating in that clear winter sky.

She shook the staff a few times to hear it again, then gave a determined huff and left the room.

\* \* \*

The guest rooms assigned to Monica and the others were on the estate's second floor, while the party was being held in a hall on the first. After walking down the second floor hallway, Monica stopped in front of the stairs.

She could hear lively voices from below. The party had already started.

As soon as she got down those stairs, the hall would be right there.

*Okay. I can do this,* she thought. But just as she was about to take a step forward, she saw something.

Specifically, she saw a ghastly white face floating just around the corner down the hallway—along with a pair of sparkling pink eyes.

Monica immediately put a hand over her veil to suppress a scream. She succeeded, but she still fell to her knees in shock. She even dropped her staff,



and it clattered to the floor.

“Silent Witch...”

Looking down at Monica, who had collapsed, was the face from around the corner, which belonged to one Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman. With his body hidden, it looked eerily like a detached head was floating there in the hallway.

“Oh... Um... Abyss Shaman... What are you...doing over there?”

“The old lady who was family head before me said I should attend as many of these parties as I could... But I didn’t help slay the cursed dragon... I came here after all that was over. People are sure to talk about me behind my back, wondering why I waltzed into a party where I don’t belong... Ahhhh, just imagining it is making me want to die... I don’t want to go...”

Ray clawed at his purple hair as his whole body shook.

Monica was very familiar with such feelings, so she stood up and quietly made a suggestion. “Ummm, Abyss Shaman... W-would you like to go, um, together?”

Ray stopped scratching his head.

“If there are two Sages,” she continued, “they’ll have to split their attention, and that might make things a little easier.”

“I see... Yes, you do have a point...”

They exchanged nods, then grasped their staffs and moved forward. The Sages—two of the most powerful mages in the kingdom—carefully made their way down the stairs, exuding the kind of tension you’d expect from people heading into a dragon’s nest.

The first floor was even louder and more rowdy than Monica had expected. They weren’t even in the hall yet, but she could already hear the voices of people having fun and see the servants bringing in food and liquor.

Having gotten down the stairs, Ray hunched over and began to quake. “I can feel the festive atmosphere...the kind you only get at parties... It’s so thick, it’s making me choke... Urgh!”

Monica stood next to him, frozen in place. But she wasn’t scared of the crowd. She’d seen something.

*Was that...?*

One of the servants passing by caught her eye. She felt like she'd seen the man somewhere before—somewhere recently, and not at this estate.

His height, shoulder width, arm and leg length, head and body ratios—all the numbers composing a human being flashed through her head.

*Where? Where was it? Outside the estate...? He was at the hunting grounds, too, but... No, that wasn't it... It was somewhere else...*

Deep in a dark forest, Monica had seen this man—no, it hadn't been her who had seen him. A sound came back to her: the hateful cry of a green dragon whose child had been stolen.

*...That's right. I wasn't the one who saw that man...*

Monica's left hand twitched, as if reacting to the surfacing memory.

"Abyss Shaman, I found him...," she said quietly, using her right hand to stop her left from shaking. "...The shaman who cursed the dragon."

\* \* \*

*Well, it looks like someone from House Albright has finally caught up to me...*

The man, having returned to the kitchen from the banquet hall, covertly wiped his sweaty hands on his clothes.

The other servants were all busy with their own tasks; nobody had time to notice the man's strange behavior. Still, he couldn't help but nervously watch for anyone looking at him. He'd always been paranoid. He couldn't help but be wary of other people's gazes—all of them, whether they were positive or negative.

*I'm fine. Ray Albright hasn't figured me out. It's been over a decade, and I look completely different.*

He'd get through this if he just acted naturally. And then he could continue his research. Stealthily, he gripped the cursed tool he'd snuck into his pocket.

*"Take control of a cursed dragon and have the second prince slay it."*

Those were his orders. But to create a cursed dragon, then manipulate it to

his own ends was no easy task. So the man had used a young green dragon as a test subject.

Young green dragons didn't have the mana resistance mature ones did. By mixing a cursed item into its food and getting it inside the dragon's body, the man believed he could get his cursecraft to take effect.

And it had worked—to a terrifying degree.

The cursecraft was only meant to let him control the dragon. Instead, it had devoured the creature and killed it. Even worse, its mother had consumed the child's remains—including the tool—and gone berserk.

The second prince had only been able to slay the dragon because the Silent Witch happened to be around to help.

*No. Think positively... I'm actually very lucky. I failed at controlling the cursed dragon, but I still fulfilled His Excellency's orders to let the second prince slay it. Now if I can just perfect the puppet-making curse...*

Completing his puppet-making curse, a shamanic technique to control dragons and people at will, was his dearest wish. If he could accomplish that, then *everything* would start going his way. Wealth, prestige—it would all be his. He wouldn't even fear the Seven Sages.

*His Excellency will surely acknowledge my talents and call me back to his side.*

The personage he worked for desired a loyal puppet. If the man could perfect a curse to make that happen, then his employer would surely appoint him to a position of trust.

Presently, House Albright had a monopoly on all shamanic knowledge in the Kingdom of Ridill. That was why His Excellency had brought in a shaman who had left the family—as a trump card to play in case he ever had to confront House Albright.

*He chose me. I'm not like that bumbling Victor Thornlee.*

Whenever he was irritated, or anxious about his future, he thought of all the people who had fallen to ruin despite their talents.

*All of them were overflowing with potential, and yet they all messed up and*

*died. And it serves them right!*

They weren't really geniuses, not in the true sense of the word. But he was different. He would survive. He would succeed.

The corners of his lips rose in a dark smile. As he put away some wineglasses, a male colleague addressed him—it was Bartholomeus, the newcomer.

“Excuse me. Got a sec? ...I seem to have stubbed my finger, and I'd like to tend to it. Can you get the firewood for me? I'll do all the prep work tomorrow in exchange.”

The man looked reticent but ultimately accepted. On the inside, however, he was relieved. Now he could get away from here.

*They'll never find me*, he told himself. But in truth, he was anxious. He desperately wanted to get as far from the banquet as he could.

Taking a lantern, he headed to the woodcutting hut behind the estate. He would claim he was too old to carry so many logs at once and make lots of trips, buying himself even more time.

As he thought over his options, he put his hand on the hut's door.

“...Wait, what's going on...?”

His hand wouldn't come off the doorknob. It was like his fingers were glued to it. Taken aback, he illuminated the knob with his lantern and saw something black and sticky stuck between it and his hand. He knew exactly what that dark goop was—the physical manifestation of a curse.

“It's a curse to make your hand stick to something permanently... I wish my hand would get stuck to a cute girl's permanently...”

A young man in a Sage's robe gripping a staff staggered out from behind the woodcutting hut. It was Ray Albright, the third Abyss Shaman. And standing next to him, wearing the same robe, with a veil over her mouth to hide her identity, was a petite girl called the Silent Witch.

The man considered his options.

He could use a shamanic technique to undo the curse and unstick his hand from the door. But if he used cursecraft, it would only prove he was a shaman.

Instead, he made a show of being confused.

“What is the meaning of this, my lord, my lady?” he asked.

The Silent Witch, who had previously refrained from speaking while at the estate, quietly answered him.

“You are Barry Oats, the shaman who betrayed House Albright ten years ago. Isn’t that right, Peter Summs?”

\* \* \*

Monica finally using her voice must have come as quite the shock to Peter.

The servant called Peter Summs was a thin man with combed-back gray hair. His mouth was covered by a mustache, and he looked a little over sixty years old.

Barry Oats was supposed to be a man of about fifty, with a robust physique and black hair. Was this new appearance something he’d adopted to evade House Albright, or had it come about naturally as a result of his life on the run?

Monica fixed Peter with a cold gaze and continued flatly, “The first ones to encounter the cursed dragon during the hunt were you and Lady Eliane.”

“Oh yes. That was when Lord Dudley saved us—”

“The second encounter took place at the rest area. You were there as well.” Monica tucked her staff between her arm and chest, then held up three fingers on her right hand—the only one she could still move freely. “Finally, the third time. I don’t know if you realized this, but the cursed dragon was still moving after we took it down. It was headed for the estate—dragged there by the curse.”

It seemed that wherever the cursed dragon was headed, Peter Summs was always there.

And Monica knew the reason why. She’d witnessed the green dragon’s hatred when her left hand was cursed.

“That green dragon was trying to get revenge on you for cursing and killing her child,” she said.

Even after Felix’s bullet had pierced its brow and Monica’s magecraft had

destroyed its wings, the dragon had kept moving, crawling along the ground. It never stopped pursuing the shaman who killed its child.

“Certain animals are very sensitive to dragons’ mana,” she said. “I’ll bet the reason they don’t like you is because you came into contact with a young dragon.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by any of this, my lady... I don’t know anything about curses...” Peter’s mouth twitched as he tried to maintain the demeanor of a servant.

Monica used uncharmed magecraft to produce several small flames around him. They illuminated the man—letting her read the numbers composing his body.

For Monica, numbers made up a beautiful world she loved, and at the same time served as a haven for her to escape to.

*...But not right now.*

In her mind’s eye, she saw Glenn in agony under the effects of the curse. She heard the green dragon’s wails when it realized it had lost its child.

She would decipher all the numbers making up the world and use them to get to the truth.

Thus resolved, Monica repeated her father’s words. “People, things, magecraft... The world is filled with numbers.”

Peter jolted as though someone had struck him with a whip. Then he turned a pair of terrified eyes on Monica.

“I saw the cursed dragon’s memories,” she said. “In them, a man placed a curse on a young dragon and killed it.”

The man’s facial features had been blurry in the dragon’s memory; she hadn’t been able to make them out. But she remembered his body. His shoe size, the lengths of his legs, torso, arms, and fingers—she remembered all of it.

“I can accurately judge the size of anything I see. The shaman the cursed dragon witnessed had the exact same proportions as you do.”

Monica slowly lifted up her hood to get a good look at Peter’s body. When

she did, he caught sight of her face.

The moment Peter saw the greenish color of her eyes in the light, his demeanor changed completely.

“Eee... Ah... Aaaaaahhhhhh!”

He shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled something out, then held it up. It was a jet-black gemstone enclosed in a spiraling goldwork pattern. In the light of Monica’s flames, the stone gleamed as if it were wet.

And that’s when Monica saw it—a black fluid dripped from the stone, trickling down the spiral goldwork before falling to Peter’s feet.

*Is that a magical item? ...No, it’s a cursed tool!*

Magical items and cursed tools were very similar. You could cast the spell imprinted in either without chanting—all you had to do was channel a bit of mana into it.

As the viscous black fluid dripped down, it began to slide across the ground toward Monica and Ray. It was the same as the shadow that had clung to the cursed dragon.

Monica tried to cast her anti-curse barrier. But as she lifted her staff, Ray used one hand to push it back down.

“...No need,” he said.

Ray muttered an incantation, then took a step forward and held his left hand out in front of him.

A shamanic seal engraved on his fingertips glowed purple, then lifted away from his skin. The slender, branch-like purple seal then coiled itself around the jet-black curse crawling along the ground.

Ray’s seal then expanded like a balloon, and Peter’s curse began to lose its color. Ray’s seal was devouring it.

As Peter’s eyes widened, Ray spoke to him in a gloomy voice. “You can’t kill me with a curse... I’m the Abyss Shaman, remember?”

Peter’s cursecraft was dangerous enough to kill a young dragon. Even Monica,

who had a relatively high mana capacity, had passed out in agony just from coming into contact with a piece of the curse the size of a single hair.

But even cursecraft that powerful was easily absorbed by the most talented shaman in the Kingdom of Ridill.

After finishing off Peter's curse, Ray spoke again, low and bitter. "...You've laid hands on a form of cursecraft well beyond your status. That old, decrepit body of yours is the result of the recoil, isn't it?"

