

12

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Promised Garden



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“I... I mean,
I *am* Lady
Tina's maid.”



Tina's personal maid

Ellie

Tina's maid is the granddaughter of the Walkers,
hereditary servants of the House of Howard.
Her talents blossomed while she received lessons
from Allen alongside her mistress.

Characters



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

ALLEN

The girls' erudite private tutor is slowly but surely making a name for himself at home and abroad.



Allen's adoptive younger sister
Royal Academy student council vice president

CAREN

This wolf-clan girl is levelheaded but shows a needy side around her brother. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.



Thunder Fox

ATRA

One of the Eight Great Elementals, Atra met Allen in a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea. She normally appears as a young girl or a fox cub.



Hero

ALICE ALVERN

This kind girl wields her absolute power in defense of the world.



Allen & Co. head clerk

FELICIA FOSSE

Although Felicia is shy and physically frail, her brilliant mind is unmatched in fortitude. She oversees logistics in the southern capital.



"The kingdom's most viciously
devious sorcerer"

THE PROFESSOR

Allen's, Lydia's, and Teto's mentor mystifies others with his easygoing attitude. His familiar, Anko, has the form of a black cat.



Allen's star pupil

TETO TIJERINA

This university student in the professor's department idolizes and adores Allen. She hails from the west of the kingdom.



Twin Heavens

LINARIA ETHERHEART

This legendary descendant of witches lived five hundred years ago, during an age of strife. She entrusted Atra to Allen's care.

Characters

>>>>>>>>>> The Northern Ducal House of Howard <<<<<<<<<<<<<<



Duke Howard
“God of war”

WALTER HOWARD

A man of commanding appearance who loves his late wife with all his heart. He vanquished an imperial army at Rostlay.



Duke Howard’s eldest daughter
Royal Academy student council president

STELLA HOWARD

Tina’s elder sister, the heir to the Dukedom of Howard, is serious and hardworking but craves Allen’s attention.



Duke Howard’s second daughter
Little Lady of Ice

TINA HOWARD

Her inability to cast spells led some to call her “cursed.” But under Allen’s tutelage, she took first place on the Royal Academy entrance exam.



Tina’s personal maid
Little Lady of Wind

ELLIE WALKER

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne’s frequent spats.

>>>>>>>>>> The Southern Ducal House of Leinster <<<<<<<<<<<<<<



Duchess Leinster
Bloodstained Lady

LISA LEINSTER

Lydia and Lynne’s doting mother is one of the kingdom’s mightiest warriors.



Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter
Lady of the Sword

LYDIA LEINSTER

Allen’s rambunctious partner is the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman, although she can be emotionally fragile when he’s not around.



Duke Leinster’s second daughter
Little Lady of Fire

LYNNE LEINSTER

Lydia’s younger sister is second in her class at the Royal Academy, and Tina’s rival. In the wake of the rebellion, she resolves to keep improving.



The Leinster Maid Corps’s number three

LILY LEINSTER

This fashion-forward maid is actually the daughter of Under-duke Leinster. She gets along well with Allen.

Characters

ANNA Head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster.
Veteran of the War of the Dark Lord.

ROMY The Leinster Maid Corps's second-in-command.
An immigrant from the southern isles.

SIDA A Leinster maid in training. Worships the Great Moon.

MINA WALKER The Howard Maid Corps's second-in-command.

SALLY WALKER The Howard Maid Corps's number four.
Her elder brother, Roland, is a butler.

CHERYL WAINWRIGHT The princess.
Attended the Royal Academy with Allen and Lydia.

LETICIA LEBUFERA A living legend known as the Emerald Gale.
One of the kingdom's mightiest warriors.

RICHARD LEINSTER Duke Leinster's eldest son.
Vice commander of the royal guard.

GIL ALGREN Duke Algren's fourth son.
Allen and Lydia's former underclassman.

CARLYLE CARNIEN A powerful marchese in the south of the League of Principalities.
He stands in the way of peace with the kingdom.

ROA RONDOIRO Heir to a southern principality. She has a history with Carlyle.

SAINT? The shadowy mastermind behind the Church of the Holy Spirit.
Who is she really?

EDITH A young apostle of the Church of the Holy Spirit.
She battled Stella and Alice in Rostlay.

ROSA HOWARD Stella and Tina's late mother. Her maiden name was Etherheart.

Prologue

“What a nuisance! Any *respectable* assailant would have the decency to let that slow her down a little!”

I, Regina Rondoiro, clucked in irritation as every one of the Divine Water Spears I’d set along the spiral staircase leading underground evaporated harmlessly in the face of my pursuer’s potent barrier. The last rays of the Lightningday sun fell through a window on the sneering face of my attacker—an attractive woman in a black dress wearing a broad-brimmed black hat and carrying a black umbrella.

Despite the fury her scorn inspired, I tightened my grip on my staff and took off down the stairs, strengthening my limbs with all the magic I possessed as I continued ever deeper into the earth. The flight took its toll on my old body.

I ruled the Principality of Rondoiro in the south of the League of Principalities. This ruined church towered atop a cliff on the outskirts of my capital. The league was currently embroiled in a fruitless war with the Wainwright Kingdom, and three other southern marchesi who desired peace had met me here in secret to set it back on the right path. But while we had discussed our march on the city of water, the Church of the Holy Spirit had struck.

I never expected them to steal a march on us before the Committee of Thirteen meets on Darknessday!

Our foes numbered only two. They should have posed no problem. Old though we were, we had fought our way through two of the Southern Wars, and we’d trusted our strength to turn the tables on any ordinary assassins. But that confidence had frozen solid the moment we’d laid eyes on the beauty in black and her attendant—a girl in the distinctive hooded gray robe of a church inquisitor.

The woman’s crescent earring had glinted as she turned her silver eyes and the tarnished-silver hair that fell to her waist a bloody crimson.

“I am Alicia ‘Crescent Moon’ Coalfield, the *one and only* lieutenant of the great Shooting Star,” she had announced to our rattled assembly. “I must insist that you die. The Saint’s word is law.”

Crescent Moon! A monster to match her fellow lieutenant, the Emerald Gale! Who could have imagined her working with the church, let alone rendering herself a vampire?!

Pierced by her elated crimson gaze, we had immediately understood. If we stood our ground, we would all die. And if we fell, the Church of the Holy Spirit, pulling the strings of our pro-war peers, might well shatter the league itself. So while our few guards risked their lives to stall the attackers, the other three marchesi and I had chosen to part ways and retreat at once. Thus, only the fearsome vampire pursued me now.

I made for the lowest level, seeding the stone ceiling, walls, and stairs with water spells in passing. I sensed them going off behind me in rapid succession as I dashed into an empty, windowless subterranean hall where hundreds had once gathered in prayer. A jolt from above shook the mana lamps on the walls and the seven great columns carved in the likenesses of the World Tree and seven dragons. My three peers were battling the gray-robed girl on the upper levels.

“Old age does no one any favors,” I grumbled, scowling. “I get winded in no time at all. I should have dumped my title on Roa and retired early.”

Thinking of my granddaughter in the city of water, I raised my staff and stealthily cast a spell.

I can’t afford to die here. Not when I have so much left to teach her.

Part of the ceiling came crashing down, and the umbrella-wielding woman in black dropped into the hall. I’d planted more than a hundred spells in her path, yet there wasn’t a scratch on her.

Monster!

“Are you done playing tag?” she asked. “In that case, I suppose you won’t mind if I kill you.”

“Big talk,” I said. “But you won’t find that so easy!”

Carvings covered one whole wall. The World Tree spread its boughs over a lone man. I glimpsed a winged whale with the water and flower dragons as well. The mural recounted the city of water's ancient past. Mentally, I recited a prayer that the head of my house had taught me when I was young.

May the elementals and the dragons bless my old bones. O World Tree, give me courage to surpass that of the last prince.

"You leave yourself too open to call yourself Crescent Moon," I taunted the freak. "Do you think I've just been running? Or that you're invincible? You're in for a rude awakening!"

"Me, leave myself open?" The woman's lips curled in a chuckle, and she raised the brim of her hat. Her crimson gaze held scorn. "I think you mean I know my own strength, Marchesa Regina Rondoiro the Impaler. Now, won't you make your peace and die quickly? You'd spare yourself pain."

Vampires had no weaknesses worth mentioning. The Hero and Dark Lord were their only natural enemies. And to make matters worse, night was closing in to magnify her already bottomless mana. Her bare hands would shred me if we fought at close quarters. But what of it?

"You don't say. But Scarlet Heaven wouldn't bother chasing us down—she would have finished us with a Firebird before we knew what hit us," I said, pointing my staff at her. I needed to buy time. "And your old comrade the Emerald Gale would have lopped off my head before I left the council chamber."

The woman paused. "Your point being?" she asked coldly while her dusky crimson mana swelled. No ordinary spell would pierce her defenses.

"Simple, Miss 'Living Legend.'" I gave my staff a twirl, my spells complete. "Your mana, strength enhancement, and combat techniques all strike fear. But no *truly* skilled warrior, much less a veteran of the War of the Dark Lord, ever lowers her guard, even for a moment. You don't strike me as someone with two centuries or more of combat experience. So, who are you?! And I hope you won't say, 'The Saint's dog.'"

"I am Alicia 'Crescent Moon' Coalfield," she replied in tones reminiscent of a freezing blizzard. "Are you quite done now? Then die!" The beauty kicked off

the ground, the tip of her black umbrella flashing a dull gleam.

She'd taken the bait.

"*You die!*" I shouted, fortifying my old limbs with all the mana I could muster as I swung my staff in a wide arc. An instant later, all the magic I'd woven into the underground hall activated at once! More than twenty dark-gray casts of the advanced spell Ocean Orb closed in on the vampire from all sides.

"You're wasting your time!" Alicia snapped. She must have placed absolute faith in her barrier because she continued her charge, not even trying to dodge and making a mess of her uncanny crimson-silver hair.

I read you like a book!

I slammed the ferrule of my staff onto the stone floor, and the vampire gasped in surprise as every orb burst before touching her defenses. Leadен water splattered everywhere, filling the hall ankle-deep. Confusion slowed the monster.

I curled my lips, gave my staff another wide swing, and roared, "Consider this a lesson, nameless vampire! On the battlefield, complacency invites death!"

No sooner had Alicia's eyes widened than the water formed countless razor-sharp spears. Concentrating on a single point, they finally broke through the monster's mighty barrier and skewered her heart. She coughed blood, but I didn't let up.

"There's more where that came from!" I shouted, running the vampiress through with over a dozen more spears.

Seven elements of magic saw common use in the present day: fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, light, and darkness. The addition of ice completed the eight classical elements. Yet many more had existed in the ancient world, and this magic invoked one of them—the element of steel. I called it Sable Stream of Steel Spears. I had studied ancient spell books passed down in my house to develop and then perfect the composite spell, whose fearsome penetrative power had earned me the nickname "Impaler."

My magic finished, and I fell to one knee, gasping for breath. Pushing my mana so hard must have taken years off my life. Before me, the beauty in black

hung still and limp from my spears, drenched in her own blood.

“It looks like your lack of combat experience came back to bite you,” I gloated, standing with the help of my staff. “I’d love to know who you really were, but now’s not the time.”

At some point during our clash, the jolts from above had subsided. The other three marchesi wouldn’t give up the ghost easily. Still, I frowned and muttered, “I can’t fight another church assassin in this state. The Nitti boy’s warning was right—this is no time for squabbling about whether we make peace with the Leinsters. I’d better speak with Pirro and Nieto soon.”

I glanced at the vampiress, but she didn’t so much as twitch. Only her fresh blood moved, running down my spears into a growing pool on the floor.

Should I withdraw at once or return to aid my allies? I deliberated only a fraction of a second before tightening my grip on my staff. Regina Rondoiro would never abandon old comrades!

I walked toward the partially collapsed entrance, whipping my heavy limbs into action. The vampiress didn’t move. Then I sensed someone land behind me. I turned to see a girl in a hooded gray robe, her right hand gripping a long sword of a type I’d never seen before. Sinister, fiendish mana rose from the crimson-stained edge of its gently curved blade. No mortal hand could wield such a weapon.

“Since you’re here,” I said, raising my staff and glaring, “I’m guessing they’re dead.”

“Yes. They fought bravely,” the girl answered calmly. She was younger than I’d thought—maybe even younger than my granddaughter. And I couldn’t read the flow of her mana.

She pointed at me. “And you will soon follow them.”

“Ha! For your information, I won’t—”

A terrible chill shot down my spine. I threw myself sideways, trying to cast a spell. But while I narrowly avoided a blow to the neck, searing pain in my left arm drew a startled cry from my lips. My magical defenses tore like paper, and my scrawny arm flew through the air, shriveling before my eyes as the mana

was sucked out of it. I tumbled to the floor, then raised myself to one knee and swiftly cast a fire spell, gritting my teeth while I cauterized the wound. Vampiric attacks impeded healing magic.

Alicia lapped the remaining blood from my left arm with an elegant smile. The spears still impaling her cracked and crumbled. Crimson mana writhed over the vampiress, instantly closing the holes in her chest and gut. It even mended her coal-black dress.

“Splendid,” she said, clapping politely. “I enjoyed the bout at Seven Dragons Plaza, but dueling a veteran sorceress has charms all its own. Don’t you agree, Viola?”

“Perhaps milady could stand to take a little *less* pleasure in every battle,” the girl replied stiffly.

“Oh, really. What a horrid suggestion.” The vampiress giggled, then opened her umbrella and twirled it, for all the world like a cruel little girl. Revolting.

I stood, leaning on my staff, and groaned, “You ate my spears and my mana? You really are a monster.”

Before Alicia could answer, the girl called Viola slowly shook her head. “You displayed truly magnificent technique,” she said with respect and pity. “Doubtless you would have survived had you faced anyone except Lady Alicia and me—Viola Kokonoe, servant of Her Holiness the Saint. Though you do not share our faith, I do not wish to make you suffer. Please cease resisting. I will give you a painless death.”

The ridiculous offer hung in the air for a few moments. Then I gave a snort and began deploying my next spell. The pain in my left arm dulled as my analgesic magic finally kicked in.

I can do this!

I struck the floor with the staff that had stood by me through decades of fighting. Drawing on the last of my mana, I sealed off the entire subterranean hall. A magic circle emerged.

“What have we here?” the beauty asked, cocking her head.

The girl gave a start. “You laced this into the spells you cast earlier?!”

“Did you think taking my left arm sealed your victory?” I scoffed. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with!”

After killing me, they plan to do something horrible in the city of water. So, as a marchesa of the league, I have a duty to stop them!

As all the mana I could muster converged, an image of my dear granddaughter’s tear-streaked face flashed through my mind, though she must have been fighting the good fight in the city of water.

Sorry, Roa. Try to take it from here.

“I am Regina Rondoiro, ruler of Rondoiro, a principality of the league. I can’t suffer threats to my homeland to live, so I’ll make sure you die with me!”

The next instant, a light like I’d never before experienced engulfed my view.



The elderly sorceress’s spell had barely begun to activate when Lady Alicia grabbed my hand and pulled me behind her open umbrella. The sorceress must have gambled her life on this final blow, but Lady Alicia’s barrier defied comparison, so her power broke against it.

By the time it all ended, half of the disused church had collapsed. Even the underground hall had lost most of its ceiling and floor, and I could hear crashing surf from the ocean that filled the pitch-dark expanse below us. The aged sorceress could never have survived that fall after losing an arm.

“I thought she would entertain me by fighting to the bitter end,” Lady Alicia said, resting her left index finger on her cheek in puzzlement. “Did I get my hopes up for nothing? I wanted to enjoy myself a little longer. But for now...” She gave me a smile so gentle that I could hardly believe she had been raging moments earlier. “Well done, Viola, dear. I see you’ve improved again.”

I nodded and sheathed my blade.

“I was so pleased to see that ōdachi shine again after such a long time,” Lady Alicia mused, waxing nostalgic as her hair and eyes returned to silver. “Kōkoku is a masterpiece. The way it gleams seems to suck me in. I remember how close

it came to killing me during the War of the Dark Lord.”

I didn’t know how to respond. The ōdachi had supposedly been in my family since gods had walked the world, but I didn’t know my own parents, let alone my extended family. I had no idea how Her Holiness had come to possess it and bestow it on me, and I didn’t care to find out. I would simply defend the Saint and slay Her Holiness’s enemies, nothing more.

“Now no one from the League of Principalities will stand against us,” Lady Alicia stated. “The only ones who might try...”

“Are the defective key and the Lady of the Sword,” I said.

“I can hardly wait!” The formidable legend who ranked so high in Her Holiness’s confidence let out a cheerful laugh.

I would have preferred to avoid fighting difficult opponents, but I held my tongue. I had joined forces with Lady Alicia on direct orders from Her Holiness, and I didn’t want to antagonize my partner.

I heard wingbeats. Looking up, I saw a small bird made of black flower petals alight on Lady Alicia’s shoulder.

“Well now,” she murmured.

“What does lo say?” I asked, feeling sick as I spoke the name. Her Holiness had chosen lo Lockfield as the second-highest-ranking apostle of the Church of the Holy Spirit, yet the self-proclaimed “greatest sorcerer on the continent” lacked any reverence whatsoever.

Lady Alicia lowered the brim of her black hat and replied, “He’s done the minimum work expected of him—killing Robson Atlas in the Fortress of Seven Towers. Having lost its last support, the Principality of Atlas will break from the league, just as she planned. None of the northern principalities have the strength left to interfere in the city of water, and the Leinsters will be too busy dealing with them to spare many troops. That leaves Carnien, Pisani, and Nitti, but the forces they can field won’t amount to much. The scary old Hero and the dragons are what we have to worry about.”

Alicia “Crescent Moon” Coalfield was strong. In terms of raw combat prowess, she might even have been the mightiest on the continent. But even so, she

would be hard-pressed if the Hero and a dragon arrived at the same time.

I dismissed the thought and said, “We’ve achieved our objective—eliminating the four southern marchesi who formed the core of the pro-peace faction. Now their supporters won’t obstruct us next Darknessday. I suggest we return to the city of water and—”

Another bird landed on Lady Alicia’s shoulder—a gray one this time.

“Oh?” she said.

A stone bird? I pondered. *Ah!*

No sooner had my dim wits reached the answer than I dropped to one knee and lowered my head. Looking up would have been blasphemous, so I waited there while Lady Alicia’s voice came down to me.