Cursecraft was a dangerous art. It ate away at the user's body and sometimes caused it to mutate. Ray's body had been slowly acclimatized to it from a young age, so the only things about him that had changed were his hair and eye color. But for Peter Summs, exposure must have caused him to age prematurely.

Peter Summs—true name Barry Oats—was currently around fifty years old, and had once been a muscular, black-haired man. But the person in front of Monica now was thin, worn-out, and old. He looked at least ten years older than his real age.

"I won't insult you," said Ray. "Surrender before your body is dragged into the abyss."

"Damn you... Damn you, monster of the Albrights!"

As Peter swore, he peeled his right hand from the doorknob. While he was triggering the cursed tool, he'd used another technique to undo the sticking curse.





The skinny old man spun around and began to run.

They couldn't let him get away. *I have to chase him*, thought Monica.

But just as she prepared to take off, Ray fell to the ground, clinging to his staff. He had a hand over his mouth, and his already pale face looked even worse than usual.

"His curse is giving me indigestion," he moaned. "It was stronger than I thought... *Blech.*"

Peter's cursecraft was vicious enough to kill a young dragon. Monica thought Ray was pretty amazing for being able to eat it without suffering anything worse than indigestion.

"I, um, I'll go follow him!" she said.

"Thanks... *Urrrp.*"

Monica scampered off as fast as she could in pursuit of Peter. She wanted to attack him with magecraft, but the man knew these gardens like the back of his hand; he was deftly moving between trees, keeping himself hidden. And with how bad her vision was at night, it was difficult to attack him at all.

She wanted to use more flames for illumination, but there were too many decorative trees around. If one of them caught fire, it would quickly spread, resulting in a real disaster.

*In that case...*

Monica struck the ground once with her staff. She'd just cast a simple spell without chanting—all it did was imbue the earth nearby with mana.

Immediately, a bunch of the flowers planted in the garden began to glow and blossom, releasing particles of white light.

The garden was full of spiritrests. By imbuing the land with mana, she had caused them to bloom, and she could now use their light as illumination.

Now she wouldn't have to worry about starting a big fire. And she only had to imbue the ground once, too. The flowers would continue to glow without her having to maintain the spell.

She didn't see Peter anywhere in the flowers' range. He was probably hiding in the shadow of a tree, watching her for an opening.

It was possible Peter had more than one cursed tool. If she attacked recklessly, he might land a nasty counterattack.

*I'll just have to smoke him out of the shadows.*

Monica squeezed her staff and focused. An enormous quantity of numbers rushed through her mind. Then she used a magecraft formula to perfectly recreate them.

"...Burn this into your memory."

The staff gave off a faint glow, and Monica's round eyes glimmered green, reflecting its light.

The Silent Witch broke her silence and declared mercilessly, "This is what your curse has wrought."

Hiding in the darkness, Peter Summs waited for his chance. He still had the cursed tool in his hand. It was a failed version of the curse meant to make a living human into a puppet. It was too strong for its intended use, however, and would kill its target instead.

But that was enough to get Peter out of this situation. He couldn't afford to be picky about keeping her alive. She was a Sage.

*So what if she's a Sage? So what if she's a genius? They're a band of freaks!*

Peter was a talented man. That was how he knew.

The Abyss Shaman, who had devoured his curse, and the Silent Witch, who used advanced magecraft without chanting—they were beyond the realm of mere geniuses. They were *monsters*.

*If you show me even the slightest opening, I'll curse you to death!*

As his hand closed around the cursed tool in his pocket, a large black shadow suddenly appeared between him and the Silent Witch.

*Wait, what is that?*

It was a giant mass, crawling along the ground—a creature covered in green

scales, being eaten away by a dark shadow. Its beautiful wings were full of holes, its mouth was burned to a crisp, and its limply hanging tongue was charred and black.

Its big golden eyes were clouded with white, and he couldn't sense any life behind them. But then, suddenly, they turned to look straight at him.

The pure hatred in those eyes made Peter cry out in spite of himself.

“Ah! Ahh, eeee, ahhhh!”

Wasn't that the green dragon who had eaten the cursed tool? What was it doing here? How was it still alive?

The beast slid along the ground, closing in on him.

“Noooooooooooo!”

Peter couldn't keep still anymore. He burst out from behind the shadow of a tree and ran away as fast as he could.

Once she saw him, Monica released her illusion. Illusion magecraft was an extremely advanced technique and held a special place in the field. To be frank, while Monica could manage it unchanted, she hadn't completely mastered it. She couldn't move while using it, nor could she use any other spells at the same time.

The illusions she created weren't very precise, either. They were far from the real thing. Whenever she tried to make them move, they looked very unnatural.

That was why Monica almost never used illusion spells. If she was able to perfectly re-create a living thing with them, she would have made a copy of herself to attend events in her place.

*It's a good thing it's nighttime...*

Because it was harder to see at night, everything had worked much better than usual. And the awkwardness in her illusion's motions didn't seem so unnatural for a green dragon on the verge of death.

Peter wheezed and whimpered as he ran around a corner of the mansion. Everything was going as Monica had planned.

Immediately, she heard the man scream and a dog bark behind the building. She scampered off after him, turning the corner herself.

“Hey, kiddo. I waited right here, just like you asked.”

As she rounded the corner, she saw two people. The first was Peter, who had been bitten in the leg by a dog and was now down on his rear. The second was a black-haired servant commanding the hunting dogs—Bartholomeus Baal. When the latter saw Monica, he waved.

“Ha-ha! How do you like that?” he said. “I’m pretty good, aren’t I?”

“Um, thank...you. Could you have the dog stand down?”

Bartholomeus said “back” to the hunting dog, and it quickly came away from Peter. Once it was clear, Monica immediately put up a sealing barrier around the traitorous shaman.

Peter’s face twisted with hate, and he held up the shamanic tool in his hand.

The black shadow dripping from the tool transformed into a slender, snakelike shape and tried to break the barrier. But the black snake was blocked by an invisible wall and fell to the ground.

Monica gazed at Peter impassively. “It won’t work. I used an anti-curse formula.”

“Damn it! Damn it, damn it, damn it all!” Peter swore, spittle flying from his mouth.

Bartholomeus looked at him with pity and sadness. “I never dreamed old Peter would turn out to be a shaman...”

At this point, Peter wasn’t paying any attention to Bartholomeus. His wide-open eyes were fixed on Monica, and his body shook terribly.

Why was there such fear in his eyes as he looked at her? Why did he seem so flustered? It was almost as if he’d come face-to-face with a dead man.

In a trembling voice, Peter moaned, “I knew you would never forgive me... Venedict Reyn...”

Monica’s thoughts instantly stopped. “...Huh?”

Bartholomeus seemed confused by the unfamiliar name. But Monica knew who Peter was talking about. How could she forget?

Venedict Reyn was her father, executed seven years ago.

*Why would he bring up my father's name...?*

Monica was disturbed, but Peter seemed even more upset than she was. A greasy sweat broke out across his whole body, and he began to claw at his own face.

“Ah, ahhhh, Venedict! Even in death, you hunt me! Is this vengeance for selling you out to His Excellency...?!”

His bloodshot eyes no longer saw Monica. They looked past her at someone who wasn't there—someone long dead.

Peter's trembling lips twisted into a grin. “Ahhh, hah, ha-ha, ha-ha-ha! I won't be like Arthur! I... I'll... His Excellency will acknowledge me, and... Hee... Hee-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He thrust another shamanic tool out in front of him. It looked similar to the first one, but bigger. A black shadow dripped from the tool and expanded. It happened much more quickly than before—and it grew much larger.

*It's stronger than the last one!*

Monica clenched her teeth in panic, wondering if her anti-curse barrier would hold out. The shadow, however, had other plans.

Once expanded, it didn't attack her barrier at all—instead, it coiled around Peter's arm.

“...Huh?”

Monica wasn't the only one in shock. Peter yelped as well, looking at his arm in astonishment.

“Wait. No! Not me! Your prey, it's— Eee, noo, ahhh!”

He opened his mouth wide, but before his scream could come out, the shadow lurched into his throat. He'd lost control of the curse.

“Hey, Peter!” shouted Bartholomeus.

But it was too late. Monica's magecraft couldn't stop the onset of curses. Especially not when they moved as swiftly as this one had. In two blinks of an eye, Peter had collapsed to the ground and stopped moving, his entire body dyed black.

As the shaman met his end, consumed by the curse, his lips trembled, and he muttered his final words.

"...Venedict... Is this your revenge...?"

Peter's body, now a black shadow in the shape of a human, quickly collapsed and disappeared like ashes scattering in the wind.

All that remained was the shamanic tool—that jet-black gemstone decorated with gold.

*But...why...?*

Monica wasn't yet able to process the shocking scene before her. More than anything else, Peter's final words had disturbed her.

*Why was he saying my father's name?*

Peter must have been linked to her father's death. He'd sold her father out to someone...to the one he'd referred to as *His Excellency*.

Was that person the mastermind behind the cursed dragon incident, too?

Monica hung her head. Hands shaking, she covered her face.

*Why would a shaman who cursed a dragon know my father?*

"Hey, kiddo, you all right? Hey!"

Monica didn't register Bartholomeus's worried voice, either.

Her brown eyes tinged with green clouded over as they stared out from between her fingers. Her chest hurt. Every time she took a breath, she felt like she was absorbing some of the residue from the dead shaman. It made her want to throw up.

*Why? How?* She had so many questions. But there was nobody here to answer them. The only man who knew the truth had just been devoured by a curse right in front of her.

She only knew one thing for sure.

*...My father was killed. Someone wanted to get rid of him.*

The sight of her father burning flashed across the back of her eyelids. Deep in her ears, she heard the voice of the executor passing judgment on him.

*“This man, Venedict Reyn, has been conducting research on class-one forbidden magecraft in secret. He has plotted to overthrow the state. Thus, he will now be burned at the stake. Let the flames of our great spirit god scorch you and purge the sin from your body!”*

No, she thought. No, no! My father isn't a criminal!

Her breathing now ragged, Monica glared at the shamanic tool Peter had left behind.

It had to be the key to finding out the truth.

*Wait for me, Dad...*

Monica picked up the tool, squeezed it in her little hand, and made a promise.

*I swear I'll prove you're not a criminal.*

As those people hurled stones at her father's body hanging from that tree, and as the executor burned his books, the young Monica could do nothing. But she wasn't that helpless child anymore. She was one of the Seven Sages—the Silent Witch.

Slowly, she rose from her squatting position, the cursed tool in her hand. Then she looked up at Bartholomeus, who was watching her with concern.

“I have, um, a request to make of you, Mister Bartholomeus.”

“Hmm? You do?”

Felix, who had known about the cursecraft.

Peter, a shaman devoured by his own curse.

The two men Peter had mentioned—*His Excellency* and *Arthur*.

Maybe all four of them were involved not just in the cursed dragon incident but also in the death of Monica's father.



She needed to know the truth. She wanted to clear his good name.

And to do that, she'd need a helper—someone she could rely on, who could operate *outside* of Serendia Academy.

“I'd, um, like to hire you!”



## CHAPTER 11

### Homecomings

Cyril's hometown of Ashendarte was in the southwest of the Kingdom of Ridill. It was famed for its textiles, and all the women there were taught weaving from a very young age.

In his memories, his mother was always sitting behind a loom, reeling in threads of all different colors, weaving them into beautifully patterned cloths.

These days, automatic water-powered looms were taking over the market, and hand-woven products were on the decline. But those of Ashendarte—known as Ashenda weave—had stubbornly held on to their popularity both inside and outside the kingdom, due to their intricate patterns and vivid colors.

It had been quite some time since Cyril had visited, and a lot about the townscape had changed. But he could still hear the clacking of the looms all around, just like he had as a child.

Cyril got out of the coach with his travel bag in hand, then walked alone through the familiar streets. His foster father, the Marquess of Highown, had told him he could borrow a carriage if he visited home, but Cyril had politely declined. The carriage would immediately mark him as a noble, and it would draw too much attention parked in front of his mother's house.

His mother hated standing out like that. So instead of wearing the high-quality clothing Marquess Highown had given him, he wore simple traveling clothes and a hat.

His deep-blue eyes, lustrous silver hair, and gorgeous facial features all made him look like a noble, and he'd always stood out among the other children. He could still remember how much that had concerned his mother—much more than it had ever concerned him. She always saw his father in him, and that made her afraid—afraid he'd turn into his father someday.

Cyril pulled the brim of his hat down as he walked, his gaze on the ground.

He was used to others looking at him with fear and curiosity. He could deal

with that—what he *couldn't* deal with was when they looked at his mother the same way.

The house he'd grown up in was the same as it had been several years ago. Marquess Highown had provided enough financial support for Cyril's mother not to have to work, but she had chosen to remain where she was and continue her life as before.

Cyril gulped and came to a stop in front of the door. He brought his right hand up to knock, then paused and held it there unnaturally.

If he opened the door and announced that he was home...would his mother say, "But this isn't your home," and chide him? That thought passed through his mind.

"....."

It *was* his home, and yet he couldn't bring himself to say so. After thinking hard about it, he came up with an idea.

*I know. I'll say "It's been so long," instead. That will flow more naturally. And then I can see how she responds, and—*

"Oh, Cyril. Welcome home."

The voice came from behind him. He was so startled, he almost dropped his things.

Awkwardly, he turned around to find his mother behind him, holding a broom. Apparently, she'd been sweeping outside the house.

Forgetting about his concerns, he responded in a panic. "I, er, I'm home!"

His voice cracked terribly. He sounded like Monica.

His mother seemed a little dazed as she looked at him, but eventually she put her broom up against the wall and opened the door.

"You must be cold from the trip. I'll fire up the stove."

"No, no. I-I'll do it!"

"You will? All right. Thank you."

That simple thank you, and the fact she'd let him call this place his home,

filled Cyril with such relief, he could have cried.

The inside of the house, just like the outside, was almost exactly as Cyril remembered it. In the corner was his mother's loom; she was using it to create a beautifully intricate pattern.

The cloth featured a white rose, depicted with glossy thread on indigo fabric. He looked at the rose more closely. It used threads of slightly different gloss and color here and there, giving the full image a sense of depth.

After he fired up the stove, his mother boiled some water and brewed tea.

"Here you are," she said.

"Thank you," replied Cyril, accepting the drink. Then he remembered he hadn't taken out his gift for her—he'd been too tense. Hastily, he dug the item, wrapped in paper, out of his bag. "This is...a gift," he said. "For you. I hope you can get some use out of it."

His mother opened the wrapping a little to examine the contents, then blinked.

"Soap?"

"Yes, well. I was with some underclassmen, and we picked these out together. They had a lot of different scents, but...this was the most calming, so..."

"It smells nice."

Seeing his mother's little smile relaxed him, and the corners of his mouth began to turn up, too.

*It seems I made the right choice... I'll have to thank Accountant Norton.*

He breathed a covert sigh of relief and picked up his cup. The cup had been his ever since he was little. He was happy it was still here, and that his mother hadn't poured the tea into a cup meant for guests.

As he pondered such things, he put the cup to his lips.

The tea wasn't too hot—Cyril's tongue burned easily—and it was already sweetened. This was the same flavor he'd liked as a kid. One sip was enough to make his chest tighten in nostalgia.

For a time, the two of them drank their tea in silence. When their cups were about half-empty, his mother asked stiffly, “How has school been?”

Cyril straightened up nervously. He’d been considering what to talk about the entire carriage ride home. But now that he was in front of his mother, his mind went blank, and he had trouble forming words.

He’d already told her all about school in his letters, and he couldn’t think of any new topics.

Cyril put his cup on the table and thought.

*Oh, I know. I’ll talk about the prince.*

He was confident he could talk about Felix until the sun went down. Whenever Elliott heard him talking on this subject, he would look at him with pity. But in Cyril’s opinion, Elliott simply lacked the proper respect for the prince.

“Student council work is going smoothly,” he began. “We have a new accountant this year, so things have been somewhat busy. But the prince’s guidance has been sublime. All of our events went smoothly, which has only impressed on me further how excellent a commander he is. His greetings during the academy festival were especially—”

“I wanted to hear about you, not Prince Felix.”

The quiet interruption caused Cyril to freeze. His gaze wandered for a few moments. “Oh, well... I put almost everything about myself in my letters,” he said awkwardly.

“I don’t mind if you tell me again... I want to hear it from you.”

Cyril’s face tightened up, and he fell silent.

When he was little and still attending the school in town, he would often brag to his mother about how good his test scores were and how his teachers had praised him. But now he was scared to talk about himself at all.

*“Mother, I scored full marks on today’s test. I was number one!”*

Whenever he excitedly announced such things to his mother, she would sigh, say “oh,” and look away.

When he was writing a letter, he could calmly reflect and give a full report. But when it came to telling his mother things in person, he suddenly found himself afraid of how she would react, and his tongue froze in place.

But he couldn't stay silent forever. And there *was* something he needed to tell her about.

"Well, it's been decided that I...will go to the castle for the New Year greetings."

The New Year greetings took place after the New Year's ceremony held at the royal castle. The event lasted for a week, during which nobility from across the kingdom would visit the castle one by one and pay their respects to the king. In general, only those with a title took part in the tradition; their families generally stayed at home.

Eldest sons, however—the ones set to inherit the family title—were permitted to accompany their fathers. And Marquess Highown had told Cyril that he'd bring him along this year. In other words, the marquess had accepted Cyril—his foster son—as his rightful successor.

It had been several years since the marquess had taken him in, and yet Cyril was still anxious about his position. It was clear to everyone that his mental faculties paled in comparison to Claudia's. In an attempt to gain a skill of his own, he'd studied magecraft. But in the end, he'd wound up suffering from mana hyperabsorption.

He was getting nowhere, and he wasn't meeting the expectations placed on him. If this kept up, wouldn't the marquess eventually abandon him?

Such thoughts plagued Cyril.

Of course, for the past few months, a certain underclassman had kept him so busy that he hadn't had time to feel anxious.

Still, when he'd returned to the Ashley estate for winter break and Marquess Highown had broached the topic of the New Year greetings, Cyril had been so happy, he'd nearly broken down in tears.

But at the same time, he felt a new anxiety well up within him—how would his mother react when she found out? No matter how many times he imagined

how it might go, his mother always sighed and said, “You really are a noble’s son.” What if she said that to him again...? The fear made his fingers tremble.

He was afraid to look at his mother’s face. If she sighed in resignation, what would he do?

As Cyril hung his head, his mother addressed him quietly. “...Good job. I know you worked hard.”

Cyril’s slender shoulders shook. Slowly, he brought his face back up. His mother, sitting across from him, wore a peaceful expression.

“There was a girl at the academy’s festival who helped me find my way around. She said you always taught her how to do her work...and that you were very kind.”

“...Huh?”

“I think Marquess Highown must have noticed those good qualities in you.”

Cyril’s vision began to blur. He saw his mother’s loom. He loved watching her weave—hearing the loom’s rhythmic rattling, seeing the pretty patterns gradually emerge. As a young boy, he’d always sat right here and watched her.

*“When weaving, it’s important to work diligently and carefully, taking each step one at a time.”*

Cyril had done just that. He’d taken each step one at a time and never stopped doing his best. He savored his mother’s words—“I know you worked hard”—and smiled, tears in his eyes.

With pride, he said, “I’m your son, after all.”

\* \* \*

Felix Arc Ridill completed diplomatic talks with the Kingdom of Farfolia and departed from Duke Rehnberg’s mansion eight days after he had arrived.





Despite—or rather, because of—a major incident involving a cursed dragon, the trade negotiations had gone incredibly smoothly. Count Malé, who had been staunchly opposed to expanding trade with the kingdom, softened up visibly after they'd slain the cursed dragon.

After weathering that crisis together, the Farfolian guests seemed to have developed a sense of solidarity with Felix and the others. When the prince suggested that Ridill and Farfolia might work together against future dragonraids by sharing information and performing joint training exercises, the Farfolian delegation was beyond enthusiastic.

Currently, dragonraid countermeasures varied by country, and different nations seldom worked together. This suggestion could bring Ridill and Farfolia into a cooperative partnership. Together, they could lead other nations in dragonraid countermeasures and—most importantly—firm up relations between their two kingdoms.

Felix had not only won an increase in Farfolian grain imports but also an opportunity to strengthen Ridill and Farfolia's relationship. These were major gains.

And once the story got out that he'd slain a cursed dragon and achieved success in diplomatic talks with a neighboring nation, the nobles supporting him would be delighted indeed.

*...Of course, the cursed dragon wasn't a natural threat but a man-made one—courtesy of Duke Clockford.*

As Felix sat in the carriage on his trip back to the castle, staring idly at the scenery outside the window, he reflected on everything that had happened in the Duchy of Rehnberg.

The previous night, a servant had disappeared from the duke's mansion—an elderly man named Peter Summs. Felix had been suspicious of him ever since arriving at the estate.

That man was probably the one who had triggered the cursed dragon incident—all to make Felix into a hero.

*...They'd planned for me to slay the cursed dragon, but Peter lost control of his*

*cursecraft and very nearly killed me. Perhaps he feared Duke Clockford's censure and ran away.*

Everyone at the mansion, not least Eliane, had been worried about the missing Peter. He'd been acting extremely frightened ever since the cursed dragon attacked him, and it seemed the prevailing rumor was that it had traumatized him, and that was why he had left.

*Duke Clockford must be running out of options.*

Just before departing from Duke Rehnberg's mansion, Felix received a letter. Its contents essentially said that the third prince's faction would capitulate to his own.

Apparently, Queen Phillis—the third prince's mother—and Duke Clockford had struck some sort of deal. The third prince had few supporters to begin with, and he was the last in line for succession. Phillis had probably decided to ally herself with Duke Clockford in advance, in order to assure her son's future. The third prince might not become king, but this would guarantee him some degree of status.

*The king has fallen ill, while the second prince is being showered with praise for slaying a cursed dragon. And now the third prince's faction has allied with us... The throne will change hands very soon.*

The foundation for Felix to become the next king was essentially complete. And now he, who had always acted like a good little puppet for Duke Clockford, would finally have to take action.

Peter Summs had used shamanic techniques to try to make a dragon into his puppet. Victor Thornlee, a former Serendia Academy professor, had been researching mental interference magecraft. When Felix considered the special talents of the people Duke Clockford had assembled, it was clear what he was after.

*You want to make me into a true puppet, don't you?*

Mental interference magecraft could certainly interfere with a target's mind and memories, but there was still no spell that could bring another person under one's complete control. And so Duke Clockford had gathered talented

magicians and shamans in order to find a means by which he could create the perfect puppet and place the whole kingdom under his command.

It would be nigh impossible to make a puppet of the king himself—he resided in the royal castle, surrounded by guards. But Felix was the duke’s grandson. He would have plenty of chances to cast a spell on him.

*I need more cards in my hand if I want to fight back... Fortunately, I had a bountiful harvest this week, including on a more personal note.*

The first positive outcome had been his exchanges with Glenn Dudley. While Glenn’s master, the Barrier Mage, supported the first prince, Glenn himself didn’t seem to have much interest in politics.

*His incredible mana capacity is very attractive. And I’m sure this incident will only make him grow.*

Glenn would be a Seven Sages candidate in the future. If Felix could put him under his thumb now, he would be extremely useful down the road. For these reasons, he hoped to continue building a friendly relationship with Glenn. Felix thought highly of his abilities, and he rather liked how he wore his heart on his sleeve.

*And the second...*

Felix took a sheaf of paper out of his luggage as a thin smile appeared on his lips. It was the report he’d had the Silent Witch correct for him.

He’d worked little by little on his essay, between all the affairs of state and school activities he had to attend to. The fact that the mage he most looked up to would deign to read it still felt like a dream to him.