“She says she’ll visit the city of water as well. To unseal the black gate...and because she ‘wants to see his face.’”

I looked up at the black-clad beauty with a start. I couldn’t grasp her meaning, but it didn’t concern me anyway. I would defend Her Holiness—the savior to whom I owed my life. Nothing else mattered!

Lady Alicia gazed up at the starry sky through a hole in the ceiling. A comet and a crescent moon twinkled overhead. “The new Shooting Star and the Lady of the Sword ignored my warning and lingered in the city. What naughty children! Just as she foretold. Still...” Intense envy crossed the black-clad beauty’s face as she spoke of those she was bound to kill. “They wouldn’t be worthy to inherit a champion’s legacy otherwise. Let’s pay them a visit and settle the score.”

Chapter 1

“So the title ‘principe’ did exist here, but almost no documents in the city preserve details of the last person to hold it, and even speaking of them is taboo? Their sentence went beyond execution to *damnatio memoriae*?”

“Yes. Apart from that, I remember only an old prayer that goes, ‘Give me courage to surpass that of the last principe.’ Does that help at all, Allen?” Niccolò asked nervously, his eyes downcast. The second son of the league’s vaunted House of Nitti had pale-blue hair and a build so slight it seemed girlish. His lovely companion, Tuna—a part-elven girl wearing an aqua maid uniform—looked equally worried.

“Of course it does,” I said. “Between this and that memo from the archive you deciphered, I’m constantly putting myself in your debt.”

“N-Not at all. I rely on your protection.” The boy in the church’s sights looked cheerful, although he still fidgeted. I wished that his older brother, Niche, would learn from his example.

We sat in the new city, in a nameless hideaway amid the ruins on the outskirts of the beastfolk settlement Cat Alley. Water burbled up in the center of the tree-ringed courtyard. Butterflies and small birds flitted about a profusion of blooming flowers. The stone building itself seemed to have served to lodge distinguished visitors before it became half submerged, and it possessed the stately dignity of a temple. Moss grew over its timeworn walls.

Two days ago, on Windday evening, we had repulsed an attack by church inquisitors and the Nittis’ revenge-mad old steward, Toni Solevino, at the Nitti archive in the old city. We’d been at a loss for where else to go until Zig of the otter clan, leader of the city’s beastfolk, had offered us this refuge.

For the past little while, the spacious courtyard had been playing host to a mock duel between a scarlet-haired young woman—my partner, Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword—and the Leinster Maid Corps’s number six, Cindy, whose long milk-white hair fluttered around her. I could hear them now.

“Lady Lydia, h-have you considered restraint?”

“Whining won’t save you, Cindy!”

A few days earlier, we had clashed with Alicia “Crescent Moon” Coalfield—a lieutenant of the War of the Dark Lord’s greatest hero, Shooting Star, now fallen into vampirism. Although we had narrowly succeeded in fighting her off, Lydia had overexerted her mana, leaving her in no condition for another battle. She was currently whipping herself back into shape.

“Let’s go over local legends next,” I said, returning my gaze to the boy. “Atra read a picture book in the Grand Library. It showed two dragons, one blue and the other with a body and wings made of trees, that—”

“E-Excuse me, Allen, sir! I have a favor to ask of you!” Niccolò jerked his head up and fixed me with an earnest stare.

“R-Really, you don’t need to be so formal with—”

“D-Don Niccolò?!” Tuna cried as an errant surge of mana knocked the boy into a daze.

Perhaps this exercise was too intense for him.

I was still watching Tuna nurse Niccolò back to consciousness when a little fox-eared girl with a violet ribbon in her long white hair dashed out of the house and hopped into my lap. Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals, seemed delighted to be wearing her hair in pigtails for a change.

“Atra, who—?”

“Saki!” she chirped in her musical voice.

“Saki did your hair?” I said. “It looks great.”

Atra beamed.

Saki, who shared Cindy’s post as the Leinster Maid Corps’s number six, was guarding the house’s perimeter for us. The gray plumage mingled with her own gorgeous black hair was her most striking feature.

I was savoring the warm fuzzies when a violent gust blew up in front of me. The air shook as Lydia gleefully drove her enchanted sword, Cresset Fox, against

the grimacing Cindy's pair of black knives. I went back to admiring the child, who held her hair down, before lifting a glass in both hands and gulping down ice water with gusto. Then Cindy let me have it.

"No more maid abuse! I demand better working conditions! Mr. Allen, the least you could do is sweep Lady Lydia off her feet and put a stop to her tyr—"

The maid's wail turned into a shriek as she failed to endure the onslaught and went flying. Lydia, meanwhile, stood languidly in her swordswoman's attire, not bothering to press her advantage. She looked the very model of a young Leinster lady.

Four mighty ducal houses occupied the north, east, south, and west of our homeland, the Wainwright Kingdom, and the royal blood in their veins earned each duke and his offspring the style "Highness." At the moment, I felt Lydia lived up to the honor.

While wiping Atra's mouth with a handkerchief, I probed for mana. Saki had erected wards of concealment so flawless that not even the church's apostles would discover us anytime soon. Our problem was the jamming of magical communications that blanketed the whole city once again. The Fortress of Seven Towers had fallen, securing our ability to contact the Leinsters, yet we remained isolated in enemy territory.

The child made to curl up on my lap. I was stroking her when a desperate wail rent the air.

"H-Hello?! Please stop taking it easy and help meee!"

Cindy had held her own against Toni two nights ago. Now, however, she raced around the courtyard as fast as her legs would carry her, pursued by Lydia's fusillade of fireballs.



“A-Allen,” a pale-faced Niccolò pleaded on her behalf.

“I suppose you have a point,” I said. “Niccolò, please look after Atra.”

The child on my lap piped a happy note as I cast a levitation spell on her. Once she was safe in Niccolò’s hands, I gripped my enchanted rod, Silver Bloom, and stood up. No sooner had the butt of it touched the ground than...

“Hey! Do you mind?” Lydia snapped.

“Take your complaints to Cindy. She asked for help,” I said as magical beasts crackled into being around her. My lightning lions pounced on the noblewoman en masse.

“I knew you’d come through, Mr. Allen!” Cindy cried, readying her knives for another round. “As an older woman, I’d be happy to—”

“No, thank you. I value my life.”

“Oh, you big tease!” The maid laughed merrily as she kicked off the stone wall that surrounded the house and engaged Lydia again. Joining in the lion’s assault, she locked blades with the Lady of the Sword.

Saki amazes me, but Cindy is no slouch either!

While I stood in awe, Atra tugged on my left sleeve from her spot in Niccolò’s arms. “Allen, Allen!” she cried, pointing excitedly at the lions, which stuck to hit-and-run tactics, staggering their repeated strikes at Lydia. The child’s eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Lightning was hardly the safest element. So, recalling the princess’s familiar from our time together at the Royal Academy, I conjured a pure-white wolf. Atra charged the moment Niccolò set her on the ground and buried her little face in its furry belly.

“Fluffy!” she cried.

Simply, utterly adorable. I won’t hear a word to the contrary.

Tuna broke into a smile as well, and a commotion broke out among the maids watching from afar.

“Ah! My heart.”

“What a little darling.”

“My fatigue is just melting away!”

“Please look over here, Miss Atra!”

“We must show the girls standing watch later!”

I wondered if their unified response to cuteness stemmed from a certain head maid’s instruction.

In the midst of the clamor, Niccolò muttered something under his breath. (“Magical creatures of light are notoriously difficult to control, yet he made it look easy while conjuring creatures of another element at the same time.”) Boys his age must have no end of worries.

I was just about to resume my seat when Cindy, keeping her distance from Lydia, turned and called, “Mr. Allen! Mr. Allen!” My lions seemed a touch nervous too.

“Yes?” I replied.

“Well, you see, I c-can’t exactly defend against this spell, so...”

A great bird of flame wheeled over Lydia’s stately head, flapping white-hot wings. The supreme spell Firebird was the Leinsters’ trump card, and this one boasted enhanced power, tuned for our rematch with Alicia. By all rights, she should have needed several attempts to keep it stable, even considering the boost that our shallow mana link gave to her magical control. But to my continued consternation, my partner was an honest-to-goodness prodigy.

“Don’t worry,” I said lightly. “I know you can do it, Cindy! At least, I’m fairly certain. Call it fifty-fifty.”

“You mean you won’t mind if I inform the other young ladies how you and Lady Lydia spent your time in this city?” the maid responded.

I pictured my students and my sister, who must have been in the southern capital at the moment. With a sigh, I dismissed my lightning lions.

The milky-haired maid gave me a perfect salute, then withdrew and threw her arms around the fox-eared child, crying, “Oh, Miss Atra!”

After a cold glance at their frolicking, I returned my attention to the young woman with short scarlet hair. “Don’t you think that’s enough, Lydia?” I chided, dispelling her Firebird with a wave of my left hand.

“What? I thought you were tagging in,” she said, eyes blazing like a predator spying its prey.

Oh dear. She wants to keep going.

We’d been partners since our Royal Academy entrance exam, but I shrugged and said, “Surely Your Highness jests. We’re expecting visitors at any moment, Lady Lydia Leinster.”

“Silly.”

The next instant, she was on me, swinging her sword. I grunted as I blocked with my rod.

“How many times must I tell you that I’m Lydia *Alvern* now?” she cheerfully corrected me, scattering plumes of pale fire all the while. “You left me behind the day before yesterday. I’d say you need a lesson!”

She unleashed an onslaught of classic Leinster swordplay. Overhead slash into horizontal sweep into thrust.

“I wish you wouldn’t say that while swinging your sword around,” I countered, parrying with my rod. “I mean, I’m but a humble private tutor, hardly fit to spar with the Lady of the—”

“Who are you fooling?!” chorused Niccolò, Tuna, Cindy, and the other maids.

An inexpressible feeling came over me as I trapped the enchanted blade in vines of ice. Lydia had seen it coming and immediately countered with fire, incinerating them in time to jump. She landed behind me with a merciless spinning slash. I couldn’t dodge it, so I cast a hurried spell.

Her blade struck a makeshift Azure Shield and stopped just in the nick of time.

“Lydia,” I said, scowling at the happy noblewoman, “you cut it awfully close just now.”

The scarlet-haired young woman chuckled. “I knew *exactly* what I was doing.” She gracefully sheathed her sword, then strode up and prodded my cheek,

evidently delighted that she'd forced me to draw on her mana.

"Buck up," she said. "Why the long face?"

"I always look this way."

"A likely story. How much time do you think I've spent watching your face?"

Another chuckle. "Victory is mine!"

I groaned. For some unfathomable reason, Lydia liked to make me use her mana. Remembering that she had a birthday next Fireday, I decided to voice my concerns.

"You seem recovered, but are you really?"

"Yes, I'll be fine," she replied. "So..."

"Whoa there."

Lydia pressed closer, leaning against me. I wasn't actually in her embrace, but a sweet, floral aroma tickled my nose. The maids burst into ecstatic squeals. Niccolò babbled, and Tuna cautioned him not to look, but Lydia ignored the pair's amusing banter.

"You can link our mana more deeply without worrying," she cooed at close quarters. "What are you waiting for?"

"No."

"You always hold out on me," Lydia pouted, turning on her heel. The maids immediately formed a line. "Bring tea. And Cindy, you haven't gotten over your exhaustion yet. The church will make its move on Darknessday, the day after tomorrow, so rest up before then."

Cindy stopped frolicking and quite literally jumped to her feet. "L-Lady Lydia, I'm not the least bit—"

Lydia dismissed her protest out of hand. Then she turned her glare on me. "Ignore fatigue, and you'll slip up when it counts. I refuse to lose loyal Leinster servants for such an idiotic reason. Right now, you have a duty to recuperate—and to reflect on how you could possibly have considered sacrificing yourself *twice*. Am I wrong? Well?"

Cindy and I pressed our hands to our chests to suppress a pang and avoided her gaze. We both knew all too well what she meant.

My ears caught measured footsteps from the house. Saki had arrived. She must have been listening via communication orb because she made a deep, elegant bow and replied, “As you say, Lady Lydia. I will reprimand my younger sister as well.”

“Oh, come on, Saki! No fair!” Cindy protested, marching up to her fellow number six. Atra ran over and hugged the newcomer in imitation. “I *know* you’d have done the same thing in my shoes! And *I’m* the older—”

“What I would have done is beside the point. But I believe we decided I am the older sister. Now, what do you have to say for yourself, Miss Took It upon Herself to Guard the Retreat at the Archive?”

Cindy staggered back with a groan, then went off by herself, squatted down on the ground, and started writing with her finger. “You’re all awful,” she whined, adding a loud sniff. “Fine, then. I’m just a hopeless, hotheaded maid who runs off on her own at the drop of a hat.”

Her dejection seemed genuine, but Saki and the other maids ignored her, filing back inside to prepare tea. I glanced at Lydia, who said, “They’re used to it.”

“I see,” I said slowly.

Still, where have I seen someone sulk like this before?

I happened to glance down, and the bracelet on my right arm caught my eye. Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three, had given it to me in the eastern capital. She and Cindy must have been close.

While I mused, Atra threw her arms around the sulking milky-haired maid. “Cindy! Squeeze!”

“Oh, Miss Atra! You’re my only friend!” Cindy cried, returning the hug. She stood up, spun in place, and then set the child back on the ground with a lovingly tender pat.

“Well then, I’ll help get ready!” she called, saluting before she took off like a

shot into the house. I overheard her chatting merrily with Saki, who seemed to have waited alone for her.

A few moments later, the blue-haired boy rose too. “W-We’ll go back inside as well.”

“Please excuse us,” added Tuna.

“Of course,” I said. “Oh, but first, Niccolò...”

Niccolò Nitti gave me a puzzled look.

“May I call you ‘Nick’ from now on?” I asked casually.

“P-Please do!” The boy flushed and nodded repeatedly.

“All right. Nick, I’d like you to continue deciphering that note. You’re my only hope on that front. I’ll call you when our guest arrives.”

“Of course! Let’s go, Tuna!”

“P-Please, Don Niccolò, not so fast,” the girl chimed in as he took her by the hand and left the courtyard.

So her stepfather’s betrayal hasn’t changed the way he treats her one bit. That boy might go places.

Once we were alone, Lydia jabbed her slender finger into the tip of my nose. “Just so we’re clear, the same goes for you. No more overblown self-sacrifice. None!”

“I know,” I said.

“You do not. Oh, honestly.” She puffed up her cheeks slightly and folded her arms. At long last, her mental state seemed to be recovering from the Algren rebellion and the other shocks that had followed.

I repositioned her crooked hair clip, combed her scarlet locks, and said, “How’s the Firebird?”

“Not bad. I’d like to test it out a few more times, but they wouldn’t miss that.”

“No,” I agreed. Saki and her fellow maids had done splendid work laying wards of concealment around this mansion, but if Lydia fully cast a supreme spell, some mana would inevitably leak out. I hoped to avoid more sneak

attacks from the church wearing us down. When Lydia and I returned to the battlefield, we would face the fallen legend, Crescent Moon.

I went back under the roof and took a chair. My white wolf howled and then vanished.

“Theoretically, it should work better than it did last time,” I told the young woman sitting on my left.

“But not well enough to win outright,” she said. “We can’t count on even a supreme spell dealing that freak a decisive blow.”

“No, we can’t. So let’s do a little something extra. For instance...” I projected the mana-control formula and battle plan I’d come up with into empty space.

Lydia darted her eyes over them and nodded. Then, dispelling the projection with a dainty finger, she let the faintest hint of unease show on her face. “Not bad. Probably the most powerful blow we can muster right now. But can I—?”

“You can,” I declared. “I know that Lydia Leinster can pull it off.”

I felt a weight on my shoulder, followed by a plaintive, ever so soft “Unbelievable.”

A gentle breeze blew past, rustling our hair. We passed the time peacefully until the fox-eared girl stopped romping with the birds and called, “Allen!”

“Yes, Atra?” I responded.

“Is something wrong?” Lydia asked, exchanging a look with me.

The child’s ears and tail bristled. She clenched her little fists and shouted, “Atra too!” Did she want to offer her support? The gesture warmed my heart.

Lydia scooped Atra up, sat the child on her lap, and stared at her. Then a magical bird landed on my shoulder—a sign of our long-awaited visitor. Lydia and I nodded to each other. Time was of the essence, but we still wanted all the information we could get. I only hoped that the city’s old tales would provide a clue.



“Sorry you have to put up with this. I wish I knew a nicer place for you to lie

low,” said the old otter wearing a jinbei and holding his pipe.

“I went looking with all the other gondoliers, but no such luck,” added an otter-clan girl in a pale-blue yukata. Both hung their heads apologetically. These were the callers I’d been waiting for: Zig, the leader of the city’s beastfolk population, and his gondolier granddaughter, Suzu.

“No, I couldn’t ask for better,” I told them, shaking my head. Lydia tenderly stroked Atra’s—the child had nodded off on her lap. “We’re close to every major institution in the city here, and it has a lovely courtyard garden. Only an otter-clan chieftain and gondolier could have found it for us—you know the city like the backs of your hands.”

Zig and Suzu blinked, then beamed.

“You think so?” The old otter chuckled. “I bet you carry on just like this in the eastern capital. No wonder Dag and them are so soft on you. Funny you mention that garden. We open it up to some of the city’s big shots—though not often, mind you. The deputy and Marchesa Carnien took a special liking to it. We’ve got an arrangement from way back so we always tend the garden here, even if it changes hands. My great-grandpa told me it was something to do with ‘atonement,’ but no one knows more than that.”

“Thank you for saying so,” said Suzu.

“You do realize *we’re* imposing on *you*?” I asked, cracking a rueful grin while I poured them some of the tea that Suzu had brought.

So, the deputy and Marchesa Carnien have been here too. What an odd combination. And why “atonement”?

I breathed in the refreshing aroma, so reminiscent of the eastern capital, then cut to the chase. “I asked you here purely to discuss local legends. Nick, if you would?”

“O-Of course!” The blue-haired boy shot to his feet. His chair clattered, making Atra fret, but Lydia must have soothed her, because she soon resumed the rhythmic breathing of sleep.

“Deputy Nitti’s second son, Niccolò, at your service,” he said, more uptight than usual—perhaps because Tuna wasn’t with us. “Please permit me to ask

you a few questions about the city's old tales!"