*I’m one step closer to her.*

The Silent Witch—that incredible mage served by the Black Dragon of Worgan himself—she was at Serendia Academy. Was she a student? A teacher? Or neither—a servant, perhaps? Whatever she was, it shouldn’t be very difficult to narrow down the options.

According to the Abyss Shaman, the bruises from the curse that had affected the Silent Witch and Glenn Dudley would disappear, but the pain would persist

for a month or so. In that case, all he had to do was look for a woman at Serendia Academy whose left arm hurt.

*...Soon, I'll be able to meet her and see her face.*

He could barely contain his joy. Stifled laughter clicked in his throat.

“Welcome home, Brother.”

When he got back to the castle, the third prince, Albert, was there to greet him.

Albert would be fourteen this year. He was a brainy-looking boy with straight blond hair and hazel eyes. He always acted politely toward Felix, but his gaze was sharp for his age, and he watched Felix very carefully.

“Thanks for coming to greet me, Albert. How is His Majesty?”

“...Not well, I hear. The doctor says he can't see anyone. I believe he will still be making an appearance at the New Year's ceremony, though.”

“I see.” Felix made a sad face, and Albert stared hard at it, as if trying to glean any information he could.

The letter from Duke Clockford said the third prince's faction had given up on the throne and joined the second prince's group... Apparently, though, Albert wasn't happy with the situation.

His mother, Phillis, had probably been the one to make the decision, while Albert himself hadn't yet accepted it.

Felix narrowed his azure eyes into a gentle, brotherly expression. “Albert, I hear you plan to leave Minerva's and transfer to Serendia Academy.”

“...I do.” Albert's face twisted into a bitter expression.

Most people knew Minerva's as the most prestigious school for mages in the kingdom. But it had one other important characteristic: It was politically neutral.

For Albert, moving from Minerva's to Serendia—which was under Duke Clockford's control—meant surrendering to the second prince's faction.

He probably hadn't wanted to transfer, and this, too, was something Phillis

had put him up to.

“Well, I for one will be happy to see my adorable little brother at school. Serendia Academy’s facilities and teaching staff are both first-rate. I hope you’ll apply yourself earnestly to your studies and meet Queen Phillis’s expectations.”

Queen Phillis’s expectations—in other words, to remove himself from the line of succession, accept a middling position, and make his mother look good.

Albert must have understood what he meant, but the third prince wasn’t yet able to fully control his own emotions. Humiliated, his cheeks twitched, and his body trembled. Still, he managed to squeeze out a few words.

“...Yes. I’ll do my best to become an upstanding person like you, Brother.”

Several ministers were waiting behind Albert; they all seemed to want to talk to Felix. There was no need to drag this out. With a short “I’m looking forward to it,” he slipped past his brother.

Albert set a dark glare on Felix as he watched him greet the ministers and discuss upcoming plans. Felix, however, didn’t even spare him another glance.

Albert left the room, suppressing the urge to stomp his feet. Once he’d turned two corners, his patience ran out, and he started to run.

He stopped at the end of the hallway and called out, “Patrick! Patrick!”

A boy about his age sauntered over to him. “Yes, Lord Albert? Did you call?”

His servant, Patrick, was a plump boy with wavy, light-brown hair. It wasn’t just his hair, either—even his smile and manner of speaking seemed somehow wavy and soft.

Unhappy with his servant’s attitude, Albert stomped his feet. “Patrick! Why are you so relaxed?! When a master runs, his servant should run, too!”

“Oh, but I don’t think it’s good to run in the halls.”

Patrick was correct. But Albert pursed his lips like a sulking child. “Patrick, did you see my brother’s attitude?”

“He seemed the same as usual to me.”

“He doesn’t care a lick about me. It was written all over his face!”

“The same as always, then.”

“It’s his fault I have to leave Minerva’s! I have a talent for magecraft, you know—unlike him! I could have done amazing, wonderful, brilliant things if I stayed there! But he’s making me... He’s...”

Albert began to claw at his blond hair in frustration. Patrick patted it down and straightened it out for him.

As he let his servant fix his hair, Albert issued an order. “Patrick, I want a thorough investigation of Felix’s school life. What subjects he’s good at, which ones he’s bad at, his interests, his special skills, his friends, his marriage candidates, the things he wants to keep secret, and anything else you can think of! Doesn’t matter! Just find out as much about him as you can! Maybe we can spot a weakness or two!”

Patrick’s tone stayed slow and relaxed. “Do I have to?” he asked. “Lord Felix is perfect. Do you really think he has a weakness?”

“It’s your job to find one, Patrick!”

“Well, all right. I’ll give it a try.”

As Albert continued to pompously order around his servant, he thought. *Ugh, this is the worst.* He resented all of them—the adults pulling him this way and that and his brother, who looked down on him like he wasn’t even a threat.

Albert was better at schoolwork than other kids his age. His motor skills were a little below average, and he couldn’t seem to hit anything with a sword. He was scared of riding horses and a slow runner. But for all that, he tried twice as hard as anyone else in the classroom.

And yet nobody cared. Nobody looked at him. It was like they thought a third prince might as well not even exist.

*...It really doesn’t matter if I’m here or not. I’m just a third prince. Nobody cares about me. Not Father, not Mother, not Felix... Though I guess Lionel’s different.*

Albert didn’t resent the first prince so much. In fact, he kind of liked him. Lionel could be a little overbearing sometimes, but he showed Albert affection.

He didn't make fun of him just because he couldn't ride a horse—instead, he'd ride the horse with him.

Everyone else said Lionel was unrefined for a prince. But while Felix may have looked kindhearted on the outside, Albert thought that Lionel was much nicer.

*The adults all say Felix is best suited for the throne. But you can never tell what he's thinking. What's so good about him? ...And he isn't even upset that Father's sick.*

When he'd told Felix about their father's poor health, his brother had made a sad face, but his eyes hadn't looked sad at all.

*I mean, okay. Royalty isn't supposed to get emotional. But isn't that a little cold? Even Lionel is sad. He was barely eating.*

To be honest, Albert found Felix creepy. He had a pretty face, but it always seemed to be hiding something.

*I'll expose Felix's true colors... We'll be going to the same school once the break ends. This is my chance to figure out his weakness!*

\* \* \*

A week had passed since the start of winter break, and Hilda Everett was at a total loss.

She'd turn forty this year, and while she was unmarried, she was a scientist at the Royal Magic Research Institute and made good money, so she was able to live in a snug house in the royal capital.

Hilda was disastrously bad at chores. That was why she left them all to Matilda, her veteran housemaid. But now Matilda had two weeks off for the winter solstice and New Year's break.

The ever-considerate Matilda had made a big batch of food for Hilda that wouldn't go bad and lined it up on the table, telling her to share it with her foster daughter if and when she came home.

Despite all this, one day during the break, Hilda decided on a whim to try making some soup, thus ruining every single one of the meals Matilda had left for her.



“That’s strange. I was only trying to make soup. How did all this happen?”

She’d thrown in whatever ingredients she could find, then turned the heat up to maximum without stirring them at all. As a result, the soup had boiled over and the bottom had burned. It was a disaster.

As Hilda was hastily trying to clean up the pot, she didn’t realize its handles would be hot, too, and she’d wound up flipping the whole thing over.

She was a talented scientist, a genius who had mastered the use of all kinds of experimental devices. And yet, sadly, she couldn’t even figure out how one of her own pots worked.

This alone would have made any housemaid slump to her knees in despair, but the tragedy didn’t end there. In order to clean the soup off the floor, Hilda had tried to wash it away using water magecraft. Unfortunately, the stains weren’t coming out. Frustrated, she continued her chant, strengthening the water pressure, until— “...Ah—”

—the surging water, strong enough to be an attack spell, destroyed one of the table’s four legs.

Naturally, the table tilted over, and all the food Matilda had left on it fell onto the soaked floor like an avalanche.

And that was why Hilda Everett was now at a complete loss.

Though she claimed she had only been trying to make soup, it was obvious that other factors were at play.

As Hilda was considering improvements to her magecraft formula—partially as a way to escape from the reality in front of her—there was a reserved knock at the back door.

*Is that her?* she thought, her chest swelling with anticipation. She went over to the door, her boots squelching against the soaked floor, and opened it.

“I-I’m...home.”

A petite girl with light-brown hair delivered her typical, awkward greeting. It was Monica Everett, Hilda’s foster daughter.

“My!” Hilda exclaimed in spite of herself, wrapping Monica’s slender body in a

hug. “Welcome home, Monica. When I got your Shelgria card, I was sure you’d come home this year... But why did you come to the back door?”

“Ummm, I used the knocker on the front door. But nobody answered, so...”

Monica had lived in this house until only a few years ago, and she still had a key. She could have just let herself in. But as always, she ended up overthinking it.

“Well, it’s too cold to stand outside talking, so come in—but you’ll need to go back around to the front.”

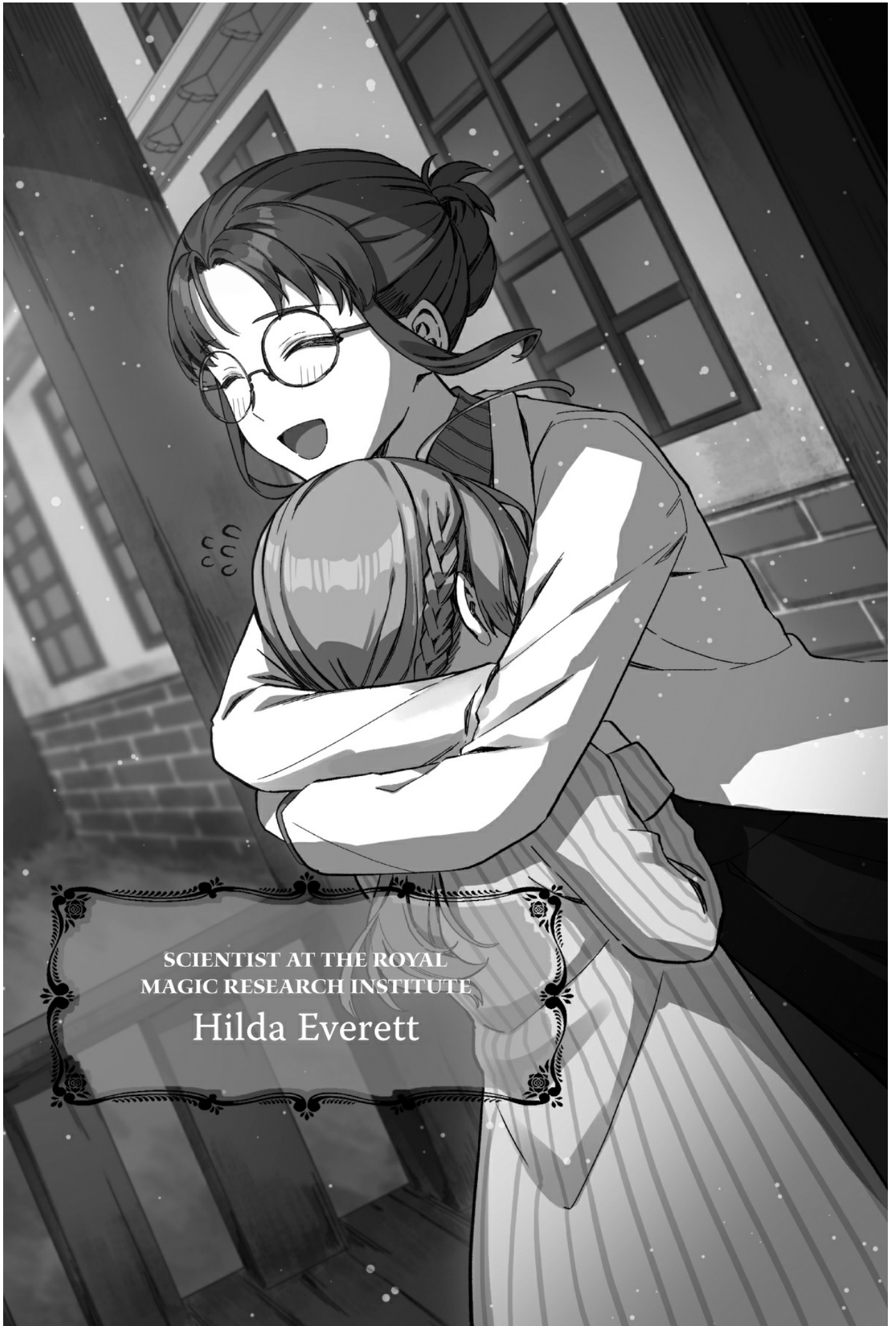
“Huh?”

“My wonderful daughter is finally home. I want to greet you properly, at the front door,” said Hilda, moving so Monica couldn’t see the disastrous state of the kitchen.

Monica went around and entered the house through the front door. Once inside, she looked around at her former home, to which she hadn’t returned in some time. Hilda’s house was more than big enough for a woman living on her own, but it was a mess, filled with books and experimental apparatuses.

Nevertheless, the place was clean of dust and spiderwebs—thanks to the housemaid’s efforts, no doubt.

*It’s been...so long...*



SCIENTIST AT THE ROYAL  
MAGIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Hilda Everett

Monica sat down on the couch at Hilda's urging, then took two wrapped gifts from her bag and set them on the table.

"I brought a gift for you, Miss Hilda. Ummm, the other one is for Miss Matilda."

"Oh! Is this lavender soap?"

"Yes... I—I was shopping at the winter market with, um, my friends, and I saw them, so..."

Hilda looked a little surprised when Monica said the word *friends*, but then she smiled warmly. "It smells really nice... Lavender staves off mold, so I'll put it in the storehouse right away."

She didn't even think about putting it in the bathroom. It was just like her. If Matilda saw it there, Monica was sure she'd move the soap to its proper location.

"So, how long can you stay, Monica? The Seven Sages need to take part in the New Year's ceremony, right?"

"Um, yes. So I'll need to go to the castle the day before..."

"Then you can stay here and relax until then! You're more than welcome. This is your home, after all— Oh."

Hilda's soft, motherly smile was interrupted by a sudden moan. Then her eyes darted toward the kitchen.

"Actually, um, about the food... Well... I'm really sorry. We might be eating bread and pickles for a while... B-but I moved the ginger cake to the cupboard, so it's safe!"

Monica could basically guess what had happened. Her foster mother had proved time and again that she had absolutely no talent for housework.

"Um, I'll just...go make some tea," she said, trying to be considerate.

Hilda blanched. "Wait!" she called. "The kitchen is, um... Well... You know what, just let me make the tea!"

Her warning fell on deaf ears, however, as Monica had already opened the

forbidden door to the kitchen. When she saw the disaster inside, she smiled dryly. Hilda was the same as always. She'd done something similar almost every year since taking Monica in.

Ultimately, Monica and Hilda spent the day cleaning up the kitchen.

Hilda seemed extremely embarrassed, but when Monica found out the only thing they had to worry about were stains on the floor, she breathed a sigh of relief. When Hilda really messed things up, the ceiling would get burned black by fire, or a cabinet would get smashed to smithereens. Hilda's lack of skill in the kitchen was just that devastating.

Once they were finished cleaning up, Hilda set sliced bread, honeyed nuts, pickles, and the ginger cake on the table. Apparently, she'd pulled out every last bit of preserved food she had in the house.

"Nero? Nero, wake up. It's time to eat."

Nero was curled up at the bottom of Monica's bag, but despite her calls, she got no response.

He'd still been awake in Rehnberg—where the temperature was milder—but ever since entering the chilly royal capital, he'd gone straight into hibernation mode. He'd been asleep most of the day.

She was worried that he was sleeping too much, but no matter what he looked like, he was a dragon. A little chill probably wasn't enough to weaken him.

Monica set Nero down in front of the woodstove, then took a seat across from Hilda.

"I'm really sorry, Monica. I wanted to have something better waiting for you when you got back..."

"No, it's, um, okay. Really, this is more than enough..."

Monica wasn't very particular about food. In fact, she privately regretted not getting Hilda something edible as a gift, instead of the soap.

"Ummm... Miss Hilda..."

"What is it?"

Hilda already had her mouth wide open and was stuffing bread into it. Monica waited for her to swallow, then continued.

“...Was there anyone, um, researching cursecraft who worked with Dad?”

Her foster mother’s face tensed, and her eyebrow twitched.

*I knew Miss Hilda would know something.*

That servant working at Duke Rehnberg’s mansion, Peter Summs—real name Barry Oats. He’d been behind the cursed dragon incident, but he also seemed to know something about her father’s death.

*“The world is filled with numbers.”*

When Monica had said that old phrase of her father’s, Peter had clearly become agitated.

*That shaman knew Dad.*

Hilda had been an assistant to Monica’s father—and the one who spent the most time in his laboratory. For that reason, Monica had thought that if anyone knew something about the shaman, it would be Hilda. And it appeared she was right on the mark.

“...Monica, why are you suddenly asking about something like that?” said Hilda, wiping the bread crumbs from her mouth and looking searchingly at her daughter.

Monica returned her gaze and straightened up. “I can’t tell you the details, but I ran into a shaman who knew my father. When he saw my face, he said my father’s name... And he also made a remark implying he was involved with Dad’s death...”

“Monica, do not involve yourself with that shaman,” said Hilda in a low voice, dropping her gaze. She folded her hands on the table. Monica could see the veins standing up on the back of her hands. She seemed to be trembling slightly. She must be very, very angry. “He’s allied with someone very powerful. If you go poking around, even you could wind up in danger.”

As one of the Seven Sages, Monica held the rank of count of magic, which was equivalent to that of a regular count. If Hilda thought this person posed a

danger to Monica, they must have been royalty, or else someone of equally high status.

Monica watched her foster mother's face carefully, not wanting to miss even the slightest reaction. "Is it that shaman's fault that Dad was executed?"

She heard the gnashing of teeth from inside Hilda's mouth. Her usually calm and gentle foster mother's face now looked fierce. She seemed to be desperately suppressing some intense emotion.

"...Once, there was a shaman who wanted to do joint research with Professor Reyn. He was looking into ways to control animals or something—right on the line of the forbidden. Since the professor was researching the link between human bodies and mana, there was a lot of common ground in their areas of study."

Professor Reyn refused the offer in no uncertain terms. A week later, the incident happened. Someone reported to the authorities that Venedict Reyn had been researching ways to revive the dead—class-one forbidden magecraft. Necromancy was one of the greatest taboos in the kingdom, along with black flames and weather control. Even just researching it—let alone actually using it—warranted the death penalty.

"Naturally, Professor Reyn wasn't researching anything like that," said Hilda. "He respected life. He always had. Trying to resurrect the dead is a desecration of life. He would never have done that."

But after an official conducted an on-site inspection, he claimed to have found several forbidden tomes and documents regarding techniques for reviving the dead. And so Monica's father, Venedict Reyn, was put to death as a criminal.

"It's obvious that man planted those confiscated documents in the professor's lab. But the official never changed his tune. Everything went suspiciously in that man's favor."

Hilda, knowing something was wrong, had looked into the shaman on her own...and, unfortunately, found out that a high-ranking noble was backing him. And by the time she'd arrived at the truth, Venedict Reyn was already dead. He had been executed without a trial, and they'd sped through the whole thing—

all because that high-ranking noble was putting pressure on them.

Monica clasped her fists on her lap. Her blood had already run cold, and yet she was still sweating. Her palms were soaked.

“...Who was...that high-ranking noble?” she asked.

Hilda slowly shook her head. “You’re a Sage now. You may end up having to interact with them... So I can’t tell you.”

If Monica got close to that high-ranking noble and it came out that she was Venedict Reyn’s daughter, her own position would be in jeopardy. Hilda was staying quiet to keep her safe.

Under the circumstances, Monica couldn’t press her foster mother any further.

Monica’s room at the Everett residence still had its bed and desk, and it was all kept clean.

She laid Nero down on the bed. He’d shown no signs of waking up ever since they’d arrived. Maybe he’d stay asleep until spring.

It would be lonely without anyone to talk to—a realization that came as a surprise to Monica. When she’d been living alone in her mountain cabin, she’d never felt lonely. But at some point, she’d grown very accustomed to being around Nero.

“I wonder if you’ll wake up once you’re all nice and warm.”

Monica pulled the blanket up and covered Nero with it, then petted him through the fabric. He still showed no signs of waking, however. She sat there with him for a while, but eventually she stood up, got a pen and a piece of paper, and sat down at her desk.

She wanted to write down all the questions she had before going to sleep so that she could keep it all straight.

## Questions

- *Peter’s remark about selling Dad out to His Excellency → Who is His*



*Excellency?*

- *Powerful person backing Peter → Is this the same person as His Excellency?*

- *Reason His Excellency is helping Peter → Does he need cursecraft for some reason?*

- *Peter's statement that he won't become like Arthur → Who is Arthur?*

- *The prince knew that cursecraft had created the cursed dragon → Why didn't he say anything? Did he know Peter was the culprit?*

After writing everything out, Monica sighed. The question she was most curious about was the identity of the high-ranking noble backing Peter. This was more than likely the same person Peter had referred to as His Excellency.

Since Peter had worked at Duke Rehnberg's estate, any "excellency" he might refer to would be, presumably, Duke Rehnberg. But the duke was, to be blunt, rather forgettable. He'd made almost no remarks during the negotiations with the Kingdom of Farfolia, letting Felix take the spotlight.

*I suppose you can't judge a book by its cover, but still...*

Monica couldn't help feeling that His Excellency must be someone else.

Right now, Monica was having Bartholomeus look into how Peter had ended up working at Duke Rehnberg's mansion. In addition, she'd entrusted the cursed tool he had left behind to Ray Albright. Monica hadn't told Ray about her father's name coming up, only about how Peter had died.

*I hope I can get some kind of clue from that shamanic tool, but maybe I shouldn't hold my breath...*

Monica slowly exhaled. Then she burned the note she'd just written with uncharmed magecraft and threw the ashes into the wastebasket.

*I know you're just trying to keep me safe, Miss Hilda. I'm sorry for going against your wishes. But I need to know the truth—even if it means losing my status as a Sage.*

Monica lay down next to Nero, then pulled a book out of a cloth pouch next to her pillow. It was her father's book, purchased for two gold coins at Porter

Used Books.

*The world is filled with numbers.* The book began with those words, and Monica had read the entire thing several times now.

She didn't know much about biology or medicine, so she struggled to understand the book's contents. But she'd been looking up all the unfamiliar terminology, and slowly she'd come to understand just how incredible the ideas in the book were.

Her father's research analyzed the characteristics people inherited from their parents, and this book explained how mana in particular was extremely hereditary. Eventually, by analyzing people's mana, he'd hoped to create a way to appraise individuals and pinpoint their bloodline.

If he was still alive, the Kingdom of Ridill's medical expertise would surely have developed even further. Research into hereditary diseases in particular would have progressed by leaps and bounds.

She was flipping through the familiar pages when, suddenly, she remembered what the owner of the used bookstore, Porter, had said.

*Oh, that's right. Mister Porter was Dad's friend, wasn't he?*

Porter wrote novels under the pen name Dustin Gunther. He'd also valued her father's book at two gold coins. That price implied to Monica that Porter acknowledged the importance of her father's research, or else that he was a very good friend.

*I wonder if Mister Porter was a frequent visitor to Dad's lab...*

When she was very young, Monica had spent a lot of time in her father's laboratory. But she didn't remember many of the people who passed through it, since she was usually engrossed in whatever book she was reading. The only person she clearly remembered a face and name for was Hilda, because she always brought Monica snacks.