"Well now," Zig mused. "The deputy's boy. How's little Niche these days?"

Niccolò gave a start. "Y-You know my brother?"

The old otter looked just like Dag as he grinned and stuck his pipe in his mouth. He made to light it, then looked at Atra and reconsidered. "Darn right I do. That scamp may act razor-sharp now, but you wouldn't believe the mischief he used to get up to. He was always dropping by Cat Alley and rowing the gondolas with a gang of our whelps. That takes me back."

Niccolò was left speechless, genuinely stunned.

Niche, crewing a gondola with beastfolk? The thought tickled me.

"So, you're interested in local legends?" Zig continued, stowing his pipe in a pocket. "What do you want to know? Oh, and don't bother tiptoeing around the point. We've got brains in our heads. This city's seen its share of coups, but we know this one's different. We're teetering on the edge of something weird but terrible. And if we want to stop it..." The old otter's eyes showed deep concern. Suzu looked just as worried. "We need Allen and his bride to come out on top. Our ancestors laid the foundations of this city, and I can't stand to see it wrecked. We'll do what we can, so you'd better win!"

"We'll do our best," I promised solemnly.

"Naturally," Lydia said, but her mask was slipping. A short giggle escaped her, and fiery white plumes threatened to fill the air—until I clenched my left hand and dispelled them.

"Oh, grandpa," Suzu murmured. "You were all, 'Allen's family, and beastfolk never turn their backs on family!' earlier."

"Qu-Quiet, you!" Zig snapped, slapping a chair leg with his snow-white tail. "I'm talking about important business! Go fool around somewhere else!"

"Whatever you say. Allen, Lydia, I'll go lend the maids a hand." Suzu stood up and went inside. She must have wanted to give us space. The otter-clan girl would grow into a fine gondolier.

I shot Niccolò a glance, indicating that he should sit down, and said, "The

city's political landscape is currently divided between hawks and doves. Until just the other day, they struggled for supremacy—”

“But someone got the drop on the southern marchesi who pushed for peace, or so I hear,” Zig finished for me. “And Atlas is quitting the league now that they’ve lost the Fortress of Seven Towers. They struck out on their own and offered the Leinsters a separate peace deal.”

“You’re well-informed,” I said, startled. Lydia murmured appreciatively, while Niccolò exclaimed in shock. None of these latest developments had been reported anywhere in the city.

Zig stroked his salt-and-pepper beard and grinned. “Trade puts food on our tables, remember? I find out most everything that goes on in this city. I reckon we’ll just have to live with Atlas breaking away. The current marchese’s a buffoon, but his little brother Robson had his act together. He’ll be sorely missed. In better times, he would’ve made a good doge someday.”

Then did the church kill him because of his talent?

Lydia shot me a look that said, “Questions can wait.”

Yes, ma’am.

“We don’t know whether the four southern marchesi survived the attack,” I continued, returning my attention to the matter at hand. “Pro-war forces will gain momentum, but that’s now the least of our concerns. The Church of the Holy Spirit has apostles and inquisitors working behind the scenes.”

“Th-The church is plotting something in the city,” Niccolò added. “We don’t know what, exactly, but they’re after me...and this.” The blue-haired boy pointed to himself, then presented a sheet of notepaper.

“The Cornerstone in the Old Temple”

Zig looked confused, then his lips curved in a frown. “They want *you*, not Allen and his lady?” he asked haltingly. “And this is...”

His marked reaction turned my suspicion to certainty. He knew something we didn’t.

“Please,” I said, “tell us if anything rings a bell. It doesn’t matter what. And if

you know anything about the principe, we'd love to hear that too."

The old otter looked high into the heavens, then heaved a deep sigh. "I knew you lot were something special," he muttered. Then, softly, he began his tale.



Where do I start? You know how we abandoned half the city once? Yeah, I mean the old city.

Okay, then—how about what happened there way back when? Not even the Nitti boy knows? I see. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. A few hundred years have gone by since then, and no one in this city's got a reason to be proud of the story.

All right, Allen. Dag's lot sings your praises, you inherited Shooting Star's mantle, and you even won over the Comet. You must have felt *something* was off. I mean, you saw what Seven Dragons Plaza was built on, didn't you?

That's right—boughs of the Great Tree. So, I bet you wondered where they got those branches from. From the royal capital? Or maybe the eastern one? Guess again. No one could ship in enough branches to lay foundations for all the central and northern islands. Those boughs may grow on trees, but they fetch an awfully steep price.

Now you've got it. A Great Tree used to grow right here, in the city of water. Where the old city is now. But our ancestors ended up losing their tree, and the old city along with it. Before that, the old and new cities made up one giant metropolis. And the last principe lost his throne at the same time.

What'd he do, you ask? Beats me. No, really. I have no idea. But I can guess.

The last principe got up to his eyeballs in whatever happened to the Great Tree. The "Cornerstone" in the Old Temple played a big part too. And I'd guess the result forced the league to really reinvent itself.

What's that? You know some old prayers. That one takes me back. I remember hearing it a generation or two ago.

The last principe probably wasn't such a bad guy. In fact, I bet he had a good heart and knew his stuff. That prayer wouldn't have stuck around otherwise.

I hear our ancestors repented after they lost the old city. They couldn't believe what fools they'd been. But, well, the trouble didn't end there. If anything, it had just begun.



At that point, Zig finally paused for a gulp of tea. Then he pulled out his pipe, clamped it between his teeth again, and looked me in the eye. "Maybe I don't need to tell you this, since you grew up in the eastern capital, but something about the Great Tree defies mortal understanding. It's way more than any of us can handle."

"I can appreciate that," I said, recalling a miracle the tree had performed in my hometown—instantly replenishing Cresset Fox and Silver Bloom's mana in answer to my mom and Atra's song.

Zig lowered his head and his voice. "After the Great Tree went, plants overgrew the abandoned districts so fast you wouldn't believe it. And they didn't stop there. They almost swallowed up the new city too."

"Plants did? Then is the old city still under their influence?" Niccolò wondered. "In that case, why did my house maintain an archive there for so long? It must mean something." Lost in thought, the boy withdrew into his own little world. His vacant gaze wandered as blue mana escaped him.

I suppressed the latter and prompted the old otter with a look.

"Our ancestors panicked," he said. "They tried everything, but they couldn't even stall the vegetable invasion. By the end, they considered abandoning the whole city. The chieftains at the time met in council after council." A bitter look came over the old otter's face. "And finally, our ancestors made a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?" I asked.

"Could you be more specific?" Lydia said at the same moment.

I felt the dots connecting, slowly but surely forming lines. Did the "Saint" who controlled the Church of the Holy Spirit know this lost history?

Zig closed his eyes. "I don't know. Like I said, it's been a few hundred years. But whatever they did must've been bad—so awful they couldn't even write

about it. They must've been dying of shame."

Niccolò looked up from his reverie, eyes alight with profound intelligence. "But as a result of their actions," he said, "the vestiges of the Great Tree ceased their invasion, preserving the city of water."

"And the thing that stopped the incursion still exists beneath the Old Temple," I added. "*That's* the Cornerstone. They must have targeted you because they need the principe's blood, although I can't see why only you and not Niche."

The boy shuddered. "True," he murmured, downcast.

If the worst happens, we might want to evacuate him ahead of time. Our opponents know far more than we do, and unless that changes, our victory hangs by—

Lydia squeezed my left hand under the table, and the gloom that had settled over my mind began to clear. I supposed I still lacked discipline.

Zig drained his teacup and said, "After our ancestors committed their error and laid the Cornerstone to rest, they beseeched the water and flower dragons to put up a barrier underneath the Old Temple, and that was that. The dragons were a lot friendlier with people in those days. And they asked some big-shot sorceress who was kicking around back before the age of strife to pitch in too, or so the story goes."

My gaze fell to the ring on the third finger of my right hand. The jewel gave a boastful flicker. So the legend was true—Twin Heavens *had* laid the water dragon's bones to rest!

Niccolò clutched his head and groaned his brother's name, overwhelmed by the scale of the revelation.

The black dragon that Lydia and I had once fought claimed to have "lived a millennium or more." The mortal races knew of only seven such creatures: the fire dragon, water dragon, earth dragon, wind dragon, lightning dragon, flower dragon, and black dragon. Logically speaking, there ought to have been eight, corresponding to the classical elements. Perhaps some dragons withdrew to make way for new generations, although I'd never heard any such tale

concerning the flower or black dragons.

Zig stood with a look of melancholy on his face. “I’ve told you about all I know,” he said. “If you want more, try Deputy Nitti. He’s related to the old principi, and his people might’ve passed down more details in secret. But don’t get your hopes up. People’s lifespans just can’t measure up to the length of history. Even elves, dwarves, giants, and demisprites don’t live forever. If anyone knows the whole story...they must’ve given up what made them a person a long time ago.”



After seeing off Zig and Suzu, I stopped by our hideout’s kitchen. Cleaning had finished the night before, under Saki’s direction, and not a speck of dust remained. I was checking the ingredients that Suzu had brought us when Lydia and Atra entered. The child wore a triangular headscarf, and both had on fresh aprons decorated with an image of the Great Tree. The considerate novice gondolier must have brought clothes as well as food.

“Allen!” Atra chirped, happily bounded up to me, and did a twirl on the spot, beaming as she showed off her apron. Simply adorable.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman approached with a wicked grin. “Here. This one’s yours,” she said, unfurling an apron she held and circling her hands around my neck.

“Show some propriety,” I said. “You’ll set a bad example for Atra.”

“*Excuse* me?!” Lydia flared up. “You ought to count yourself lucky!”

“If I could turn back time, I’d relive our year at the Royal Academy and team up with Cheryl to reeducate you,” I replied with a sardonic grin. “But thank you. Would you fetch me those bowls off the shelf?”

“Leave the scheming princess out of it,” she grumbled, cheeks swelling in annoyance. Nevertheless, she set the wooden bowls on the table. I began laying out cake flour, eggs, butter, and sugar beside them.

Atra clambered onto a chair, swaying her body in time with her wagging tail—hardly a safe position. I cast a wind spell to support her as I turned to the scarlet-haired young woman and said, “You *are* still Her Royal Highness’s

personal guard, remember? You'd better bear that in mind. And feel free to watch while I whip up something sweet. I did promise you back at the Nitti archive."

"Meanie." Lydia pouted up at me. A winsome gleam crept into her gaze, and her left hand toyed with her necklace and hair clip.

The decisive battle was only two days off, on Darknessday. This would be my last chance to bake, and I would use it to make my mom's hassle-free cookies. Suzu seemed to have assembled fine ingredients for us, so I couldn't wait to see how they turned out.

While I measured out ingredients, a group of maids poked their determined faces through the door.

"M-Mr. Allen."

"If you want cookies..."

"We'll bake them for you!"

"So please rest!"

"We know you stayed up late last night, and the night before that."

"Leave this to us!"

I picked up an egg and traced a line across it with my finger. A subtle wind spell split the shell, causing Atra's eyes to light up. I gripped the shell in both hands and nodded to the maids while I separated the white from the yolk.

"I appreciate your concern," I replied, "but baking makes a great change of pace. And"—I set the yolk aside in a small bowl and took a second egg—"I need to please a willful noblewoman who craves homemade dessert."

As one, the maids cocked their heads in puzzlement, then brought their hands together with an "Ah!" of realization.

Lydia, who had been observing with her arms folded, fixed them with a glare. "Don't you have somewhere to be?" she demanded, a lock of her scarlet hair rising.

"E-Excuse us!" the maids chorused and retreated, cowed by Her Highness.

Still, Lydia's cheeks had turned pink.

With my ingredients ready, I added unsalted butter and sugar to a large bowl and started creaming them with a wooden spatula.

"Sweet, Allen?" Atra asked, waving her tail wildly.

As I stirred, I added the egg yolks I'd set aside.

"That's right," I replied, peering into the child's jewel-bright eyes and nodding emphatically. "And I bet they'll taste even better if you help me stir."

"Stir!" She hopped up and down on her chair, raring to go.

Lydia reached over with a small wooden spatula. Atra took it and started singing for joy. The sight warmed my heart—then a young woman came up beside me with a spatula of her own.

"Lydia?" I asked, seeing her in profile.

"I'll stir too," she said gruffly. But I'd known her long enough to see through her tone. Despite appearances, Lydia Leinster couldn't bear being left out.

My heart felt positively hot, and a smile spread across my face.

"What?" Lydia demanded, eyeing me coldly as she stirred the bowl with practiced movements.

"Nothing," I said. "Come on, Atra, you help too. The three of us will get this done in no time."

A short while later, the three of us had turned all our ingredients into yellow cookie dough. Atra peered into the bowl and asked, "Done?"

"Not yet," I said. "We need to cover this with paper first."

I stretched thin paper over the bowl, deposited it into a wooden box, and cast a minor ice spell. We didn't have an icebox, but this would do as well. Then I took out the pocket watch that Lydia had generously returned to me, checked the time, and patted the child on her scarf-covered head.

"Now we let it sit for a little while," I told her. "After that, we cut out shapes and bake them. *Then* they'll be done."

“Cut?” Atra repeated, confused.

“Yes. So we’d better get ready to—”

Just then, Saki and Cindy peeked in at the kitchen door. Behind them stood the maids whom Lydia had chased out earlier. They must have waited in the hallway.

“Mr. Allen.”

“Please let *us* take it from here!”

“We couldn’t be more ready!” the whole group chorused, each maid producing a wooden cookie cutter. Atra left her chair and raced to the door in excitement.

Saki and Cindy shot Lydia and me the briefest of looks.

“Well then, if you’d be so kind,” I said, removing my apron with a nod.

“Think nothing of it!” the maids chirped in unison.

Out in the long hallway, Lydia and I walked silently...into our private room. It held a timeworn bed and sofa, a small table, and several chairs. Even the mana lamp on the wall was antique. According to Zig, decades had passed since a traveler had drifted in from who-knows-where, bought the half-submerged mansion, and renovated each room to their taste. Upon departing the city, they had donated the dwelling to the beastfolk in gratitude for assistance rendered.

I sank onto the sofa, and Lydia poured a glass of ice water. “Mm,” she grunted, handing it to me.

“Thanks,” I replied and gulped down about half of it. Then I set the glass on a round table littered with memoranda and leaned back in my seat.

The young woman’s warmth seeped into my left shoulder.

“Lydia,” I said slowly, “what do you think of Zig’s story?”

“I think he’s got the gist right. It’s safer to assume *something* is sealed away underneath the Old Temple,” she replied in her Lady-of-the-Sword voice, taking nothing for granted.

I gazed up at the ceiling and found it covered in geometric floral patterns. “At

first,” I murmured, “I felt sure that the water dragon’s corpse was the Cornerstone. I supposed the legend must have grown distorted in the course of history. But...”

“It looks like you were wrong.” Lydia stood up and paced forward. With her back to me, she continued, “Twin Heavens laid the dragon to rest during the age of strife, but the Old Temple was built long before then. And whatever is sealed there earned it that name. The note you found in the Nitti archive fits that theory too.”

“In which case...we have trouble.”

Duchess Rosa Howard—mother of my students Tina and Stella, whose ducal house governed the north of the Wainwright Kingdom—had most likely written that note. It mentioned people known as “Floral Heaven” and “Black Blossom,” as well as dragons and whatever slumbered in the heart of the Old Temple.

Can we possibly handle this alone?

The scarlet-haired young woman broke my brooding silence with a light poke to the forehead.

“Lydia?” I asked with a start. Then I looked up into her fearless grin.

“Silly,” she said. “How many times do I have to tell you?” She withdrew a short distance, revolving like a dancer, then thrust her finger at me. “I’m at your side, and you’re at mine,” she declared with perfect confidence. “How could we lose?”

I blinked, then shrugged. “I’m truly no match for you.”

“I’ve heard that answer more times than I can count. So today, I have a question for *you*. S-So, um...” Lydia suddenly faltered, dropped her gaze, and started fiddling with her fingers.

A pleasant breeze blew in an open window and rustled our hair. When it ceased, the young woman slowly looked up at me, teary-eyed.

“Tell me,” she said, “just what is Lydia Leinster to you?”

“My one and only partner. I’d stick with her in a fight against...oh, let’s say the whole world,” I answered without missing a beat.

Why should I hesitate? Lydia must feel the same— Huh?

“Um... Lydia?” I ventured.

A faint squeak escaped the scarlet-haired noblewoman, whose eyes went even wider than before. Not only her face and neck but the hands pressed to her cheeks blushed bright red, and she stood still as a statue. Hardly the reaction I’d expected.



I stood, shaken, and began taking fearful steps toward her...when without warning, she threw herself on my chest and beat her fists against it, wailing, “U-Unbelievable! D-Don’t spring things like that on me, Allen, you big dolt! S-Sneak attacks are against the rules!”

“Ow! N-No hitting!” I seized the young woman’s fair, slender arms, checking her assault.

She glared at me, sulking like a child. Then I felt weight and warmth on my chest. “I feel the same way,” she confessed in the faintest of whispers. “And don’t you forget it.”

A long moment passed. Then I said, “Yes, yes.”

“One ‘yes’ is enough! Jeez.” Lydia pouted with upturned eyes, then rubbed her head against me. This side of her hadn’t changed since the day we’d met.

I lowered myself into a chair and set about improving the willful noblewoman’s mood. I was fixing her disheveled hair when someone hammered on the door.

“Come in,” I said, putting away the brush. “It’s not locked.”

The door flew open almost at once, and in came a young man with pale-blue hair wearing spectacles and a suit of rumpled formal wear—Niche Nitti. Only two days or so had passed since our last meeting, but he looked so thoroughly worn out that few would take him for the heir to the illustrious house of the league’s current deputy.

“Damn you,” Niche groaned, fixing me with a piercing stare. “Do you *still* think you can afford to loaf about?”

“Hi, Niche,” I said, raising my left hand in greeting. “Hard at work, I see.”

“You again?” Lydia cut in. “Someone of your standing should know how to read the room.”

Niche stamped his foot. “You think I come here for the fun of it?!”

I clenched my left fist, casting an immediate sound-dampening spell. Then I looked at Niccolò’s enraged brother, urging him to continue. He took a moment to collect himself, then began again in grave tones.

“I don’t want to risk using magical creatures as messengers now that Carnien and his pro-war faction have tightened their security. Folonto, in particular, poses a problem. He seems to have smuggled a veritable army into the city, and considering their equipment and morale, you’d almost think he was the ringleader.”

Carlyle Carnien and Fossi Folonto, both southern marchesi, had taken a stand against reconciling with the Leinsters. As far as I knew, Carlyle had taken the lead in stamping out peace efforts thus far. Had the balance of power shifted as the decisive battle drew near? Something seemed off, but I moved on to a question that had been worrying me.

“How are the four southern marchesi Crescent Moon attacked? Marchesa Rondoiro in particular.”

Niche had shared his latest military intelligence with us when we’d relocated to this hideout. The marchesi who favored peace were supposed to be seasoned military campaigners. The board would look quite different if they had escaped disaster.

But Niche’s face fell. “Unknown,” he replied, weakly shaking his head. “But I’m not enough of an optimist to seriously hope they survived. Roa Rondoiro was desolated. Right now, I can say only one thing for certain: even if the marchesi live, they can’t march on the city before the votes are cast on Darknessday. That puts the cause of peace at a hopeless disadvantage.”

“You mean the Committee of Thirteen will still meet?” I asked. “We’re playing against the church’s apostles now—no other opponent matters. It seems safe to assume they used the infighting between hawks and doves for their own ends. Won’t the remaining northern marchesi and the representatives of the southern marchesi put their own principalities first and leave the city?”

Niche didn’t answer, but my harsh assessment brought a grimace to his face. I must have hit the nail on the head.

The northern principality of Atlas had concluded a separate peace, and we didn’t even know if four southern marchesi were alive. Carlyle and Folonto were concentrating their forces in the city of water while other marchesi and their representatives left it. The league’s supreme executive body—the

Committee of Thirteen—could not function under these circumstances. The time for politics had passed.

Niche removed his spectacles and sighed. “You have it right. At this point, the size of armies will do the talking. I advised my father to mobilize troops, but he refused.” He paused before adding, “No one has chewed me out like that in a long time. He forbade me to so much as speak to him until the committee reconvenes. I assigned Paolo to him, just in case.”

The former Nitti spy Paolo Solevino had managed the Water Dragon Inn, the luxurious hotel that had lodged us when we’d first arrived in the city. He was Toni’s younger brother, but we could trust him.

Still, what made Deputy Nieto Nitti so furious? I heard he supports peace.

“We just heard an old legend from Zig, the leader of the city’s beastfolk,” I said, filing the question away for later. “Comparing it to what we’ve learned from other sources, we believe the church is after something called the ‘Cornerstone,’ which rests in the Old Temple. They may want Niccolò to lift a barrier laid by the water and flower dragons, or for some other reason. We can’t be certain.”

Niche’s eyebrows twitched. “And what *is* this ‘Cornerstone’?” he asked in a voice short on feeling.

“I can’t begin to guess. Your brother is helping me investigate, but we just don’t have enough time. That reminds me, though,” I added to lighten the mood. “I hear you used to get up to all kinds of mischief in Cat Alley.”

Niche goggled at me. Then he folded his arms, turned his head away, and barked, “I don’t know what you’re talking about! You must be thinking of someone else!”

Who knew that anecdote would get such a rise out of him?

I shot Lydia a look that said, “Do you think there’s more to it?”

“Absolutely,” her gaze answered.

I must ask Zig for details once the dust has settled.

I smiled to myself, drawing a murderous glare from Niche. Raising my hands in

surrender, I began, “I won’t presume to dictate peace terms, but—”

“Liar,” Lydia interrupted just as Niche snapped, “Go to hell.”

“How rude,” I protested. Then I set about proposing terms to my former Royal Academy schoolmate. “Sending you and Niccolò to the southern capital might prove advisable.”

All of a sudden, Niche slammed his notes onto the table with a look of heartfelt disgust. “Stop. Everything you say carries weight, and it’s high time you realized that!” the nobleman shouted and turned his back to me.

I felt a lively surge in Atra’s mana clear as day. The cookie cutting must have begun.

“Leaving already?” I asked. “We can offer fresh-baked cookies if you wait a little.”

Niche didn’t respond, but he halted before the door. “Roa Rondoiro told me something,” he said rapidly without looking at me. “Carlyle’s wife contracted a mysterious illness one year ago and hasn’t risen from her sickbed since. You sent me a question about Carlyle Carnien’s motives, and this might tie into them. Keep an eye on my brother and Tuna.”

With that, Niche made his exit, leaving the door open behind him.

Really, what a hopelessly awkward fellow.

Lydia rested her head on my left shoulder and murmured, “No wonder a certain meanie is so fond of him.”

I lifted my sound-dampening spell just in time to hear someone running in the hallway. A few moments later, Niccolò flew into the room. He must have come in a considerable hurry, if the sweat beading on his forehead was anything to go by.

“P-Pardon me!” he panted. “I heard my brother— Oh. He already left.”

Tuna entered close on the boy’s heels, bowed to us, and began dutifully wiping his face with her handkerchief.

Lydia cleared her throat loudly to catch the artless pair’s attention. Master and servant dropped their gazes, embarrassed.

“Nick,” I called, levitating Niche’s notes into the boy’s hands.

“Y-Yes, sir!” he responded, snapping to attention. He looked ready to salute at any moment.

I chuckled. “I hate to ask more of you, but Niche brought a new research subject. Try to remember if you’ve ever read of a disease that matches those symptoms. But don’t push yourself too hard. Tuna, I’m counting on you to rein him in.”

That gave Niccolò a start—he’d been champing at the bit to solve his brother’s mystery. “B-But Allen—”

“Certainly, sir,” the part-elf girl cut in with a lovely smile. “I’ve studied medicine in my own right.”

I nodded and turned to the noblewoman keeping a straight face beside me. “Lydia, what do you say we join in the cookie cutting? Who knows when we’ll get another chance.”



That evening, I sat alone under a small mana lamp, devising spells to counter Alicia. The natural enemies of vampires were the Hero and the Dark Lord. I had glimpsed snippets of both their magic, and Cindy had shown me her formulae as well. But the spells simply required too much mana. I couldn’t even deploy them on my own.

Outside the window, a waning moon and a massive comet hung in the night sky. I could hear only the sound of flowing water. It hardly seemed like the prelude to a great battle.

Oh, and I still need to get my act together and settle on Lydia’s birthday present.

Lydia and Atra were sound asleep in a bed not far away. I’d had my work cut out for me slipping away from them, and I would need to sleep soon myself. It wouldn’t do to let fatigue trip me up at a crucial moment.

I dimmed the light, lifted it, and approached the bed. Atra’s hands poked out from under the blankets, moving happily. Perhaps she was dreaming about

when she'd made cookies earlier that day.

I took a chair by the bedside and tenderly stroked the child's head. Then my gaze fell on Lydia's sleeping face. Just as it came over me how beautiful she was, the scarlet-haired young woman opened her eyes a crack.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Did I wake you?"

"Don't stare at me in my sleep," she mumbled sullenly, sitting up.

I draped my jacket over her—that sheer nightgown threatened to give me a heart attack.

"You're still up?" Lydia demanded, hiding her mouth with a sleeve. "I thought you went to bed when we did."

"I couldn't sleep," I answered, scratching my cheek and avoiding her gaze. My worries never ceased.

"The fight with Crescent Moon?" asked the young woman with a case of bed head.

"Yes. Tomorrow morning, I'd like to ask you about—"

"Ask me now." Lydia folded her legs under her on the bed and leaned against me. Feeling each other's warmth brought great peace of mind.

"Mm," she cooed, staring at my profile from so close our heads almost touched.

"I mean, it's kind of complicated, so—"

"Mm!"

"Oh, all right," I relented. Nothing could sway Lydia when she got like this. I'd certainly never managed it.

No sooner had I lain down than she snuggled up beside me. "Much better," she said. "So?"

I extinguished the mana lamp and projected my estimate of Alicia's combat strength on the ceiling. A dim, hazy light enveloped the room.

"Vampires are fiendish at the best of times," I said. "They have immense reserves of mana, regenerate from most wounds, and wield terrifying raw

power. But our opponent is *the* Crescent Moon. No ordinary attack will even faze her...and she'll use the Dark Lord's sword."

"True."

Seven Dragons Plaza had been built on boughs of the Great Tree, which almost nothing could even scratch. But the sinister jet-black blade had sliced through its foundations.

"I refined Firebird, so it should hit harder now," I continued. "But that won't be enough. We'll need to combine it with the tactics I proposed earlier today."

I sensed Lydia shift. Then...

"Don't fuss. You'll wake Atra," she whispered, straddling me and peering into my eyes with a bewitching smile.

My heart beat a rapid tattoo. I couldn't help it—I was as much a man as any other.

"But you're nervous," Lydia continued, tracing the curve of my left cheek with her finger. "Even with a new Firebird and battle plan, you worry that giving our all still might not cut it. It weighs on you so heavily that you stay up late brooding—and neglect your w-wife!"

I couldn't resist the way she blushed, no matter how often I saw it.

"You know, Lydia," I retorted only with great difficulty. "You don't have to say things you're too embarrassed to— Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. So please, no biting."

Lydia let her upper body fall, groaning bitterly as she left love bites on my shoulder. She must have been at her limit too.

I cradled her head and whispered in her ear, "You aren't the problem—I am. Linaria gave me her rod, but I don't even have enough mana of my own to make full use of it. If only I could fix that, I could— Lydia?"

We stared at each other, so close we could feel each other's breath. But the young woman's eyes brimmed with tears and rage. She grasped my hands, touched her forehead to mine, and began a confession that bordered on prayer.

“Don’t say things like that. You put in more effort than anyone, always working yourself to the bone no matter what. Do you realize how many times seeing you do that has saved me?”

A pregnant pause followed. I dispelled my projected formulae, unable to manage more than a “Sorry.”

“Listen,” Lydia pleaded, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You must realize the best way to bridge the gap between us and Crescent Moon. It couldn’t be simpler. So why not take it?”

“But Lydia...”

Moonlight streamed through the window, shining on her face. I couldn’t reject her now.

“To be honest,” I said, “I have considered it.”

“Then—”

“That said...” I sat up, facing Lydia, and pointed to the mark of Blazing Qilin on the back of her right hand, flickering with mana and emotion. “While I don’t believe the great elementals are evil like the legends claim, we don’t know what they’re capable of. If we want to draw out her power, we’ll also need to link mana more deeply than ever before, and I don’t know what effects that might have either. I don’t mind shaving years off my own life, but your—”

Sharp pain shot through my chest. Lydia had dug her nails in like she meant it.

“*Never* suggest shortening your life again,” she demanded, pressing her head against my breast. “Your mother and father would be heartbroken to hear you say that. And I...” Words failed her then, and the young woman’s quiet sobs filled the room.

I wrapped my arms around her, stroking her back as I said, “Sorry. Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying,” she sobbed, ready with a retort even as big teardrops fell from her face.

I wiped them with my finger and took her hands. “Let’s shelve this question for now,” I suggested. “There are too many uncertain factors, and— What?”

The mark glowed brighter, radiating powerful mana. We were both still wondering what to make of it when I felt a warmth on my back. Looking over my shoulder, I found that the white-haired child had woken up without our noticing.

“She says, ‘I’ll try!’” she sang. “Atra too!”

I fell speechless.

Lydia prodded my cheek, emboldened by these unlooked-for reinforcements. “Well?” she crowed. “You heard her.”

Atra added her own pokes in imitation.

“Let’s play it by ear,” I said, raising my hands slightly in surrender. “We won’t take that route if we don’t have to.”

“Yes, yes,” Lydia said while Atra sang a happy note.

I lay back down and burrowed under the covers with a groan. Lydia and Atra soon joined me and seized hold of an arm each.

“The Fortress of Seven Towers falling paved the way for a lightning-quick truce between Atlas and the Leinsters,” I murmured, staring up at the dimly visible patterns on the ceiling. “That would normally be cause for celebration, but...”

Lydia squeezed my left arm. Atra moved onto my belly, where her breathing took on the rhythm of healthy sleep. In the darkness, Lydia picked up the thread of the conversation.

“I hate to admit it, but that was a master stroke. If I know my mother and grandmother, they must have considered occupying the city of water using an army of griffins to drop troops from the air. But now that Atlas has surrendered, they’ll need aerial strikes to effectively protect it from the other northern principalities. And even though my grandfather and Felicia are juggling a superhuman amount of supplies, they don’t have the matériel to absorb the whole north of the league.”

The full might of the Leinsters and the other houses under their banner could defeat even Alicia. But circumstances prevented them from bringing it to bear. I

spat out the realistic conclusion:

“So we can’t hope for reinforcements during these crucial few days. At worst, we may have to fight with only our current forces.”

Lydia tightened her grip. “You left out Tiny, Caren, and Lily.”

“Tina, Caren, and Lily?” I repeated. There was a good chance they’d taken part in the assault on the Fortress of Seven Towers. I’d endorsed the girls’ participation myself, in the proposed battle plan I’d entrusted to Celebrim, the former second-in-command of the Leinster Maid Corps. Even so, I doubted they could reach the city of water so quickly—or that Lisa would allow it.

“I have a bad—a *dreadful* feeling,” Lydia murmured grimly in the dark. “We might need to change hiding places now, before it’s too late.”

I let out a hollow laugh, certain she was worrying for nothing. When I looked down, Blazing Qilin’s mark flashed brightly as if to cheer us on and vanished.

“Lydia,” I said, “I think I’ll do a little more—”

“I won’t sleep without you,” she interrupted, stirring to hit me with a point-blank pout.

“Really, now. B-Be reasonable. If we’re going to call on a great elemental, we’ll need formulae to—”

“Go to sleep or I’ll jump you.”

Oh dear. She means it.

Feeling profoundly like prey in a predator’s sights, I relaxed and said, “You know, I feel awfully sleepy all of a sudden. Maybe I will turn in.”

Lydia didn’t respond to my wooden acting right away, but the mood told me all I needed to know. She was pouting like never before!

Sure enough, she soon pummeled my chest and muttered, “Unbelievable. Allen, you dolt. That was your cue to give in and let me take you. Oh, b-but...I wouldn’t mind if you took me inst—”

“Duke’s daughters don’t say such things,” I interrupted.

She gave a sullen “Humph” but still touched my cheek. I returned the gesture.

“Good night, Lydia. Let’s make breakfast together in the morning.”

“Good night, Allen. I wouldn’t mind cooking for you.”



“Then you’re really, truly certain, Nieto?” Doge Pirro Pisani asked quietly in a Nitti study on the city’s central island.

It was the dead of night, and I, Paolo Solevino, waited still as a statue, my nerves strained to the breaking point.

“Your wisdom has seen us across many seas and through battles that should have killed us,” Don Nieto, the doge’s deputy and present head of the House of Nitti, answered gravely. “Surely you already know. ‘In the face of a wrathful flower dragon, divide your cargo. Dispersing risk is the foundation of the trader’s art.’ That old adage they made us learn as children holds true.”

My master’s grandfather had taught me that phrase. Hearing it called up a warm wave of nostalgia. Don Nieto hadn’t changed one bit since those days.

My master straightened himself up and bowed to the doge, who stood stock-still, looking grim. “Now that events have reached this point, you need only give the order,” he said. “‘Let the House of Nitti fulfill its duty.’ It won’t cost much—only my life and the ruin of my house. As long as you and our bright young lights survive, I’ve no doubt you will rebuild the city and the league.”

An interminable silence followed.

At last, Doge Pisani managed to wring out a “Forgive me.”

“I should be the one to apologize,” said Don Nieto. “My son Niche lamented Carnien and his faction’s church ties from the first and often advised me against them. Even the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, whom you met with and declared trustworthy, advised caution. And look at the result! I hear that the Brain never gives up. A decisive battle in the city has become inevitable.”

I had only heard such regret in my master’s voice once before, when he had failed to stop a vile deal with the commonwealth in time. He was anticipating even the worst possible outcome—the permanent loss of the city of water.

The league’s deputy bowed deeply to its doge. “My folly led to all this. I know

how to take responsibility, Captain Pirro.”

Toni, why aren't you here now?!

While I suffered the tortures of resentment, the doge replied, “Aye. I know that well enough, First Mate Nieto.”

These two men, who had spent decades laboring so that the league and the city might prosper, locked eyes.

“Nieto Nitti. Pirro Pisani, doge of the League of Principalities, commands you.” The doge turned to leave. Though he leaned on a cane, he walked with a steady gait. Before the door, he stopped and said with utmost dignity:

“Fulfill your duty.”

Had any grimmer order been given in the League of Principalities's long history? Yet Don Nieto replied softly, without even raising his head, “I humbly accept. The league and the city, I leave to you.” He looked up. “Pirro, safe journeys, and may the dragons and the elementals guide you. O World Tree! Give my lifelong friend courage to surpass that of the last prince, who though mired in disgrace yet saved the city.”

The doge shuddered, and his cane rattled. Even so, he did not look back. “Farewell, Nieto, my friend,” he said. “I'll tender my apologies in purgatory. Please, wait for me there.”

The study door thudded closed.

Don Nieto looked relieved. “Paolo, thank you for serving a sorry excuse for a man like me all this time. Words can't express my gratitude.” He paused before adding, “I'm sorry about Toni. I should have seen through him. Forgive me.”

“Master,” I pleaded, falling to my knees, “I beg of you. Please... Please take me with you!”

“No!” he roared like thunder, a sudden departure from his tone thus far. Then he rested a hand on my shoulder. “My death will suffice. You needn't join me.”

“Don Nieto...”

My master, the man who had proposed going over to the pro-war side to ensure that the league would survive whatever befell it and persuaded the doge

to adopt his daring plan, squinted out at the nightscape and said, “I wish to leave Niche and Niccolò in your care. The House of Nitti will doubtless fall in this battle. But...” He clenched his fists and declared, “Even so, life will go on. My sons have brains, but they will need a man of your experience to help them. This is your foolish master’s last request. Please accept it.”

Chapter 2

“Damn! What the blazes is the church thinking?!”

For the umpteenth time that night, my panicked shout filled my office in this villa on the city outskirts. Considering that my ailing wife was still sleeping in the next room, I—Carlyle Carnien—should have stayed in my house on the central island. And yet...

I roughly swept the papers off my desk with my right hand, then clutched my head. I couldn't restrain my darker impulses.