And Monica had never been good at remembering people's faces to begin with. She'd only started assigning numbers to faces and bodies after her uncle's abuse, when she began escaping into the world of numbers.

As she thought back on her childhood and continued to flip idly through the pages of the book, something caught her eye. The flyleaf at the back was stuck to the colophon page.

“...?”

Gently, she separated the two pages and found a piece of paper caught in between them. It looked like a scrap of writing paper. She carefully peeled it out so as not to damage the book, then took a closer look at it. Someone had written something on it.

*“Visit the shop again when you discover the truth of the Black Grail.”*

Monica put the paper under a lamp and observed it. Neither the paper nor the letters changed color very much. It must have been written sometime in the last few months.

The letters were ill-formed, like they’d been written in a hurry. It had probably been scrawled quickly on a piece of writing paper, covered in a thin layer of glue, and stuck between the last few pages of the book.

And speaking of writing paper, Porter had been in the middle of penning a novel when she’d visited his shop. There had been stationery all over the counter—not just writing paper—and a bookstore would always have a supply of glue on hand.

“Did Mister Porter write this?” she wondered aloud.

The shop mentioned in the message was probably Porter Used Books. But what was the Black Grail?

Monica searched her memories but didn’t turn up anything. The term never appeared in her father’s book, either.

*Is it code for something? Or a cipher?*

She tossed and turned in bed, racking her brain for what the words “Black Grail” could refer to.

But in the end, she came up with nothing. Eventually, she surrendered herself to drowsiness and fell asleep.

That night, Monica dreamed of her father.

In the dream, Monica was absorbed in her book on mathematics, and her father was sitting in his chair, drinking coffee and watching her.

A guest sat next to him. The hair and clothes were a blur, but Monica could tell it was a man.

The guest sipped his coffee, then exhaled.

“Hmm,” he said. “It certainly is bitter, but I don’t taste any impurities. Not bad. And it wakes you right up, too—it’d be perfect for writing drafts... I’ve always wanted to try this stuff out, ever since I saw your coffeepot.”

“Hilda took one sip of it and said she couldn’t stand the bitterness,” said Monica’s father. “You’re the only weirdo who actually drinks my coffee.”

“I try never to forget my sense of adventure. When you lose that, it’s the beginning of the end, Venedict.”

The guest downed the rest of his coffee, speaking words that Monica seemed to remember from somewhere, sometime.

“I have to say, your daughter is a strange one,” the guest continued. I wondered what she was reading—and lo and behold, it’s a book on mathematics. Does she even know what any of it means?”

“Yes, she understands all of it. She’s a smart girl.”

“No interest in the novel I brought her, I suppose.”

“Sorry about that. I’ll read it instead.”

“But I brought it for her. It’s an adventure novel. I thought lofty scholars like you weren’t interested in that stuff.”

“I enjoy your novels. They take place in fictional worlds, but they cleverly incorporate cultures and customs from other countries. The key item from the last book was something close to my research topic, too, which was extremely interesting to me. Did you get that from another country’s legends, too?”

“Oh, that? Well, the model was the \_\_\_\_\_, actually.”

As her father and his guest talked, Monica sat next to them in silence, reading her book on mathematics.

It was a simple, frivolous dream.

Yes. That was all it was...



## EPILOGUE

### An Oath on a Tone

After spending the rest of her winter solstice break relaxing at her foster mother's house, Monica went to the castle the day before the new year. Once there, however, she shut herself away in her room until the morning of the ceremony. She was too afraid of running into Felix.

She'd wanted to hole up for the entire first week of the year if she could, but everyone had told her that if nothing else, she was absolutely required to attend the ceremony on the first day.

So Monica put her veil over her mouth and headed for the meeting place, her steps gloomy.

The Kingdom of Ridill's royal family would receive their New Year's blessing at the grand church on the first day of the year, and then there would be a parade to the castle, where the ceremony would be held.

Once the royal family arrived at the castle, but before the ceremony, the Seven Sages would perform a magecraft dedication. Different Sages performed this service each year, and some years multiple Sages participated.

This year, three Sages were assigned to the dedication—the Artillery Mage, the Barrier Mage, and the Witch of Thorns.

The Artillery Mage was to send flowers of flame into the sky and then make them blossom, while the Barrier Mage made sure the fire didn't ignite anything nearby. Meanwhile, the Witch of Thorns would be making a winter rose blossom—at least, that was the intended program.

“That... That accursed farmer-Sage...”

When Monica arrived just barely in time at the gate where they'd be welcoming the royal family, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller was gnashing his teeth, a vicious look on his face. He was so angry, she thought his long braid might suddenly stand on end. Wrath burned in the eye behind his monocle.

Monica unconsciously cringed and froze in place at the sight of him. The

mood at the gate was about as far as one could get from welcoming in the new year.

Monica and the other Sages were behind the big gate—in other words, inside the castle. On the other side, a huge crowd of townspeople was already gathered to watch. She could hear their voices bleeding through. It was enough to make a timid person like Monica cower in fear.

“U-ummm... Good, um, morning...”

Five other Sages were present at the gate. The Artillery Mage Bradford Firestone, with his tall frame and black hair and beard, heard her greeting and gave a casual wave.

“Hey, Silent. Been a while, eh? That veil a new look for you? I like it. Gives you some real gravitas.”

“Th-thanks...”

“And hey, I heard you took down a cursed dragon! You’ll have to tell me all about it later.”

Monica secretly decided she would lock herself in her room the moment the ceremony was over. The cursed dragon incident simply involved too many secrets—Nero’s true identity, her suspicions about Felix, and that shaman.

But just then, Mary Harvey—the Starseer Witch—turned to her and smiled. “Excellent work slaying the cursed dragon, Monica dear. Allow me to express my gratitude as the one who foresaw that disaster. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Oh, um, uhhh...”

Mary’s beautiful voice as she politely gave her thanks carried the authority and compassion of a prophet who loved her country. “One wrong step and it would have been a catastrophe. You saved many lives.”

Monica had done her job as a Sage. She’d been useful. That made her tingle with joy.

Mary heaved a heavy sigh of relief. “But I must say, I’m so glad you’re here! If you’d failed to show up, too, I wasn’t sure what we’d do...”



The word *too* made Monica pause and look around. Six of the Seven Sages were present. One was missing.

*Wait, could it be...?*

As she looked around, an old man with a white mustache—Emanuel Darwin, the Gem Mage—nodded bitterly. “Indeed, indeed,” he said. “The Witch of Thorns still has not made his appearance.”

In keeping with his title, Emanuel had adornments hanging all over his clothing, jingling as he moved. He nervously toyed with his ruby choker and continued to lament.

“The dignity of the Seven Sages is at stake. What could the Witch of Thorns be doing on such an important day?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Bradford casually. “He probably started working in the garden and lost track of the time. That’s usually why Thorns is late.”

Bradford was an easygoing guy who didn’t sweat the small stuff. Even now, he looked more amused than anything else.

In his shadow stood the Abyss Shaman, hunched over and clinging to his staff. “I saw him in the castle gardens this morning,” he said gloomily. “I was moving quietly, so that nobody would see me. But then he spotted me and yelled my name in that annoyingly loud voice of his... It was awful. The absolute worst. I curse him...”

Monica took them all in—the Gem Mage’s open displeasure, the Artillery Mage’s amusement, and the Abyss Shaman’s typical gloominess. She was at a loss for what to do.

Meanwhile, the enraged Barrier Mage smiled thinly and made a suggestion. “Why don’t we fire the Witch of Thorns, then, and make ourselves the Six Sages from now on?”

“No need to get desperate, Louie,” chided a troubled Mary.

Monica couldn’t blame Louis for being angry, though. Another Sage—Monica—had completely forgotten about the ceremony just last year and had almost missed it. She’d been so engrossed in her research that the whole thing had

slipped her mind. In the end, Louis had to fly to her mountain cabin, roll her up in a mat, and carry her to the castle. First, he'd had to personally escort another Sage, and now he was going to have to fill in for one during the magecraft dedication. Other people's tardiness had caused him problems two years in a row, and he wasn't happy about it in the slightest.

"All right, Barrier," said Bradford. "Don't get your feathers ruffled."

"But what are we supposed to do about the magecraft dedication? The blooming of the rose at the end—only the Witch of Thorns can do it."

"Abyss can do the same kinda thing, right? Y'know, by controlling plants..."

Ray's eyes went wide at Bradford's suggestion. "Those are *cursed* plants that cry out and attack humans!" he exclaimed shrilly. "You want a *shaman* to do the New Year's magecraft dedication?! Are you daft?! You're a fool, aren't you?! Nobody even wants some gloomy shaman at the ceremony in the first place... If I did the magecraft dedication, everyone would throw stones at me... Ah, I want to die..." Ray squatted, curled up, and began muttering, "I want to be loved" over and over, his eyes hollow.

Bradford stroked his beard, then looked at the elderly Emanuel. "Got any other ideas for a replacement, Gemstone?"

"...I would, of course, like to do my utmost to make this ceremony a success. But it would pain me to rob the youth of their chance to shine..." Emanuel's excuses came hard and fast.

Louis pushed up his monocle and snorted. "Artillery Mage, you mustn't push the elderly. The Gem Mage can't do anything without the proper setup anyway."

Emanuel's cheeks twitched.

The Gem Mage was a first-rate magical item craftsman who specialized in imbue ment magecraft. If he'd used a homemade magical item, he might have been able to give a fantastic display suited for the magecraft dedication. But without the time to prepare, his options were limited.

Emanuel and Louis butted heads as Ray continued to mutter "I want to be loved," spreading a gloomy aura all around him.

This was definitely not a suitable mood for the New Year's ceremony. Mary, who usually directed the group, sighed. "We've got a real problem on our hands. There isn't much time left..."

As everyone began to lose hope, Monica nervously raised her right hand.

"Ummm... I-is it okay if it's not a flower for the magecraft dedication?"

Louis's eyes widened. Monica almost never spoke up of her own volition like this; he must have been surprised. "Well, it's best that the dedication be appropriate for the season, of course. But anything sufficiently impressive should work... Do you have an idea, my fellow Sage?"

"Something impressive... So it, um, just has to be...something that looks really special, right?"

Monica had an idea of something truly special that she could replicate with magecraft. And it was perfect for the season, too.

For a moment, she hesitated, wondering if she should go for it or give up on the whole thing.

But then she gave her right hand a shake, causing her staff's adornments to jingle, and said, "Th-then I, um, have an idea...!"

\* \* \*

The second prince, Felix Arc Ridill, was riding on top of the parade carriage as it rolled slowly down the city streets. He was dressed in scarlet formalwear, waving to the citizens. Every time the prince, with his attractive, sculpted features, waved, high-pitched cries would break out here and there around him.

Rumors that he had slain a cursed dragon must have already reached the capital. The gazes on him were even more passionate than they'd been the year before.

He responded with one of his perfect smiles, but in truth, the only thing he could think about was the magecraft dedication to be held after the parade.

*I wonder which of the Seven Sages will be in charge of the dedication this year.*

If he had his choice, he'd have wanted to see the Silent Witch perform it. But

her left hand had been injured by the cursed dragon. It seemed safe to assume she wouldn't be taking part.

As he was thinking about what a shame that was, the carriage came to a stop. They'd arrived at the castle.

The royal family headed to the front gates with the king in the lead, followed by the queen and princes.

The king held a staff and wore makeup to conceal his deteriorating condition. But Felix had taken note of how the ceremony at the temple had been simplified. It had included little breaks here and there, too. The king must indeed be suffering.

The king came to a stop in front of the main entrance. Horns of blessing sounded, and the gates slowly opened.

On the other side were the Seven Sages, all wearing their hooded robes, kneeling with their staffs placed on the ground. This was the highest form of reverence a mage could show.

Felix didn't notice that one of them—the absent Witch of Thorns—was merely an illusion, courtesy of the Starseer Witch.