“Who could have guessed that apostle's ‘plan’ was to murder Robson Atlas and lead the principality into a separate peace? So *this* is how the Church of the Holy Spirit operates—any means to achieve their ends!”

Assaulting the four southern marchesi, I could at least understand. But driving an ally into the enemy's arms went beyond the pale. I couldn't believe it.

No, it's too late for doubts. Far too late.

The church's desires had always differed greatly from ours. They didn't crave territory, only the “Cornerstone” deep within the Old Temple. I wanted the Saint to heal my wife, whose mysterious illness kept her asleep.

Even the Committee of Thirteen must have been beneath their notice at this point. Of the five pro-war northern marchesi, Atlas had defected, while the remaining four had their hands full dealing with the Leinsters. All except Atlas had left the city. As for the six southern marchesi, the four who favored peace had likely died fighting. Only my sworn friend Fossi Folonto and I commanded significant forces in the city. Doge Pirro Pisani and Deputy Nieto Nitti had yet to mobilize in earnest.

Come Darknessday, the only flags flying in the city of water would belong to Carnien, Folonto, any who decided to back our winning horse...and the Church of the Holy Spirit. Victory stared me in the face. But could I really trust the church's apostles and their Saint?

I was still brooding when light shone in through the window.

“Morning?” I murmured.

Just a few days earlier, the advent of the demisprite apostle Io Lockfield had withered most of the beautiful garden into which my wife had poured her heart and soul. I wondered what Carlotta had meant when she’d called it “atonement.”

Staggering to my feet, I opened the window. A clean breeze rustled my hair, belying the reeking, blood-drenched battlefield the city would become tomorrow.

I recalled what Fossi had said on his visit here the night before:

“Don’t waver, Carlyle. The die is cast. We bet on the church—on the Saint. You for your wife, I for the league’s future. We’ve come too far to turn back now. Unless we triumph, we are doomed. We’ll lose our titles, and the blame will extend to our whole houses—your wife included.”

I looked up at the cloudless dawn sky. Seabirds weren’t the only creatures circling above the city.

Leinster griffins? Surely not.

Fossi had accepted my wild explanation that the church’s Saint might be able to save Carlotta, and he’d even agreed with my plan to capture the city. He had drawn Marchesi Atlas and Bazel and many others into the plot. I couldn’t pull the rug from under him.

My last conversation with the apostles before embarking on this gambit still echoed in my mind.

“What has you in such a temper, Carlyle Carnien?” Io had asked. “I don’t understand you. I forestalled the Leinsters for the time being, and it cost only the Principality of Atlas—a liability.”

“Lady Alicia eliminated the meddlesome southern marchesi,” Edith had added. “And of the remaining doves, the doge’s deputy has made overtures to join our side. We’ve completed our arrangements to lift the dragons’ seal. All we need to do now is slay the infuriating Lady of the Sword and her Brain, then

retrieve the sacrificial principe.”

A strong gust scattered withered petals. I reached out to them, but they crumbled at my touch.

I couldn't begin to guess the black-clad beauty's limits, and her fellow apostles also wielded fearsome power. If the Lady of the Sword and her force opposed them, what would become of the city of water—my wife's home?!

I returned to my desk and dropped my gaze to two letters I'd received since that meeting the previous night. One wax seal bore the blue rose of the principi's bloodline, and the other, the black rose of the southern marches. I agonized, hesitated...and finally made up my mind.

Softly, I called, “Is anyone there?”

The door opened to reveal an aged butler, his hair entirely white. He must have waited through the night in case I needed him.

“You called, sir?”

“Find someone I can trust implicitly,” I said. “At once. I will give them their orders personally.”

“What a strange request,” the old butler replied, bugging his eyes like a clown. “Such a person stands before you, sir.”

I seized the letters and their envelopes and incinerated both with a spell. The old retainer couldn't know what they said, but he must have felt the mood they'd inspired. “They won't be pleasant orders. You might not survive them.”

The old man gave an emphatic shake of his head and looked at me. “When your lordship's predecessor reprimanded me over those dealings with the southern isles, your intercession saved me from expulsion. Thanks to you, sir, I was able to instruct my late daughter's children. And I have arranged for the garden to be tended after I am gone. Pray have no fear on that account.”

A stab of pain pierced my heart. When the old butler's case arose, I had been too wary of my predecessor's wrath to stand up for him. Only after stern words from Carlotta had I stepped in. I dropped my gaze, unable to look him in the eye as I said, “Return here later. I have a letter to write.”

“Certainly, sir.”

The door closed, and silence filled the room once more. I sank into a chair and shut my eyes.

“Carlotta,” I murmured, “I’m trying to do something wretched. Despite selling out my country and dragging so many people into my plot, I’m struggling to stop at the last possible moment—to turn back time on my choices, even if it means stabbing a friend in the back.” I chuckled. “I always knew I was a fool. I can’t begin to fill a marchese’s shoes without you. But even so...” I reached out a hand and clenched my fist around empty air with all my might. “I’ll endure any disgrace if only you’ll wake up again. I’ll gamble on any chance, however slim. I was nothing but a mass of vainglory, an empty puppet before you made me a person. For your sake, I’d dare anything.”

Lowering my hand, I recalled the contents of the letters I’d burned, one from Niche Nitti and one from Roa Rondoiro.

“The Brain of the Lady of the Sword may be able to treat your wife’s symptoms.”

Damn Niche. He must think awfully highly of that fellow. And in the end, Roa didn’t take my advice to flee.

Remembering the perpetually stone-faced heir to the House of Nitti and the young woman who had been both my underclassman and my lover, I smiled for the first time since the previous evening. I opened a drawer and drew out pen and paper. Since I’d made up my mind to answer their letters, I ought to send as much information as I could write down in one sitting. I would start with Carlotta’s precise symptoms and the time they had first—

My hand stopped. The faintest of doubts surfaced in my mind.

When Carlotta fell ill, who had brought me those first rumors of the Saint and her miraculous healing prowess? Could it have been Fossi?



“So, what are our plans?” Lydia asked, sitting across from me in sword-fighting clothes and filling a lovely porcelain teacup. “This is our last day, after all. Here. Your tea.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “The same as yesterday. We’ll gather intelligence...and prepare for tomorrow’s battle.”

True to our agreement the night before, we had made and shared a somewhat late breakfast together. It was Lightday, with a refreshing breeze and not a cloud in the sky. Atra sat beside Lydia, eyes narrowed in pleasure and ears twitching. Eating in the courtyard had been the right call.

As for the maids watching over our little group...

“Th-They wouldn’t even let us prepare tea.”

“But Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen looked *fabulous* in aprons!”

“And Miss Atra was cute as a button!”

Another day of business as usual, it seemed.

Niccolò and Tuna had stayed up till dawn deciphering Duchess Rosa’s note. After putting in a brief appearance, both master and servant had taken to bed.

Saki and Cindy had gone out on patrol. Detection wards and Saki’s cordon of magical creatures surrounded our hideout, and Cat Alley itself formed a veritable labyrinth, but we couldn’t be too careful.

“Why not strike the first blow?” Lydia asked, gazing affectionately at Atra while the child sipped tea. “Wouldn’t we be better off taking the initiative?”

I rolled up my white shirt sleeves and grimaced as I raised my own cup. “We don’t know where to find Crescent Moon and the other apostles. I expect they’re in the Old Temple, but we can’t be certain, and they have a sorcerer capable of strategic teleportation. We can’t risk it.”

“You mean the one in Duchess Rosa’s note—‘Black Blossom.’” The scarlet-haired young woman reached out and touched my hair. That drew the maids’ curiosity like a magnet, but she merely murmured, “Bed head” and set about straightening it.

I let her have her way as I replied, “Right. And don’t forget the pro-war forces who threw their lot in with the church. The northern marchesi must be too busy dealing with the Leinsters to spare many troops, but Carnien and Folonto are a different story.”

According to Niche, the leading hawk was Carlyle Carnien, the man who had plotted to abduct Niccolò from the Water Dragon Inn. Both he and his sworn friend Fossi Folonto had several hundred soldiers in the city.

I reached out my own hand to adjust Lydia's hair clip and exchanged a nod with the scarlet-haired noblewoman.

"Our only fighters now..."

"Are you, me, and..."

"We're with you!" the maids chorused, standing proud. "You won't come to harm while you have us!"

How reassuring. I really mustn't let them die.

I gently rubbed Atra's head.

"In conclusion," I said, with a flick of my left wrist, "we need to remember who we're up against. Crescent Moon alone is more than we can handle. I shudder to think what will happen if we try to even the odds with a preemptive strike and end up walking into an ambush."

"Well, I don't like it." Lydia raised her teacup and glared, eyes ablaze with quiet fury. "After all this, Pisani and Nitti *still* won't mobilize against the church? The apostles killed one of the league's generals without a second thought, just to stall my family."

I plucked a small cloth bag off the table and produced yesterday's cookies. One I fed to the bright-eyed Atra. Another I placed on Lydia's saucer. "I suppose politics in this city make for strange bedfellows. I wouldn't count on them if I were you."

I'd met Doge Pirro Pisani in The Cat Parting the Seas, a café on the city's central island, and I'd found him no fool. He must have had his reasons.

I drew out a sheet of notepaper Niche had sent me that morning and presented it to Lydia. She ran her eyes over it and gave the maids a hand signal. They all filed back inside. Once she'd seen the last of them go, the noblewoman gave me a questioning look.

The note began with a hasty scrawl in Niche's hand, but Niccolò had added

the final lines.

“Marchesa Carlotta Carnien has been bedridden for about a year now. Carlyle Carnien tried every healing spell and medicine he could think of, to no avail. I believe he turned to the church as a result. The marchesa’s symptoms began with a sudden, severe fever. After ten days of that, she fell into a stupor. She has seldom risen since, and hardly regained consciousness at all in the past six months.”

“I recall reading a report of similar symptoms in my father’s study when I was very young. It lacked the author’s name, but I’m certain it was in Old Imperial.”

A mysterious illness? But this sounds more like a curse.

I shook off the urge to speculate and met Lydia’s gaze as I said, “Despite the major difference in lethality...the symptoms remind me very much of ten-day fever, the bizarre disease that tore through the royal capital ten years ago. Only it’s supposed to have been highly contagious, and this only affects Marchesa Carnien. Odd, that.”

Ten-day fever had, I’d heard, claimed the lives of my pupil Ellie Walker’s parents. And Tina and Stella’s mother, Duchess Rosa, had been bedridden in her last years. Duke Walter Howard had told me that he suspected someone had cursed her.

Lydia made a point of moving to the seat beside mine. “Tell me,” she said, “what does it all mean?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted and fed her a cookie. Then I took out my pocket watch and idly flipped the lid open and shut. “The report Niccolò read was apparently in the Nitti archive. Collections in other countries might have copies, but we’d never get them in time.”

Yet again, I keenly regretted losing so many precious documents in the raid on the archive. Had the church’s “Saint” planned this far ahead?

I snapped my watch shut and locked eyes with Lydia. “All I know for certain is that a marchesa in this city suffers from symptoms similar to ten-day fever and

that we may be able to learn something about a most enigmatic illness if we examine her. Circumstances permitting, of course.”

No sooner had I finished speaking than a wind sprang up, laden with flower petals. It ruffled our hair and swayed Atra’s white tresses.

“True,” Lydia said, plucking a petal from my dark-brown hair. “If we can take a good look at that lady, we may be able to prove your hypothesis that ten-day fever was no epidemic. I know you suspect a deliberate spell or curse.”

I blinked. Atra’s ears stood up, striving to catch sound.

“How?” I asked belatedly.

“It was obvious. Or do you think you can keep secrets from *me*? Don’t tell Ellie for the time being. We can have Anna and the Howards’ head butler look into it once this mess is over.”

So she wanted to pass over the professor, headmaster, and others no doubt acquainted with the kingdom’s dark side in favor of people we could trust absolutely: the Leinsters’ head maid and Ellie’s grandfather, that old Howard retainer Graham “the Abyss” Walker.

I heard voices from the house. Evidently, we had company.

“You win,” I said. “I surrender.”

“As you should! And while we’re at it, I’ll give you an assignment.” Lydia stood up and laughed musically. Then she planted her left hand on her hip, pointed her dainty index finger at the tip of my nose, and shouted, “Ask for my help with everything you do from now on! Is that clear?! If you understand, speak up! And learn how to get that thing off your right ring finger already!”

“I... I’ll do my best.”

“Thirty out of one hundred—you fail. Now, one more time!” Her Highness brought her face right up to mine. I groaned, buckling under the pressure.

Atra dropped off my lap, ran toward the house, and hugged the lovely bird-clan maid who had just left it. “Saki!” she cried.

“Miss Atra. I just got back,” the maid said, flashing a smile, then made us a slight, graceful bow. “Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen, warships from the southern isles are

sailing in the open ocean off the city. They're moving away now, but I thought I had better keep you informed." Saki used her birds to conduct reconnaissance.

Lydia and I blinked, then both spoke at once.

"From the *southern isles*?"

"At a time like this?"

The island nation must already have known about the outbreak of war between the Wainwright Kingdom and the League of Principalities. And even if they wanted more information—

I recalled something the Leinster Maid Corps's former second-in-command had once told me: "I have my ways, and a few contacts in the southern isles."

A moment later, our wards trembled faintly, then returned to normal. Whatever had tripped them meant us no harm.

Saki raised her right hand, holding Atra with the other, and I held up my left as we both increased the sensitivity of our detection spells. The maid gave a start, surprise in her eyes.

Lydia folded her arms and glared up at the rooftops. "I suppose Celebrim set this up," she muttered as fiery plumes filled the air. "Come out!"

A perception-blocking lightning spell burst with a loud crack. Startled exclamations in the familiar voices of two girls and one maid drifted down from the roof.

A trio in matching cloaks dropped into the courtyard, holding their skirts in place. And then...

"Sir!"

"Dear brother!"

Two girls raced up to me. One had platinum hair with a pale-blue tinge and a long rod slung on her back. The other's red hair barely hid her ears, and she wore a one-handed sword and a dagger at her waist. Tina Howard and Lynne Leinster were genuine blue bloods, daughters of dukes entitled to the style "Highness," and I was their private tutor. They jumped up and down in excitement, locks of their hair swaying side to side.

“We’re here!” Tina cheered, giggling. “Oh, Stella wrote you this letter.”

“Dear brother!” Lynne shouted. “Thank you for the dagger!”

“Wh-Why, Tina, Lynne,” I managed. “Please, have a seat.” Despite my confusion, I accepted Stella’s letter and pacified my students with pats on the head.

Both girls opened their eyes even wider than before, blushed faintly, and then gazed down at their feet. Embarrassed moans escaped them.

Wh-What on earth...?

Puzzled by this unexpected response, I looked to Lydia and Saki, only to find them in the midst of a whispered conversation.

(“What do you think?”)

(“I daresay I blame Mr. Allen. Girls can’t remain children forever.”)

I could expect no help from that quarter.

With no other choice, I turned to the other new arrival. Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three, wore a black ribbon and a floral clip in her long scarlet hair. As usual, her outfit consisted of a jacket patterned with interlocking arrows, a long skirt, and leather boots—nothing like a maid. And yet...

“Saki! How have you been?” she lilted, throwing her arms around the other maid—Atra and all. “We managed to find our way here thanks to all your little birdies flying around. Good thing I did all that maid corps training!”

She found our hideout based on the positions of magical creatures flying at high altitudes?!

While I struggled to believe my ears, Saki freed herself.

“Don’t cling like that, Lily,” she said. “I’ve been well, in no small part because I cleared up a long-standing dilemma the other day. Please remember that I’m Cindy’s *older* sister from now on.”

“Okay! You got it!” The maid brought her hands together in delight. I foresaw teasing in Cindy’s future.

And we should have one more visitor before long, so...

I crouched down and addressed my two bashful pupils. “Tina, Lynne, I have so many questions for you, but please tell me just one thing first.” I withdrew my hands, and the girls stared at me. “The city of water will become a war zone by tomorrow at the latest. The battle could begin at any moment. I truly appreciate your coming all this way, but—”

I swallowed my words. Tina’s and Lynne’s cloaks showed considerable wear. They must have endured a difficult journey without rest.

In response to my silence, the young noblewomen exchanged a look, then advanced a step toward me. “You have to ask?” they said in unison, leaking glittering rays of azure and red mana. “We came to help you!”

Girls grow up so fast.

“Thank you,” I said. “In that case, we can use your help.”

“We’re happy to give it!” Tina and Lynne smiled and underscored their answer with emphatic nods.

I motioned with my left hand, urging them again to take empty chairs.

Lily moved away from Saki and into my view. Placing her left hand on her chest, she silently displayed her bracelet.

I held up the bracelet on my own right wrist in a show of gratitude.

“You’re welcome,” the maid murmured almost too softly to hear, holding her own expressive lock of hair down with a look of relief. Tina, Lynne, and Lydia would normally add a few choice words at a moment like this, but none of them interjected. I must have caused Lily as much concern as any of them.

In the meantime, a maid with long milk-white hair had entered the courtyard.

“Excuse me!” Cindy called. “Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen, you won’t believe who just got here! All the way from the southern capital, it’s—”

Faster than the eye could follow, Lily was on her, rubbing their heads together cheek to cheek. “Cindy!” she cried, laughing. “I hear you resigned yourself to being the little sister.”

“L-Lady Lily?!” Cindy reeled. “H-How do—? H-How did you even get here?!”

Lydia, Lynne, and Saki showed no concern. This was evidently an everyday occurrence.

“Oh no you don’t,” Lily crooned. “Call me plain old ‘Lily’ or nothing!”

“Er, well, y-you see...I really d-don’t know if I could...”

“Then I’ll keep the hugs coming!”

“Oh, Saki,” Cindy wailed, clearly at the end of her rope, but her sister was busy conversing with Lydia and Lynne.

Still, Lily made capturing the corps’s number six look easy. She sure knows her business—probably better than I do.

I shrugged and turned to Tina, who was having a friendly chat with Atra. “What?!” she cried in response to a yip from the child. “W-Well, Mr. Allen gave me a ribbon too!”

I was just about to call to her when...

“Allen!”

“Whoa there!” I exclaimed, catching a wolf-clan girl as she flung aside her luggage and threw herself at me. My little sister buried her face in my chest and wagged her bushy tail.

“You too, Caren?” I murmured, stroking her back.

“Of course,” she said, frowning up at me. “I’m your sister, and sisters protect their big brothers. That’s natural law. I flew almost a full day straight from the Fortress of Seven Towers, so feel free to shower me with praise.”

A full day?!

I looked to Tina and Lynne for confirmation, and both thumped their chests.

“I think brothers ought to protect their little sisters,” I said. “But thank you. You too, Tina and Lynne.”

“You’re welcome, sir!” Tina giggled.

“Dear brother!” Lynne chimed in. “I have so much to tell you!”

A cup clinked loudly.

“Caren?” Lydia asked with her legs crossed. “Doesn’t your sister-in-law deserve a greeting?”

“Of course not,” my sister growled, moving protectively in front of me. Violet sparks clashed with blazing feathers. “You’re under suspicion of a grave offense: taking advantage of my brother’s kindness to make him sign the false name ‘Allen Alvern’!”

Tina, Lynne, and Lily spoke not a word, but I could feel them pressuring me.

Lydia scowled. “It’s the truth. And I’m ‘Lydia Alvern’ now.” With a giggle, she added, “Doesn’t it have a nice ring to it?”

“Nonsense!” Caren roared, shrouding herself in lightning to—

“That’s quite enough!” I interjected, dispelling my sister’s magic. “Saki. Cindy.”

“Everything stands ready,” the former maid replied, while her partner groaned, “Not a problem.”

“Thank you both,” I said and shot the cool-faced Lydia a look.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman rose smoothly to her feet. “Start with a bath,” she commanded the girls. “A soak will wash away your fatigue after that long flight. Then we’ll talk specifics. Follow me.”

She walked off without waiting for an answer, and despite their confusion, Tina and Lynne trailed after her.

“Huh? Oh, r-right!”

“Dear sister, wait for me!”

“Go on, Caren. Join them,” I urged my sister, who had lost a target for her wrath. “To tell the truth, you won’t have much time to relax.”

Then I nodded to the trusty maid. “Forgive me, Lily, but would you mind sharing the latest military news from the southern capital in the meantime?”



“Oh, wow, Lynne! Look at this bath!”

“Don’t shout like a child, Tina!” I snapped. “Although I must agree.”

The two of us had cast off our clothes and entered the bathing area ahead of the others, wrapped in fresh towels. What we'd found explained our raised voices. The bath occupied a whole wing of the hideaway, allowing for spacious dimensions and a high ceiling that made it feel truly expansive. The walls and floor were all marble, but the tub appeared wooden. According to what my dear sister had told us on the way, the city's beastfolk used this hideaway to host honored guests, and even the smallest touches bespoke their careful attention.

Tina and I were still staring around the room when the door opened and my dear sister and Caren entered, attired as we were.

They're both gorgeous.

My dear sister was slender yet womanly, and even Caren seemed markedly more mature than Tina or me. Lily wasn't present, but she went without saying. In comparison... I looked down and sank into gloom. Then I looked at the nearly nonexistent bosom of Miss First Place, who had just done exactly the same thing.

"From an objective standpoint," I said gravely, my hope rekindling, "victory is mine."

"Are you blind?" she demanded. "*I'm* taller!"

We glared daggers at each other.

This is the problem with Miss First Place! She can't face facts! What a shame Ellie isn't here. I'm sure she would take my side if she hadn't stayed behind in the southern capital.

Neither of us could stand to give ground, but our elders regarded the contest with exasperation.

"Pipe down, Tiny. And you too, Lynne," said my dear sister.

"Let's rinse down for a start," Caren added.

"Yes, ma'am," we grumbled, raising our hands in unison, and moved to the washing area.

Dividers ensured each of us ample space, making for a relaxed atmosphere. I

touched fire and water spellstones to produce hot bathwater and poured it over myself, realizing in the process that I'd been more tired than I thought.

We had ridden our griffins out of the Fortress of Seven Towers in the middle of Lightningday night. Thanks to Celebrim's connections, we had set down on a warship from the southern isles during the journey, but still.

Tina and Caren seemed to share my sentiments, splashing hot water over themselves with obvious enjoyment.

"Dear sister," I whispered as I wet my hair, "are you...angry that we came?"

I heard hot-spring water gush into the tub. While steam clouds billowed, I caught my dear sister chuckling.

"Silly," she said. "I'm not mad. Oh, but of course, Tiny and Lily are a different story."

Relief flooded my heart. Anyone could see that my dear sister was, well, *fond* of my dear brother. And...s-so was I. But I also adored my dear sister and respected her, so I couldn't help feeling cheerful.

Joining my hands, I shyly murmured, "I'm glad."

"Well, *I'm* not!" Tina shouted, cheeks swollen with indignation. She had finished washing and wrapped herself in a towel again. "How can you accept Lynne and Caren but not Lily and me?! This is tyranny! I demand a clear explanation!"

My dear sister stopped the water and waved the steam aside. "First," she said, with a piercing stare, "the church knows you have Frigid Crane inside you. Did you forget how obsessed they are with the great elementals?"

"I-It had to happen sooner or later! And doesn't the same go for Blazing Qilin?!"

My dear sister wound her towel with evident annoyance, then crossed her arms, looking torn. "Second, he thinks highly of you. So highly he'd ask for your help in the middle of a mess like this."

"M-Mr. Allen would ask *me*?" Tina goggled. That lock of her hair waved side to side in delight.

My dear brother holds Tina in high regard. I know he does. And yet...

Caren and I fell silent, unable to put our feelings into words.

Dear brother, will you ask for our help too?

“But of course,” my dear sister continued with a bold grin, her composure restored, “when push comes to shove, the person he counts on most is *me*. We can get by just fine without you, Tiny! Plus, you have short hair.”

“What?! B-But your hair’s as short as mine now!”

“Yes, yes.”

“One ‘yes’ is enough!”

“Lydia,” Caren said slowly, “I haven’t finished questioning you about the ‘Alvern’ thing.”

The three of them continued their friendly(?) argument as they walked toward the tub. Whatever she might say, my dear sister was quite taken with Tina and Caren.

I stopped the water, surveyed my own short-haired figure in the mirror, and muttered, “Maybe I should grow it out.”

I mean, my dear brother—Allen—likes long hair on women.

My cheeks burned the moment the idea popped into my mind.

I really might be beyond saving now, I thought, repeatedly splashing cold water over my head. *If only Anna were here so I could talk this through with someone.*

“Lynne? Is something wrong?” Tina called from the tub, gripping the edge with both hands to give me a worried look.

“Nothing,” I managed to reply. “Nothing whatsoever. I’ll be right with you.”

I stopped the water again and stood up. The mirror reflected my nakedness.

I’ve matured a little in the past few months. Yes, I must have. The battle’s only just begun! And while I may be at a disadvantage, I can’t give up.

Fists clenched, I marched toward the bathtub.

“You can tell me all the details later,” my dear sister said after a pause to soak in the bath, “but I hear you took the Fortress of Seven Towers. Did you use his battle plan?”

“Yes! With ideas from Stella! Can you believe she came up with almost the same plan as Mr. Allen?” Tina nodded eagerly. She had distinguished herself by freezing the vast moat with only Ellie and Lily to support her.

“She did? Well now, isn’t that something.” My dear sister narrowed her eyes and scooped up bathwater in her hands. I guessed that she was equal parts surprised and impressed. The old her would have given off a whiff of jealousy too, but I couldn’t detect one.

“But after we breached the walls, we fought a demisprite sorcerer who called himself the number-two apostle,” I added, putting my questions aside. A shiver ran through me as I pictured the dreadful sorcerer as I’d seen him, unfurling his black wings against a backdrop of broken stained glass and holding his staff high to cast a taboo spell. If not for the Dagger of Fiery Serpents my dear brother had sent me, I would have...

“And his name?” my dear sister asked Caren.

“Io Lockfield,” she replied. “He learned from someone named ‘Floral Heaven’ and called himself ‘Black Blossom.’ He also assassinated General Robson Atlas. Lynne, Lily, and I fought him three against one, but the best we could do was buy time until Lisa and Duchess Letty got there. He performed strategic teleportation and cast the taboo spells Hermitage of Verdant Billows and North Wind of Dark Death.”

“Sounds like trouble.”

With that brief comment, my dear sister lost herself in thought.

Tina had been soaking next to me, but now she raised her hand and said, “Please tell me, Lydia. How do you estimate the enemy forces in the city?”

I need to learn from this fearless streak of hers.

While I reflected on myself, my dear sister dispensed with ridicule and

replied, “As far as we know, our opponent’s major pieces are Crescent Moon, Black Blossom, another apostle called Edith, and a group of church inquisitors. Then there’s Toni Solevino, a traitor to the Nittis, and the armies of Marchesi Carnien and Folonto. They managed to mass-produce watered-down spell-soldiers based on a formula for artificial vampires. And when push comes to shove, they’ll probably send in the spell-soldiers imbued with vestiges of Radiant Shield and Resurrection that we’ve faced before. Have you heard they attacked four southern marchesi and may have killed them for all we know? And while Pisani and Nitti pushed for peace, I think they’re getting cold feet. So if we fight head-on, we’ll be in for a rough time.”

The Lady of the Sword’s levelheaded assessment silenced Tina and me. If she saw things this way, then my dear brother must have shared her opinion.

Then our student council vice president broke her silence: “I understand what we’re up against...but it doesn’t strike me as anything to worry about.”

Tina and I blinked.

“Caren?”

“But...”

The vice president held out her left hand. “Think about it. We have Lydia, me, Tina, Lynne, Lily, and the Leinster maids. And most importantly...” She looked us over as she counted down on her fingers, but she wore a look of unshakable faith in someone who wasn’t here. “We have my brother. We can’t lose.”

I felt a bittersweet taste of defeat, and Tina sank in the bath up to her mouth. My dear brother and Caren might not share blood ties, but their sibling bond couldn’t have been stronger.

Wait. Hang on. Who’s always the first to speak up at times like this?

We turned to my dear sister, but she only smiled and said, “Yes, we’re going to win. But I mean it when I say we were shorthanded, and I’m glad you came. Thanks.”

Our jaws dropped. My dear sister, that strict devotee of the Church of Hogging My Dear Brother, had *thanked* us for interrupting her time with him? Even with Atra and the garrison of maids, she’d had him practically all to

herself.

“Wh-What happened to you, Lydia?!” Tina cried in a panic. “A-Are you sure you didn’t mean, ‘But he and I can handle this without your help’?!”

“D-Dear sister,” I quavered, “has the joy of spending so much time with my dear brother driven you m-mad?!”

My dear sister skewered us with her glare. “Tiny? Lynne?”

We clasped hands as a short shriek escaped us.

The vice president, our most dependable ally in this situation, looked nervous. “Lydia, what did Allen tell you?”

My dear sister, meanwhile, showed no cracks in her composure. “Nothing special,” she replied, with a soft smile. “I’m just being myself. Business as usual.”

None of us spoke. Her mental stability had suffered when we’d lost track of my dear brother during the Algren rebellion—albeit temporarily. It appeared that the Lady of the Sword had made a complete recovery here in the city of water.

After surveying our reactions, she stood and issued a grave warning amid the rising steam clouds.

“I’ll get out ahead of you. Soak a little longer and get properly rested. We’ll finish this fight tomorrow, on Darknessday. Our enemies are powerful, but we can’t afford to lose.”



“So we can’t expect any more reinforcements, then?” I asked.

“Nope,” Lily replied. “We really didn’t count on Atlas offering peace without the rest of the league. I hear Princess Cheryl and her guards are coming to the southern capital, and so is Teto Tijerina with a band of the professor’s students, but they’ll never make it in time. And Celebrim left for the Bazelian border with the venerable mistress.”

Once Lydia had led the girls and Caren away, we had settled down in the courtyard to fill each other in on the latest developments. The other maids

were elsewhere, and Atra was sleeping curled up in her basket.

I had more or less expected Lily's response, but that didn't make it pleasant. According to Stella's letter, Duchess Emerita Leticia "the Emerald Gale" Lebufera, a veteran of the War of the Dark Lord and former lieutenant to the legendary Shooting Star, was advancing into the Atlasian capital. But with the other northern principalities to consider, she would have trouble going much farther.

Lily set down her cup and gave me a serious look across the table. "May I venture an opinion, Allen?" she asked, sounding nothing like her usual self.

"Of course," I replied. I knew how hard Lady Lily Leinster had worked in secret to become a maid despite being the under-duke's eldest daughter, and I trusted her.

"To sum up," she said calmly, "we're at an undeniable disadvantage. We have limited options to turn the tables on a tactical level, and strategically speaking, we've already lost. Shouldn't we at least consider withdrawing from the city?" After a moment, Lily produced a letter and handed it to me. "The mistress and the venerable mistress send word. I came to deliver it."

The back of the envelope bore the unmistakable Leinster seal. So, I had a message from Duchess Emerita Lindsey "Scarlet Heaven" Leinster, the continent's finest sorceress, and Duchess Lisa Leinster, the former Lady of the Sword and one of its mightiest warriors. I forced a grin as I accepted the missive, quickly opened it, and read.

As the maid had said, they counseled retreat. At the end, Lisa had jotted a postscript:

"We defer to your judgment, Allen. Whatever you do, don't undervalue your own life."

I should have expected her to see right through me.

"I consider that a perfectly reasonable opinion," I said, neatly folding the letter and returning it to Lily. "We're cut off in the middle of enemy territory. The forces arrayed against us are powerful, and we only have a hazy idea of their ultimate goal. And worst of all, the self-proclaimed Saint pulling their

strings is a genuine freak of nature.”

“Then—”

“But we can’t retreat,” I continued over Lily’s objection. “The Church of the Holy Spirit poses too great a threat to sit back and observe.”

The maid’s scarlet tresses fluttered in a stiff breeze, and her floral hair clip caught the light. When she spoke, it was in a stiffer tone than I’d heard from her before.

“May I ask you to justify that statement? I am here in my capacity as the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three, not as the under-duke’s eldest daughter. Even... Even if you resolve to stay, I must prioritize the safety of Lady Lydia, Lady Lynne, and Lady Tina Howard.”

Profound relief flooded my heart. No Leinster maid would ever lose sight of what she ought to protect.

I poured a cup of tea, pressed my left hand to my heart, and smiled at the distraught Lily. “Naturally. If worse comes to worst, I’d like you to take everyone and escape. Needless to say, I’ll bring up the rear. Oh, and we baked these yesterday. Please help yourself.”

I transferred several cookies from their bag to a dessert plate and pushed it across the table. But the usually irrepressible Lily remained stone-faced.

“Why go so far?” she asked, gaze lowered. “I don’t believe you would cling to the hope of winning glory as a negotiator. And if you feel a moral duty to defend the city of water, I can’t see why. You’re the kindest person I know, but...but I refuse to let you risk your life here!”

Hearing her analyze me objectively felt a bit embarrassing.

Little birds were flocking to Atra’s basket. Was her elemental power at work? I watched the happily sleeping child as I answered, “I’m just like you.”

Lily looked up and stared at my face. “Like me?” she stammered. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes at any moment.

“I doubt I need to remind you that I’m an orphan,” I said, reaching out to the maid’s eyes with a handkerchief. “I have no blood ties to Caren or to our

parents in the eastern capital. And I had so few friends at the Royal Academy, I could count them on one hand.”

Only three of my classmates had looked on a wolf-clan adoptee without contempt: Lydia Leinster, whom I’d met during the entrance exam; Cheryl Wainwright, whose acquaintance I’d made the next day; and Zelbert Régnier. One more—Niche Nitti—had reached out to me at my graduation ceremony.

“So I remember every kind word spoken to me. And that debt,” I said clearly, straightening Lily’s hair clip while she clasped her hands to her chest, “is more than worth risking my life to repay. Remember what you told me on that hill in the southern capital? ‘Only my mother and Anna rooted for me to become a maid. So I feel like I have to become the best maid there is to repay them!’ I feel the same way about this, Lady Lily Leinster. And I have faith you’ll understand.”

“That... That isn’t playing fair,” Her Highness murmured in a trembling voice, then stood and turned her back on me. “Why must you always...?”

“I’ve come too far to turn back,” I said, striving to sound casual. “Whatever happens, I’ll see this through to the end. And we should be able to learn a lot. But if we do retreat, can I count on you to convince Lydia and the girls?”

After a long moment, Lily sighed. Then she shouted, “Jeez! Jeez, jeez! Honestly, Allen, you never play fair! You’re impossible!” Her fit of pique filled the air with whirling fire flowers. She dried her eyes on her sleeves, spun around on the spot, and finally planted her hands on her hips. “Absolutely not!” she declared at the top of her lungs. “I don’t care what happens—I categorically refuse!”

Then, in a sudden about-face, she spread her skirt in a neat curtsy. “Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three, at your service. I await your orders, Mr. Allen. For your sake, there’s nothing I wouldn’t slice, incinerate, and crush. However!”

I yelped in surprise as Lily abruptly closed in on me. A swift levitation spell saved me from falling but left me staring straight into the maid’s lovely face. My cheeks flushed faintly, and I grew flustered in spite of myself.

“None of this about bringing up the rear! You matter too much for that. If you break this rule, then, let me see...how does becoming my husband sound? I’m

getting sick of my father going on about marriage.”

“You *are* joking, aren’t you?” I asked hesitantly.

“Do *you* think I’m joking? But anyway, I’d still appreciate a clear answer!”

Oh dear. She speaks softly, but I have a feeling she won’t take no for an answer. Must be her Leinster blood.

I touched Lily’s bracelet, invoked a formula to enhance her spell control, and surrendered completely. “I won’t guard the retreat, and I won’t undervalue my life.”

“Much better!” Lily declared, beaming with heartfelt, childlike innocence. “Thank you for the formula. I love it.”

Cheryl used to overrule me like this too, didn’t she? I reflected as Lily set the chairs back in place, smiling every time she touched her bracelet. *Still, she really does seem more at home as a maid than a lady.*

The maid scooped the bag of cookies off the table. “Now, I’ll go take my turn in the bath!” she announced, with a grandiose bow. Under her breath, she added, “And you’d better hug and link mana with *me* next time, okay? It’s not fair that Lydia gets all the attention.”

“Have a nice time,” I replied. “Wait, did you say something just now?”

“Not a thing! Oh, and say something nice about the young ladies’ outfits! I just love how they came out!”

“Y-You don’t say.”