One of the Sages, the Gem Mage Emanuel Darwin, maintained his bow and offered words of celebration.

“Happy new year, Your Majesty. At the beginning of this new year, on this day that the Goddess of Light Serendine opened her eyes, the Seven Sages would like to offer you these humble words of joy.”

Once the Gem Mage finished his smooth remarks, the Artillery Mage and Barrier Mage stepped out in front and began to chant. The former's incantation was short and powerful, while the latter's was elegant with many verses, like a song.

Eventually, the Artillery Mage—finished with his chant—lifted his staff with his thick, sturdy arms.

“Glory to the Kingdom of Ridill!” he roared.

A huge fireball grew at the end of his staff, then launched up into the sky. It

flew high and far, and as it passed the castle's steeple, it exploded with a boom.

Suddenly, a flower of flame bloomed in the light-blue sky. Firework technology was improving year by year, but this flower was much, much bigger than anything a mere firework could have produced.

Its huge petals spread out through the sky above but never scorched the castle or the city's buildings. The Barrier Mage had erected a defensive barrier to protect them all.

Felix's eyes sparkled as he watched.

*The Artillery Mage used a multi-layered strengthening formula... Given the power, four layers, perhaps? Or maybe five. He's known for having the most firepower in Ridill—they say he could even pierce a dragon's torso. The barrier, too, would need to be quite powerful to contain it, and it would have to be spread over such a wide area in such a complicated shape. Very few people could manage a feat like that.*

The flower of flame continued to spread through the air before fading away, ephemeral, as though melting into the winter sky.

And then Felix saw it. The shortest of the Sages stepped forward and raised her staff.

*Wait! Is she—?*

The decoration on the Silent Witch's staff jingled loudly. Around it, droplets of light resembling water appeared and formed a loose spiral as they climbed into the sky. Then the droplets turned into ice, each one steadily taking shape. They became long, slender tubes, each of them about the height of a human. Over thirty of them hung in the air.

They'd transformed into something everyone in the kingdom associated with winter—Alteria chimes.

The ice tubes swayed and struck one another, producing loud, clear tones. Mere chunks of ice would never have created sounds like that. The Silent Witch must have adjusted their hardness and density.

There was no doubt she'd used an incredibly complex magecraft formula. And

she hadn't even had to chant.

Felix's heart began to sing. His cheeks, chilled by the wintry air, warmed up from within.

Alteria chimes were meant to deliver voices to the spirit god. The voices of all those standing here—their cries of joy and wishes for prosperity—were sure to reach that god.

There could be no magecraft dedication more suitable for the first day of the new year.

*Amazing! Amazing, amazing...!*

The Artillery Mage's powerful flower of flame, followed by Alteria chimes born of intricate magecraft, ringing out a lovely chorus. The contrast was so beautiful, Felix lacked the words to describe it.

If he hadn't been in front of so many people, he'd have cried out in joy.

*"The great witch has produced a miracle! I can't believe I get to see it with my own eyes!"*

He burned the image of the hooded Silent Witch into his mind, then made an oath to himself.

*When our winter vacation is over, Lady Everett... I will find you.*

\* \* \*

Cyril Ashley, son of Marquess Highown, was in his lodgings, fidgeting in front of the mirror as he checked his clothes and hair to make sure not a strand was out of place.

His foster father was reading a book on the couch; as he watched Cyril, he said quietly, "Why not take a seat for a moment?"

"R-right. Yes, sir."

Awkwardly, Cyril sat down on the couch. He was petrified, his gaze glued to the floor.

That afternoon, Cyril would accompany Marquess Highown to the castle to give their New Year greetings to the king.

This tradition brought in nobles from all over the country, but they each had an assigned day so as to avoid creating a crowd. Marquess Highown was to come on the evening of the first day.

Cyril had wanted to go to the parade this morning to see Felix in the procession, but his foster father had stopped him. The parade in the city got extremely crowded, and if he hoped to see someone riding in a carriage, it was apparently essential that he lock down a spot the day before.

As it happened, he could see the enormous crowd right outside the window. These lodgings were a few streets away from the main road where the parade was taking place, but the space outside was still packed to the brim with people.

*I'm glad I did as Father told me...*

If he'd been mobbed by people on his way to see the parade, he wouldn't have had any stamina left for their greeting that evening. Even without going anywhere, he was so tense his stomach felt like it was tied in knots, and he'd barely managed to eat breakfast that morning.

*This is my first New Year greeting... I must not do anything that would bring shame on my father.*

Cyril lifted his head and gazed at the mirror on the wall. His face was pale, and he had hunched over without realizing it.

*I'm always telling my underclassmen to straighten up. How shameful...*

The room could use some better airflow, and he wanted a breath of fresh air to clear his head.

"Father, may I open a window?"

"Sure. Go right ahead."

With his father's permission, Cyril opened the window and then heard a big *boom*.

Surprised, he looked up and saw a great flower of flame blossoming in the sky above the castle.

"What is that...?" he murmured, eyes wide.

Marquess Highown, still reading on the couch, said, “The Seven Sages must have begun their magecraft dedication.”

If the magecraft dedication had begun, then the prince he so respected and adored had finally arrived at the castle. And with that realization, his nervousness came back.

As he gripped his aching stomach, he heard the clear sound of bells ringing. They weren’t cathedral bells—those were more majestic. These had a lighter sound, like jingles—the sound of Alteria chimes.

*Is someone ringing Alteria chimes nearby?*

Cyril closed his eyes and listened to the beautiful tones.

He remembered his visit to the winter market before the break had started. His underclassmen had rung those chimes and sworn oaths on them.

“...I will act boldly without fear.”

Just as his underclassmen had done, Cyril made his oath out loud, then felt a little bit of strength come into him. He straightened his spine and clenched his fists.

“You can do it,” said the marquess quietly. “Now go forth.”

Cyril, having completely forgotten his foster father was in the room, froze in place and flushed up to his ears.

\* \* \*

The giant Alteria chimes made of ice swayed in front of the castle gates. Everyone’s eyes were now on the Silent Witch, who had managed the impressive spell.

Normally, Monica would have cringed and run away—she didn’t like people paying attention to her.

But this time, she was able to stand her ground. Maybe it was because of the oath she’d made when she rang those Alteria chimes at the winter market.

She looked up at the bells of ice she’d created with magecraft. At the winter market, she’d sworn on the chimes that she would do her best to behave properly in front of others.



And since she'd already made that oath, what would she swear to these bells ringing out now?

Monica already knew the answer.

*I...will prove my father's innocence.*

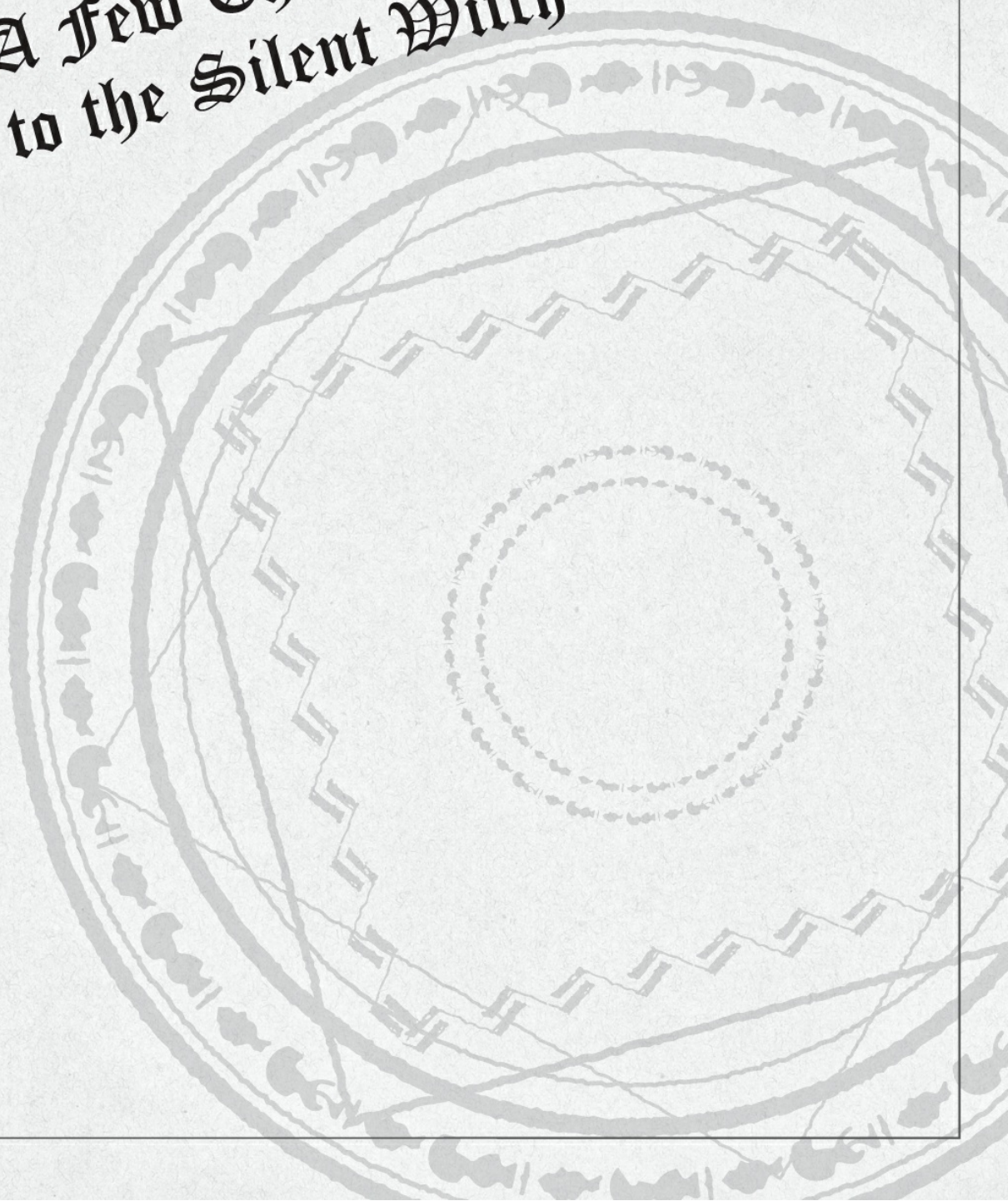
The Silent Witch's Alteria chimes rang out through the wintry sky.

Their peals were high and beautiful, and they carried with them the hopes and oaths of the people.



SECRET EPISODE

**A Few Things Unbeknownst  
to the Silent Witch**





Bernie Jones, the second son of Count Ambard, was once a student at Minerva's Mage Training Institution. But upon the sudden death of his elder brother, who had been expected to inherit the title, he had decided to retire from school and return home.

His aging father had a chronic disease, and he had been terribly depressed by the death of his eldest son. The doctor had told them he didn't have very long. And when he passed, Bernie would have to inherit his position.

As a child, Bernie had wanted that title very badly. But he never expected it to fall into his lap like this. Naturally, he had mixed feelings about it all.

*But I'll do it—I'll become the greatest Count Ambard to ever hold the title.*

If he didn't become someone he could be proud of, he'd never be able to stand in front of Monica again. Telling himself that, Bernie left his dormitory behind.

He'd heard most schools completely closed their dorms for the winter, but at Minerva's, some students remained, and a few teachers even stayed in their research labs. Some magecraft research had to be checked on every single day, after all.

Now out of his room and with his luggage in order, Bernie decided to bid one last farewell to his teachers. He headed over to the research building.

In front was a mean-looking old man with a pipe in his mouth—Professor Gideon Rutherford, the Mage of Violet Smoke. He was talking about something with the elderly, stooping headmaster.

Bernie didn't belong to Rutherford's research group, so the man hadn't done much for him. But the headmaster was there, so he approached them to say good-bye.

"And so the second problem child leaves," said Rutherford. "An idiot, through and through. And with so much talent..."