With that baffling remark and a sly grin, Lily flashed her bracelet and went inside with a spring in her step.

Lydia returned at almost the same time, wearing a fresh sword-fighting outfit, although she must have taken time to dry her hair. She stormed over and threw herself into the seat beside me.

“I missed you,” I said.

“Well, I’m back now.” She fixed me with a glare. “What were you and Lily talking about? She seemed awfully happy.”

“We compared what we know,” I replied, pouring a glass of ice water. I had better not mention anything about bringing up the rear. “Did you know Cheryl, Teto, and the rest of our old schoolmates will reach the southern capital soon?”

Lydia immediately made a sour face. She downed the water in one gulp, then sank into thought. “I’ll write to my mother later about— No, she’d send them our way for certain. I’ll advise my father instead. No one invited that scheming princess!”

Atra’s tail shot up with a start, then quickly relaxed.

“Really, now,” I said, refilling the empty glass. “I’d like—”

“What?” Lydia took the glass and rested her chin in one hand, fuming all the while.

“I’d like to see Cheryl’s familiar, Chiffon,” I finished, calmly nibbling on a cookie. “Remember that fluffy belly? Just picture Atra and Anko sound asleep on it.”

“Chiffon can come, then. Teto too,” Her Highness conceded. “Mm.”

I popped a cookie into her open mouth. That would normally have done something to restore her mood, but her ill humor persisted. Had something happened in the bath? She didn’t say, but she did open her mouth again, so I fed her another cookie.

“Where is everyone?” I asked. “Weren’t they with you?”

“I don’t care.” Lydia sulked and started toying with my bracelet.

Less “upset” than “jealous,” I’d say.

“Thank you for waiting, Allen,” my sister called calmly from the house.

“Caren, welcome ba—” was as far as I got before words failed me.

My sister wore not her accustomed Royal Academy uniform but a jacket patterned with interlocking arrows from a far-eastern land and a long skirt in varying shades of purple. She had a floral beret on her head and leather boots on her feet.

The same outfit as Lily?! She did say she “just loved how they came out,” but I

never dreamed...

While I reeled, Tina and Lynne peeked out from behind Caren.

“S-Sir, um...”

“D-Dear brother, well...”

Both young noblewomen wore jacket, skirt, and boot ensembles identical to Caren’s, albeit in different hues. Tina was decked out in shades of azure, and Lynne in red. Perhaps they felt embarrassed, because they were fidgeting and watching my reaction.

Caren strode up with barely a glance at them and demanded, “Now, Allen, tell me what you think.”

“Give... Give me a moment,” I demurred. Then I drained my cup and closed my eyes.

So this is what put Lydia out of sorts. She does hate feeling left out, as much as she tries to hide it.

I set out extra glasses and soon felt strong enough to issue an accusation. “I take it this is your handiwork, Lily?”

A self-satisfied laugh filled the air, and the maid who had supposedly gone to the bath poked her head out from behind a column. “So you found me out!” she cried, looking positively wicked. “Then why try to hide it? Yes! This is all—”

“A certain noblewoman’s scheme to spread her look and hopefully make it the new standard because she can’t seem to get her hands on a maid uniform?” I interrupted.

Lily froze—hardly a common occurrence. Then her lips flapped, and her cheeks colored. “D-Don’t spell it out like that!” she wailed. “I... I’ll never live it down!”

Her standards of shame eluded me.

Beside me, Lydia muttered, “She might as well have made *me* a set while she was at it.”

I would pretend I hadn’t heard that.

“Still, you look charming,” I told the trio once I’d pulled myself together. “Those outfits suit you to a T.”

Tina and Lynne giggled, those expressive locks of their swaying happily.

“Naturally,” Caren said with perfect composure.

Lydia poured a glass of ice water in silence.

My compliments revived Lily. “I knew you’d come through, Allen!” she crowed, with a triumphant laugh.

“But they still don’t look like anything a maid would wear,” I added, pulling the rug out from under her.

She soon ran into the house—in truth, this time—shedding crocodile tears and wailing, “A-Allen, you...you big meanie! I’ll never be *your* maid, you hear!”

Is she trying to murder my reputation?

Atra gave a start and looked groggily at me. I waved to her, and she curled up again, apparently reassured.

“Tina, Lynne, I heard all about the attack on the fortress,” I said, urging the girls to sit down with a look. “You certainly distinguished yourselves in that battle.”

“Y-Yes, sir! I gave it my all!” The platinum-haired young noblewoman beamed.

“We had plenty of help,” her red-haired peer demurred politely. Then she frowned. “But dear brother, this dagger is a bit, well...”

I set glasses in front of my students and sister, then rose from my seat. “Lynne, lend me your dagger,” I said. “You too, Caren.”

“Very well,” Lynne answered nervously and held out the weapon.

“Allen? What are you up to?” Caren asked, looking puzzled.

I accepted the daggers from both of them. “Lydia, would you mind reinforcing the barriers?”

The scarlet-haired noblewoman grunted and carelessly waved her left hand. Seeing the wards gain strength and several fireballs appear as targets, I advanced to the center of the courtyard and slowly unsheathed both daggers.

“S-Sir,” Tina called anxiously, “w-watch out for that dagger.”

“Dear brother, be careful!” Lynne shouted.

A massive serpent of flame uncoiled without warning, poised to soar into the sky. I reined it in. Sealing the flickering inferno into the blade in my right hand, I coated the one in my left in lightning. With a wink to the flabbergasted young noblewomen, I slashed and thrust at the fireballs.

Pseudo-sword blades of fire and lightning instantly took shape, shredding and skewering multiple targets. Tina, Lynne, and Caren jumped and blinked in surprise. The blades had already vanished.

I returned both daggers to their sheaths and called, “Lynne, you first.”

“Y-Yes?!” The red-haired girl stood and eyed me nervously.

“You did wonderfully smashing the fortress’s spires,” I said, moving back to the table and returning her dagger. “But as I just demonstrated, controlling and focusing the mana yields a sharper edge. Start by learning to use it as a longsword. Master that, and you’ll be able to reach even greater heights once the other dagger I asked the dwarves and giants to forge for you arrives. Let’s work on it together.”

“Yes,” Lynne said slowly. Then her cheeks flushed and she nodded vigorously. “Yes, dear brother! I won’t let you down!”

I returned my sister’s weapon next. “Caren, you should aim to push your Lightning Apotheosis even further. Work on concentrating your mana in an instant. You’ll need that to handle the dagger once it gets its edge back.”

“I understand. And, er, Allen...” My sister gave me a pleading look with upturned eyes.

I took the hint and straightened her floral beret. “As promised, when we get back to the royal capital, I’ll give you my old school beret to replace the one you lost.”

“Thanks,” Caren said bashfully while her tail wagged like mad.

Tina’s hand shot into the air with a clatter. “Sir!” she shouted. “Give me a new assignment too!”

“Only one thing to work on, Tina: control,” I replied, recalling a passage from Lisa’s letter.

“Tina’s mana has staggering potential. Still, she has a rather precarious grasp of it.”

“Why?!” the girl demanded as a storm of icy blossoms mirrored her emotions. “I want an assignment like Lynne and Caren!”

“Well...”

Lydia had often voiced the same complaint back when she’d first learned spellcasting. But although the demand brought back fond memories, I was hard-pressed to answer it. The path to magical finesse demanded slow and steady progress—day after day of deploying and dispelling, deploying and dispelling. My former underclassmen at the university must have been about the only people who enjoyed it.

“Don’t whine,” Lydia interjected, rising from her seat. “Anyone can see control is what you lack. Am I wrong?”

Tina bit her lip in frustration. “No,” she admitted and backed down.

I shot a grateful look at the scarlet-haired noblewoman, but her next words caught me off guard: “*You* go get some rest until lunchtime.”

“Uh, Lydia? Pardon?” My voice came out sounding funny. I’d hoped to chat with the girls after this.

When I just stared at Lydia, she thrust her finger at my chest and snapped, “No arguments! Get going!” Under her breath, she added, “I bet you tried to leave us in Lily’s care, didn’t you? Any more of that, and I’ll abduct you and flee the country for real.”

She saw through that, huh?

I scratched my cheek and turned to Caren. She looked worried but nodded, so I levitated Atra’s basket and scooped it up in my arms.

“All right,” I said. “Wake me in time for lunch.”



“Excuse me?” I ventured. “Where is this place?”

I found myself in a large library chamber. Bookshelves covered the walls. Several paintings adorned one section, all of young boys and girls.

Don't tell me...

“Long time no see, Allen of the wolf clan.”

A terrible chill ran down my spine, and I hastily jumped backward with all my might. An invisible blade passed right in front of me. A few hairs from my bangs paid the ultimate price and floated to the floor.

I grimaced and glared daggers at the gorgeous young woman reclining cross-legged on a sofa that hadn't been there a moment ago. She wore small spectacles and sorceress's robes that matched the striking crimson of her long hair. Five hundred years ago, Linaria “Twin Heavens” Etherheart had been the greatest champion of the age of strife and the pinnacle of mortal achievement—history's mightiest sword fighter *and* spellcaster, not to mention a witch.

Atra lay on her lap, sound asleep.

Did her power cause this? Or was it Linaria's ring?

I couldn't explain my situation, but I decided to register a complaint anyway. “I wish you wouldn't attack without warning. Unlike you, I'm just a humble—”

“Yes, yes. Spare me the comedy routine,” she interrupted. “We don't have much time, so hurry up and sit down.”

With a sigh, I lowered myself into an unoccupied chair. “This is a dream, isn't it?”

“It is. But aren't you pleased to get another look at my lovely face? I'm so glad you haven't managed to get my ring off yet.” Linaria chuckled and rested her chin in her hand. “Whenever will you get around to surpassing me?”

I pulled a face. “I'll exercise my right to remain silent. But thank you for Cresset Fox and Silver Bloom. And...” I looked down at the sleeping white-haired child and bowed my head, remembering the battle for the eastern capital. “Please forgive me. I broke my promise to—”

A blast of wind struck my forehead a light but unexpected blow. I looked up

to find Linaria smiling kindly.

“Silly boy,” she said. “Yes, you broke your promise to keep Atra safe, but you also put your life on the line for her. How many mortal vessels do you think the great elementals have stepped in to patch before now? Most importantly, she seems like she’s having the time of her life. And isn’t that all that matters?”

After a moment of stunned silence, I managed, “I’ll do my utmost.” I’d sworn to save Atra and the other great elementals, and I wouldn’t break my word twice.

“Now, let’s cut to the chase,” said the crimson-haired beauty, with an abrupt change of tone. “The way you’re going, you’ll lose—and they’ll take the elementals.”

“Crescent Moon is that strong, then?”

Maybe I really should ask Lily to get everyone to safety.

While I brooded, Linaria gently stroked Atra’s head. “I’m dead. I can’t tell you everything,” she replied. “I’m bending the rules quite a bit already. But you know...” Her earnest gaze pierced me. “The girls whom the key I know kept with him wouldn’t stoop to vampirism. They weren’t that weak.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, taken aback.

Allen the Shooting Star, hero of the War of the Dark Lord, had kept two “cursed children” at his side: Leticia “the Comet” Lebufera and Alicia “Crescent Moon” Coalheart. After he had saved them and lifted their curses, these battle-hardened champions had crossed blades with the Dark Lord and survived. Alicia called herself “Coalfield”—evidently the original bloodline—and her tarnished-silver hair didn’t match the silver-white of her legends, but her behavior left no doubts about her identity. She had even wielded what seemed to be the Dark Lord’s sword.

Am I overlooking something?

Linaria was growing hazy.

“Allen of the wolf clan, the new Shooting Star and the final key. Think, and do the best you can. You already have the answers close to hand. Remember,” she

continued, cradling Atra, “you’re not alone. Have the courage to take the hands reaching out to help you. Self-sacrifice *is* noble, but you need to realize how many people would mourn your death. I tried to do too much alone way back when, so I know what I’m talking about.”

“Thank you,” I said and reached out to take Atra from my precursor.

A storm of ice blossoms and fiery plumes started brewing as the space crumbled.

“Looks like our time’s up.” Linaria chuckled. “You must have a way with the great elementals. Frigid Crane is sulking, and Blazing Qilin seems fond of you too. Yes, I was right about you—and your troubles with women are only getting worse!”

“I wish you’d left off that last bit,” I said. “Maybe jabs like that explain your lousy luck in love while you were alive. I could always cut the dangerous bits out of your diary and publish the rest, you know.”

“What kind of cad threatens a young lady?” Linaria laughed, all the while slowly disintegrating into beads of light just as she had before.

I stood, still holding Atra.

“Tell me one last thing!” I shouted to the officious witch. “Why did you seal the water dragon’s body in the Old Temple?”

“Because I couldn’t stop the rampaging World Tree’s encroachment any other way,” Linaria answered softly as light and icy flowers engulfed everything. “The dragons’ barrier can’t do everything. And I felt bad for the brave, kind, poor principe. He shouldered all the blame without making so much as an excuse to the people he was sworn to protect—all to save the Cornerstone.”

“You mean the two dragons placed a seal on the temple too?!” I exclaimed. “The World Tree encroaching on something? And the principe took all the blame for the Cornerstone? Th-Then, the depths of the Old Temple house—”



When I opened my eyes, my gaze met that of a platinum-haired girl reaching out toward my head. She let out a little gasp and quickly started blushing.

"I-It's not what you think, sir!" she—Tina—protested in a panic. "I... I only came to wake you because lunch is almost ready. A-And I haven't done anything yet! I only t-touched your hair! I didn't try on one of your shirts or anything!"

"We'll go over all the gory details of the crime later," I said, sitting up and looking around.

I recognized the room as part of our hideout. Atra was sleeping like a log beside me—she must have crept into bed sometime after I'd dozed off. Every so often, she smiled slightly and twitched her ears.

Lydia gave me strict orders to get some rest, and then...

"Are the maids making lunch?" I asked Tina.

"No." My highborn pupil folded her arms and sullenly explained, "Lydia got the others together to cook. I offered to help too, but Lily kicked me out. It's deplorable! Not to mention unjustified!"

I recalled a stern warning from the Howards' head maid, Shelley Walker: "Under no circumstances should you ever let Lady Tina prepare food." She must have communicated as much to the Ducal House of Leinster too.

"Hm... I'm sorry to say that a defense will prove difficult," I replied. "You don't have a case."

"Jeez, sir! Why do you have to be so mean?!" Tina threw herself into a bedside chair, pouting harder than ever.

I heard maids cheering in the distance. Perhaps lunch was ready.

"It's been a long time since we talked like this," Tina said softly. "Just the two of us."

"That's true," I replied. "So much has happened."

Under normal circumstances, a new semester would be underway at the Royal Academy, and we would be in the capital, talking often despite our busy schedules. But between the Algren rebellion and the strife that followed, we hadn't found time for a chat like this.

I assigned exercises, but I haven't been much of a tutor, I mocked myself. And

in the meantime, I decided to ask about the exploits Celebrim had relayed to me.

“I hear you managed to cast four advanced ice spells at once.”

“Yes,” Tina said. “And all thanks to you, sir.”

In these days of hand-wringing about magical decline, few even among the students of the Royal Academy managed to master an advanced spell by the time they graduated. And four at once? Unheard of. To top it off, Tina had lacked any magical ability a mere few months earlier. Who could guess what her future held?

“You earned it through hard work,” I demurred. “You’ll surpass me before—”

“No!” the platinum-haired girl shouted without warning.

The sleeping Atra’s eyes snapped open, but then she saw me and closed them again.

“That’s not true,” Tina said, downcast and trembling. “Not true at all.”

“Tina?”

The young noblewoman leaned against the bed and seized my right hand in both of hers. The mark of Frigid Crane flickered on the back of her own right hand. “You gave me magic, sir,” she said, closing her eyes as if in prayer. “Ever since that day we first met, I’ve been walking in your footsteps, trying to catch up to you.” She looked up, her eyes choked with tears. “But I’ll never reach you if that’s all I do! Not ever! I told you before, remember? I want to stand at your side—to be more than just someone you protect.”

Icy flowers swirled through the room. Her appeal carried weight. And I knew what she would say next.

“Ask me to do more for you! Use me more! I know I still have a lot to learn, but at least when it comes to mana, I can hold my own even against Lydia. And as long as I have you with me, I’m not afraid of— Sir? What’s that smile for?” the girl demanded, seeing me fail to suppress a grin.

“Oh, I was just thinking how right the dressing-down I got in my dream turned out to be,” I answered honestly, stroking Atra’s head. “Tina, would you let go of

my hand?”

“Yes, sir.” She released her grip, wilting at what she took for rejection.

I swiftly touched the mark on her hand, using mana to convey my feelings: “I trust you.”

Tina gasped and froze, blushing bright red to her ears. Sensing my words directly and the fact that I’d initiated the touch this time must have embarrassed her. She toppled straight onto the bed, where she hugged Atra and commenced floundering.

“Our enemies this time seem to be far beyond anything I’d imagined,” I told the flustered young noblewoman out loud. “Please lend me your help.”

The girl raised her face from the sheets and got to her feet beside the bed. “Yes,” she said, with a dazzling smile that seemed too mature for her thirteen years. “For you, it will be my pleasure, Allen.”

“Much appreciated, Tina.”

While we smiled at each other, Atra woke up fully and hopped up and down on the bed. “Allen! Linaria!” she cried, shaking her ears and tail with delight.

“Yes, that’s right,” I responded. The witch had said that I had “all the answers close to hand.” That meant the rest was up to us.

Tina’s eyes gleamed with hidden depths of determination.

“I’ll tell you all over lunch,” I said to her, “about a witch who can’t mind her own business.”

Chapter 3

“Okay, open your eyes. You should be fine now.”

I, Stella Howard, smiled at the lady knight from the league whose facial wound I had just cured with a light spell. The young woman touched her cheek with a look of disbelief, then broke down sobbing.

A stir spread through the onlookers—a mix of allied troops, their officers, and surrendered Atlasian soldiers. Murmurs filled the vast tent that had gone up in the partially ruined Fortress of Seven Towers since its fall two days ago.

“My lady saint, thank you. Oh, thank you.”

“She makes advanced healing magic look easy.”

“We have to spread the word.”

“She really is a saint!”

“Praise be to Lady Stella Howard!”

The unlooked-for acclaim bewildered me. I was nothing so special.

Maybe I shouldn't have worn these white clothes Sally gave me.