"The problem children do tend to flock to you, Rutherford..." replied the headmaster. "Will you be lonely?"

"Headmaster, do you really expect me to say yes? In fact, I'm feeling quite

refreshed. That warped personality of his is beyond repair. I'm glad to be rid of him."

Rutherford took a drag on his pipe, then fixed the headmaster with a sharp, narrow-eyed stare. "So? Is the demon child going back home?"

"He'll apparently be transferring to Serendia Academy at his parents' request."

Bernie was shocked by the headmaster's words. He ran over to them and—forgetting his manners—got right to the point.

"Excuse me, but is all that true? Is Dee...? Is that boy who was always following Monica around transferring to Serendia Academy?"

After hearing the news from the headmaster and Professor Rutherford, Bernie went back to his dorm, took a pen and a bottle of ink out of his things, and spread some paper out on his desk.

Once, back when Monica was at Minerva's, there was a nasty boy obsessed with the Silent Witch, who was always going up to her and demanding a magic battle. His name was Huberd Dee.

He was feared and avoided by all, called things like the Evil Hound, the Demon of the Magic Battlefield, and Minerva's Second Problem Child. But he was apparently leaving Minerva's and would be transferring to Serendia Academy after the winter break was over.

And that was the worst possible place for him—because Monica was currently on an infiltration mission there!

If that evil, vulgar man ran into Monica, it would be a disaster. He could easily imagine her crying and whimpering, begging Bernie to help her.

And Bernie was too nice not to have pity on his handful of a rival.

*She'd better keep thanking me for the rest of her life,* he said to himself, writing the first words of his letter: *"To my eternal rival."*

\* \* \*

When Bridget Greyham, daughter of Marquess Shaleberry, arrived back at her mansion, she was greeted by Serafina, her younger sister by two years.

“Welcome home, Bridget!” she said, smiling ear to ear.

Serafina had blond curls like Bridget’s, and adorable eyes, big and wide. Her rose-colored dress, decorated with lots of lace, suited her very well.

“Yes, thank you,” said Bridget shortly, before heading to her room.

As she walked, she thought. *That detective is keeping an eye on all of Monica Norton’s activities in Kerbeck... Now, for Duke Clockford’s estate. I just need to—*

“Bridget, Bridget!” called Serafina innocently, following her sister like a little puppy.

Bridget, her thoughts interrupted, came to a stop and turned around. “What is it?”

“Did you have lots of tea parties with Prince Felix? Did you get to dance with him at the ball after the school festival?”

“.....”

Serafina was afraid of leaving home, so she attended an all-girls’ school in their family’s domain. Even so, she idolized Serendia Academy. Every time Bridget came home, her sister wanted to hear all about what she’d done at school.

“It must have been so wonderful when you and Prince Felix danced... He was really weak when he was little. I always thought he wasn’t good enough for you. But now he’s so wonderful, and—”

“Serafina,” interrupted Bridget.

Her voice was soft, but firm enough to stop her sister from talking. Serafina closed her mouth.

Bridget glared at her with chilly, amber eyes. “You’re being rude to the prince.”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry, Bridget...”

Bridget knew her naive sister didn’t mean anything by what she said... And that was what aggravated her.

Bridget turned around and hurried to her room. Then she closed the door

behind her and locked it. Alone at last, she slid down to the floor in front of the door and buried her face between her knees.

“...Prince...”

Her voice sounded like she was about to cry. It was weak and shaking.

Nevertheless, she quickly stood up and began quietly unpacking her things as though nothing had happened.



## Characters So Far



# Characters



## Monica Everett

The Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages. She made her Sage's staff into the most expensive drying pole in the world. Ryn retrieved her balled-up robe from the back of her wardrobe and ironed it.



## Louis Miller

The Barrier Mage, one of the Seven Sages. He has a lot of skills, like making barriers and using flight magecraft, so he tends to be given a lot of work.

He's devoted to his wife and wishes someone would put an end to the tradition of the Sages staying at the royal castle for an entire week of New Year's celebrations.



## Nero

Monica's familiar. His true identity is the black dragon who once made a ruckus in County Kerbeck's Worgan Mountains. He has resistance to alcohol and poison even in human and cat form, but the bitter taste of coffee threw him for a loop.



## Rynzbelfeid

A high wind spirit contracted to Louis. She was relatively busy during the winter break, having been ordered to pick up an important person from quite far away. When she requested a special winter bonus, Louis made a sour expression.





## Mary Harvey

The Starseer Witch, one of the Seven Sages. She claims she's not very good at illusion magecraft, but she's the most competent among the Sages.

She passes her time trying again and again to create a boy of ideal beauty using illusion magecraft, only to collapse in tears each time, unsatisfied.



## Bradford Firestone

The Artillery Mage, one of the Seven Sages. He has the second-highest mana capacity among currently serving Sages, and he can use magecraft so high-powered that one of his attacks could blow a hole in a dragon's trunk. He's daring and has a big heart, and he loves magic battles.



## Ray Albright

The Abyss Shaman, one of the Seven Sages. As the only Sage who is a shaman rather than a mage, he is generally not called on for magical dedications. In truth, he wishes he could perform a really cool magical dedication and have girls fawn over him.





# Characters



## Felix Arc Ridill

The second prince of the Kingdom of Ridill. He was so excited about meeting the Silent Witch that he was unable to sleep for days. Wildianu thought he was ill and was worried sick.



## Elliott Howard

The son of Count Dasvy and one of the student council secretaries.

During his winter break, he was a model noble son and conducted himself gracefully around both family and high society guests. But in the mornings, this chronic late sleeper clung to his bed and caused his servant no end of trouble.



## Cyril Ashley

The adopted son of Marquess Highown and vice president of the student council.

After clearing up the misunderstandings between him and his mother, he told her all about his lively school life in the student council, about his friends, and about his troublesome underclassmen.



## Bridget Greyham

The daughter of Marquess Shaleberry and one of the student council secretaries. She hired a detective to investigate Monica. An avid reader, she prefers travel diaries that touch on local culture and customs to fiction.





## Neil Clay Maywood

The son of Baron Maywood and the student council's general affairs officer. During winter break, he maintained a rigid schedule, helping take care of livestock, shoveling snow, and writing letters to his fiancée. Surprisingly fit.



## Glenn Dudley

Apprentice to the Barrier Mage Louis Miller. Due to his very high mana capacity, he once lost control and caused a lot of problems, forcing Louis to take him as a pupil.

In terms of mana capacity, he surpasses both Monica and Louis.



## Isabelle Norton

The daughter of Count Kerbeck. Currently laying all sorts of groundwork to solidify Monica's alibi for winter break. Right now in Kerbeck, the dazzling family of villains are holding auditions to find the best body double for Monica.



## Eliane Hyatt

The daughter of Duke Rehnberg. Raised strictly by her mother but doted on by her father. While she's a little selfish, she's considerate of her servants, who in turn treat her like a daughter or granddaughter.



# Characters



## Bernie Jones

The son of Count Ambard. He dropped out of Minerva's to succeed his father and is currently working hard to achieve that goal. Rewrote his letter to Monica about twenty times.



## Bartholomeus Baal

An engineer from the Empire who once worked in a magical item workshop.

Still thinks the Silent Witch and the second prince are in a secret relationship and is warmly cheering them on in his heart. "Don't let the difference in status get you down, kiddo!"



## Gideon Rutherford

A professor at Minerva's Mage Training Institution. Also known as the Mage of Violet Smoke. Monica's former teacher and Louis's master. Seems to always end up involved with problem children.



## Hilda Everett

A scientist at the Royal Magic Research Institute and Monica's adoptive mother. A very talented woman who was formerly an assistant to Monica's father.

While she can accurately read and interpret magecraft formulae, she tends to have a lot of trouble with cooking instructions.



## Other Characters



### Agatha

Isabelle's maid, though Isabelle sees her more like an elder sister. The two of them often get excited talking about romance novels. Very physically capable and doubles as Isabelle's bodyguard.



### Wildianu

A high water spirit contracted to Felix. Relatively young for a high spirit. Always anxious, because his master so rarely speaks his mind.



### Darius Nightray

The Duke of Clockford and Felix's maternal grandfather. One of the most powerful people in the Kingdom of Ridill.



### Peter Summs

A shaman who cozied up with House Albright under the name Barry Oats. Was researching curses to make people into puppets, and knew Monica's father Venedict.



### Venedict Reyn

Monica's father. Was executed seven years ago for researching forbidden techniques. He was a genius scholar well versed in a broad range of topics.



### Porter

The owner of a used bookstore in Corlapton. Also writes novels under the pen name Dustin Gunther. He was a friend of Monica's father, Venedict.



### Albert Frau Roberia Ridill

The third prince of the Kingdom of Ridill. Good at studying but bad at physical activity. One of the few other characters as unathletic as Monica. Once sprained his ankle just from stamping his feet.



# Afterword



Thank you for purchasing Volume 5 of *Secrets of the Silent Witch*.

Volume 5 comprises the winter break arc, which takes place outside of school. Because of that, Monica's school friends don't show up very often in this book. I believe most of the ones who are absent are having a pleasant winter break. I hope I can give you all some more of Monica's energetic friends in Volume 6.

When this series was first made into a book, I expected things to wrap up in either three or five volumes, depending on sales. (I call that version "Top Speed Silent Witch.") But I am happy and honored to say that, thanks to all of you, the series will keep being published. I even released an after-story to Volume 4 as a companion to the main books, and now we're at Volume 5. And Volume 6 is soon to come.

And so I'd like to take this chance to express my deep gratitude to all of my readers. Thank you.

...Right. The next volume will be number six, and I must admit there's something I'm concerned about.

Over a year ago, when I first saw the cover design for Volume 2, I was very surprised.

The reason was that the volume number was in Roman numerals. And when it comes to Roman numerals, I think all of us have, at some point, broken down crying after mixing up IV (4) and VI (6) or misreading VIII (8) as VII (7)... You've done it, too, right? IV (4) and VI (6) are the easiest ones to mix up, don't you think?

I gave up on remembering Roman numerals a long time ago, but now that my own work is being numbered with them, I need to memorize them. So on this very day, I'm grappling with a big list of Roman numerals. I still sometimes forget how to write IX.

In any case, the next volume (Volume 6) will be a V with one I to the right of it. A V with one I to the right. Got it?!

When you purchase Volume 6 at the bookstore, please remember that—it's a V with one I to the right!

To Nanna Fujimi, thank you so much once again for your beautiful illustrations in this volume. Your covers are wonderfully mystical, and they make me smile every time I look at them.

With every illustration, when I receive the rough draft, I think, "Wow, another amazing one..." but when I look at the finished product, they're always even more impressive and beautiful than I imagined.

To Tobi Tana, thank you for the ever-wonderful manga adaptation. It makes me incredibly happy to see the effort you put into each and every panel.

Just from the drafts, I knew all the characters' expressions would be wonderful, but when I saw them completed, they were even better than I'd hoped. I am a truly lucky author.

Two collected volumes of the manga adaptation are currently on sale through B's-LOG COMICS. Please give them a look as well.

The second volume's cover features Monica and Lana. Monica still looks a little awkward and tense, and it's very heartwarming.

Thank you, as always, for all the fan letters.

Since the afterword of Volume 3 was only one page, and the part detailing the address for sending fan mail was gone, I received many kind words wondering if I was unwell and unable to write afterwords or read fan letters. But that was only because I overdid it and my manuscript for Volume 3 ran right up against the page limit.

I am healthy and energetic, so please don't worry. I gladly await your fan letters.

If it ever happens again that the afterword or fan letter address pages are missing, please assume I simply went overboard with the manuscript once more.



I do apologize to the editor. I feel like it's only a matter of time.

Monica's school life is finally reaching its second half.

I'll be writing plenty for Volume 6 as well, so I would be happy if you considered purchasing it.

Once again, Volume 6 will have the V with one I to the right. Thank you for your support.

Matsuri Isora

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