“Excuse me,” I ventured, “I... I’m really no sa—”

“You lot! Stop bothering Lady Howard!” barked the scarlet-armored Leinster general Earl Tobias Evelyn. “Now, get back to your posts!”

“B-Begging your pardon!” the press of soldiers responded in unison and fled the tent. Earl Evelyn made me a slight bow and followed them out.

It looked like I could take a breather. I didn’t regret my promise to treat all the wounded, friend and foe alike. But I had been at it since morning, and I was starting to tire.

Have I always been this good at healing? Or do the changes I’ve been going through lately have something to do with it? My light spells feel stronger than ever, but my health suffers when I try to use other elements.

As I mused aimlessly, I slipped a sea-green griffin feather out of my pocket—a treasured gift from my magician, Mr. Allen. Just gazing at it restored my strength. What a simple woman I was.

I can't wait to see him again.

The tent flap opened, and in rushed a blonde girl. Ellie, the heir to the Walker family, a long line of Howard retainers, wore her usual uniform as my sister Tina's personal maid. Mr. Allen called her an angel for the way her smile brightened everyone's day.

"You must be exhausted, Lady Stella! I'll get you tea in a jiffy!" cried the lovable maid who had stayed behind for my sake. She was practically a second little sister to me.

"You've been working hard too, Ellie," I said as she busied herself with preparations. "Remember to give yourself a rest. You've been healing the wounded outside, haven't you?"

"Y-Yes'm! But Sida helped me, so I feel fine!"

Sida—a Leinster maid in training and an adherent of the exotic cult of the Great Moon—was temporarily serving as Ellie's assistant.

"I wonder if Tina and the others managed to meet up with Mr. Allen and Lydia," I murmured, resting my hands on the long table.

Ellie set a cup and saucer painted with tiny scarlet birds before me and carefully poured me tea. I took in the foreign aroma so unlike that of northern leaves.

"They say the whole area around the city of water is still blanketed in magical jamming," she said. "Your tea, my lady."

"I see. Would you join me, Ellie?"

"Y-Yes'm."

My sister in all but name sat next to me. Neither of us spoke. I put away my griffin feather, but in my heart, I called, "Mr. Allen."

I heard footsteps, and the tent flap opened again.

“O Stella, Ellie, look not so glum,” said the newcomer. “Remember, the man you love has gone to war.”

Almost divinely beautiful jade-green hair hung about her pointed ears. Thin garments of pale green covered her flawlessly proportioned limbs. Two hundred years ago, during the War of the Dark Lord, Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, had served as lieutenant to the wolf-clan champion Shooting Star. During the recent assault on the fortress, the elven living legend had marched tirelessly from the eastern capital to join the fray and helped to repulse an enemy apostle.

“D-Duchess Leticia, really...” I protested. “‘L-Love’ is a strong word.”

Ellie groaned. “I... I couldn’t dream of...”

We both brought our hands to our cheeks and shook our heads in denial.

Do I love Mr. Al—? No. Stop it, Stella. Don’t follow that train of thought. You don’t want to deny it, of course. But if you put it into words, you won’t be able to stop yourself.



While Ellie and I agonized, the elven beauty took a seat across from us.

“I know I’ve told you to call me ‘Letty,’” she said. “And you needn’t explain. I’m not so boorish that I would stand in the way of a maiden’s love. Even I stood in your place once, you know.”

Pouting, we turned back to face her.

Did I make it that obvious?

Duchess Letty took a small pastry with the air of a seasoned commander. “I deliberated with Lisa, but as I feared, a swift march on the city of water seems doubtful. We can’t spare the griffins. The people of Atlas require provisions, and we suddenly have a far longer front to defend.” The Principality of Atlas’s departure from the league and lightning-quick offer of peace had thrown the Ducal House of Leinster into disarray.

“I hear that the remaining four northern principalities seem dead set on resistance,” I said, relaying what I’d gleaned from prisoners. “And that except for Atlas, all their marches have returned to their principalities from the city of water. I can’t blame Duchess Lisa.”

“I... I hear Felicia has been under a lot of pressure too,” Ellie added. But despite our justifications, we both sounded somber.

The Leinsters couldn’t mount a direct assault anytime soon. Even if Tina’s group reached Mr. Allen, he and Lydia would still face a difficult decision.

Duchess Letty roared with laughter as she poured herself tea. “You don’t seem convinced to me,” she said. “I’m told you refused to set out for the city of water yourselves, but I see that hasn’t stopped you worrying yourselves sick over Allen.”

“Duchess Letty,” I said stiffly.

“I... I wish you wouldn’t put it quite, well, like that,” Ellie murmured.

We believed in Mr. Allen with all our hearts—likely more than he believed in himself. But he was still only mortal. If he kept fighting, he would get hurt. And if...if something happened to him, I would...

“Forgive me.” The elven legend raised her hand slightly. “But fear not. The

Leinsters and Howards won't forget what they owe, and neither will the Lebuferas or the western peoples. We won't allow Allen or the Lady of the Sword to perish."

Ellie and I took a moment to respond. At last, we both settled on "We know." If the kingdom's three ducal houses were debating a solution, then we had no choice but to trust them.

"Still, Alicia 'Crescent Moon' Coalfield and Io 'Black Blossom' Lockfield," Duchess Letty murmured dispassionately as we stared at her. "I would have liked to speak with Caren's party before they set out. Haste may be a virtue in a soldier, but they got a bit too far ahead of themselves. If only they had waited until I returned to camp."

After the fortress fell, Duchess Letty had taken temporary command of all allied forces and advanced on Sets, the Atlasian capital. Thanks to her swift action, the marchese's youngest brother had surrendered without a fight.

"Duchess Letty," I ventured, "has, um, Crescent Moon really fallen and become a vam—"

"Never," the elven champion answered immediately, piercing me with her glare. "Alicia would never show such weakness. Even should she come close, she would strike her own head off first. That's the sort of woman my comrade was."

"B-But Celebrim reported that Allen and Lydia fought her in the city of water," Ellie cut in, despite a nervous tremble. She would never have spoken up in the old days. Was this Mr. Allen's influence at work?

Duchess Letty took a sip of tea and gazed up into the roof of the tent. I saw mourning in her face. "Alicia was strong, and she laid down her life at Blood River because of it," she said, setting down her cup without a sound. "But she would never call herself 'Coalfield.' She loathed the main house that cast her out with every fiber of her being. Some people have lines they would rather die than cross. I trust you can understand that, being heirs to the Howard and Walker names?"

"Yes," we answered slowly. As members of a ducal house and an illustrious line of its supporters, we had been born into bonds that we could never break.

But at the same time, a question occurred to us.

“Then...”

“What does that make the Crescent Moon in the city of water?”

“An impostor. I can think of no other possibility,” Duchess Letty replied.

“Though there may be *some* truth to her.”

We answered her insinuating tone with puzzled looks. But although we waited, Duchess Letty seemed disinclined to say more on the subject just then.

“Don’t dismiss the sorcerer who appeared at the fortress either,” she said. “Black Blossom. Our forebears did murky things in the War of the Dark Lord’s aftermath. Chise and Egon must be fit to tear their hair out. And one other thing: the Shooting Star Brigade, the western houses under the Lebufera banner, and the Howards have broken their camps outside the royal capital.”

Chise Glenbysidhe, the demisprite chieftain and a mighty sorceress, wielded strategic teleportation magic. Egon Io, the valiant chieftain of the dragonfolk, could fill a book with his military achievements. What did Black Blossom have to do with their peoples?

And the state of affairs that Mr. Allen and Lydia’s denunciation had kicked off in the royal capital seemed to be coming to a head.

Duchess Letty touched her chin and grinned. “The western chieftains must be in a rush to fulfill their oaths to Allen. This will make fine training for Leo, whom I left to keep everything in order.” She pondered for a moment. “Mayhap he foresaw this too. Yes, I truly must wed him to the finest daughter of my house!”

“No, you must not!” Ellie and I shot to our feet and shouted in unison. But shame soon caught up with us, and we sank back into our chairs, heads drooping as we tried to make ourselves look small.

Oh, wh-what was I thinking?!

Ellie was blushing as furiously as I must have been.

“Truly, what a wicked fellow.” Duchess Letty chuckled. “Not even *my* Allen was this bad, you know.”

Too ashamed to even meet her gaze, we heaped sugar into our tea to cover

our embarrassment.

I hope you realize you're to blame for this, Mr. Allen. Prepare for a long, long talking-to the next time we meet.

I had just made this private resolution when an anxious voice said, "P-Pardon me."

Into the huge tent stepped a petite young woman wearing a black witch hat. She was dressed like a sorceress and carried a wooden staff. A black cat rode on her shoulder.

"You're..."

"Lady Teto Tijerina and Anko?" Ellie finished for me.

We had met Mr. Allen and Lydia's former university underclassman during the Algren rebellion, at the battle for the royal capital. She studied under the professor and was now temporarily serving in Princess Cheryl's guard, or so I'd heard.

"'Teto' is fine," the girl who certainly didn't *look* older than me answered nervously.

"'T-Teto' it is, then," Ellie said. "Since we both learned from Mr. Allen!"

The girl's eyes widened, and she bashfully lowered the brim of her hat. "Th-Thank you, Ellie."

"Yes'm! You're welcome!"

A friendly mood flowed between the pair. Teto was supposed to be one of Mr. Allen's favorites, so they might get along.

"O Tijerina girl," Duchess Letty cut in wryly, "I believe you had something to tell us?"

The older girl grew flustered, then cleared her throat to compose herself. "The professor instructed us, his students, to act as Her Royal Highness's temporary guard. We planned to travel to the southern capital, but unavoidable circumstances arose, and, well... I had Anko with me, so I came ahead alone. I'll continue to the city of water at once."

Ellie and I stared hard at her.

“What kind of...”

“‘U-Unavoidable circumstances’?”

Duchess Letty gave a short chuckle of understanding.

The tent flap opened, and...

“Mm. I picked her to guide me. Saint Wolf, something sweet, please.”

Time ground to a halt.

The newcomer wore a gold ribbon in her long platinum-blond hair. Her beautiful, doll-like head sat atop a small body dressed in pure-white swordswoman’s attire. An antique sword hung from her waist in a jet-black scabbard.

The Hero, Alice Alvern, had arrived.

Ellie and I leapt to our feet, knocking our chairs over in our surprise.

“A-Alice?!” I cried. “B-But why?!”

The picturesque girl yawned, then folded her arms and narrowed her eyes, swelling with importance. “A Hero’s duty,” she said. “I sensed the most Allen in Witchy Girl. I turned down Princess Sinister—she’s my enemy without a doubt. You there, enemy. I don’t want you either. Are my comrade, Comrade Two, and Caren in the city of water?”

“U-Umm...” I fumbled for a response. Alice viewed all large-breasted women with hostility and felt a kinship with Tina and Lynne.

“Oh, h-how could you say that?!” Ellie wailed, on the verge of tears.

Teto murmured, “‘The most’?” and giggled, clenching her fists.

Duchess Letty cut straight to the point. “Are matters in the city of water so pressing, O Hero of the present age?”

“Will you come too, Lady of Wind?” the lovely girl asked casually, scooping Anko off Teto’s shoulder. “To put an end to a poor false fiend?”

“I plan to. My Allen and Alicia would want that.”

“Mm.”

They both squinted sorrowfully.

“False”? Then “Crescent Moon” really is—

Alice turned to Ellie and me. “You get ready too, Saint Wolf, Last Daughter of the Tree Wardens. I’m sure Allen will need your help once this is over, and my intuition is never wrong. That’s the kind of situation we’re dealing with.”



“Do you have *any* appreciation of our predicament, Allen of the wolf clan?!” Niche demanded. “It’s a bit late in the game for stargazing!”

He had reached our hideaway as Lightday drew toward evening, trailed by a young woman with hair of the palest orange. She was currently staring out the window at the courtyard in utter confusion. Outside, Lydia, the girls, Caren, and Lily—with Atra riding on her shoulders—were running vast astronomical simulations using an array of spell formulae.

I ran my eyes over Niccolò’s latest translation from the note. “We need these calculations,” I said, waving my left hand, “to figure out what the church is after.”

The Church of the Holy Spirit was fixated on Darknessday—tomorrow. And Linaria had warned me that “the dragons’ barrier can’t do everything.” Putting together all the information I’d gathered so far, I had arrived at a hypothesis:

Something known as the “Cornerstone” had slumbered beneath the Old Temple. The last prince had done *something* to it—and sent one of the descendants of the World Tree that we called Great Trees into a berserk rampage. It had destroyed the old city. The two dragons had erected a barrier to prevent it from overrunning the new city as well. But then something had happened to breach the seal, so Linaria had laid the water dragon’s corpse back to rest.

If I had it right, then some factor triggered the dragons’ barrier to fail almost completely. That left the question of how to identify it. However...

I passed Niccolò’s partial decryption of Duchess Rosa’s memo to Niche. I had

yet to tell him who'd written it.

"Five hundred years ago, during the age of strife, the sun once vanished from the sky over the city of water," I said. "I'm having them verify whether the same phenomenon will occur tomorrow."

Both man and woman gaped at me.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What?"

I traced the deciphered text with my finger, projecting it into the air.

"That day, when the sun hid, the water and flower dragons' seal lost nearly all its force. I wonder, if I come back to the city of water the next time it weakens, could I cross the other two barriers and meet the Cornerstone?"

Three barriers apparently guarded the Cornerstone that the church sought. And the dragons' barrier faded on days when the sun hid. Once we found out whether that would happen tomorrow, we could take the initiative. Where would I be if my partner, my students, my sister, and a certain would-be maid weren't so capable?

"We're short on time, so I'll ask you to introduce your companion," I said, with a rueful grin at Niche, who'd made no move to sit. "Oh, and I asked Niccolò and Tuna to investigate something for me. In all seriousness, would you mind if I recommended them to Duke Leinster?"

The young man pulled a sour face, refusing to play along with my small talk. "Donna Roa Rondoiro," he said.

"Allen, private tutor," I responded. "In the courtyard, you can see the Lady of the Sword. And with her, my students, my sister, and a Leinster maid, all of whom just arrived from the Fortress of Seven Towers."

The noblewoman fluttered her long eyelashes and turned to Niche like a stiff-jointed doll. Her eyes said, "Tell me he's joking."

"It's probably true," the young man spat, glaring at me. "Don't ask his students' names if you value your mental health—"

"Don't pitch a fit over every little thing," Lydia interrupted, reentering the

room alone and sitting gracefully beside me. “Now stop dithering and state your business.”

I shot a glance at the scarlet-haired young woman, but she wore her composed going-out face.

Niche took several deep breaths, then said with difficulty, “We know when the Committee of Thirteen will reconvene. It meets in the central assembly hall at noon tomorrow.”

So like it or not, this is our last day to act.

I gave the Nitti heir my heartfelt gratitude.

“But why hold it at all?” I asked. “Unless the situation changes, only the doge, his deputy, the northern Marchese Atlas, and the southern Marchesi Carnien and Folonto will attend. It seems like a formality.”

“It shows how little they think of us! No one will attend, for all I know!”

The resumption of far-reaching magical jamming confirmed that Black Blossom had returned to the city. In which case, Crescent Moon had presumably done the same.

“Donna Rondoiro,” I said.

“Roa,” replied the orange-haired woman. “Don’t bother with ceremony.”

I recalled Saki’s dossier. She had written that “Donna Roa Rondoiro’s talents amply qualify her to succeed as marchesa in the near future.” So, I had a gifted woman to deal with.

“Roa, then,” I said. “Would you tell me your impressions of Carlyle and Carlotta Carnien?”

“Why?” the noblewoman asked, eyes awash in suspicion. “It hardly seems necessary.”

“Because all my sources paint Carlyle as highly capable,” I replied, explaining what I’d learned from records.

The league’s institutions surpassed those of the Wainwright Kingdom in a number of ways. They allowed anyone of talent to climb their ranks. Even the

houseless and the beastfolk were no exception. However, no one could marry into a marchese's family without some form of backing.

"And yet," I concluded, "he resorted to crude force in his attack on the Water Dragon Inn. The same goes for his response to Marchesa Rondoiro and her southern compatriots. He almost seems to be rushing for some reason."

The man's career offered precious little that might give me a window into his past self. I doubted that he had come from high birth, even by the league's standards.

After a brief wait, the noblewoman began to speak.

"People have had high hopes for Carlyle since his school days. Some even whispered that he would shoulder the league's future alongside Niche Nitti. Carlotta was a cheerful girl, fond of flowers and history. Of course, I lost touch with them after the Academy of Magic."

I nodded and jotted down her words.

So, a marchese's daughter with a passion for flowers and history.

"First things first," I said. "I suspect that Carlyle doesn't spare a thought for the league, the city, the people who live here, or even the influence this power struggle can bring him. He has only one thing on his mind." When I'd laid out Carlyle's whole career, I'd noticed a point at which his motivations clearly changed. I looked Niche and Roa in the eyes. "Curing Carlotta Carnien's illness. Every action he takes is aimed at that single goal."

The two aristocrats looked shaken.

"It can't be," Niche groaned.

"Impossible," Roa nearly shrieked.

They might understand such behavior in an ordinary person, but Carlyle was the marchese of Carnien. Who would suspect that he would willingly lose his country for the sake of his wife?

"The marchesi of the league live for its people," Roa murmured, clutching the arms of her chair for support. "My grandmother taught me that all of us born into ruling houses hold that as a point of pride. But to save his ailing wife,

he offered the nation—the people—to the church on a silver platter?! That... That can't possibly—”

“Oh? Have you forgotten recent history?” Lydia interrupted. “Or were Marchesi Atlas and Bazel thinking of the people when they abandoned them and fled to the city of water?”

Roa fell silent and hung her head in the face of this merciless reminder.

Power always rots. The kingdom's ducal houses had staved off corruption despite the military might they possessed, but they were the exception that proved the rule.

“No doubt he was a gifted student,” I continued, with a glance at Niche's scowl. “And he remained capable after succeeding to his title. But we know nothing about his past before that.”

Despite Saki, Cindy, and their fellow maids' best efforts, Carlyle's early life remained a blank. Their report noted that “records may have been purged”—a suspicious fact by any measure.

“I also read up on the previous Marchese Carnien. He apparently searched for a man of suitable birth to receive his only daughter's hand in marriage. After meeting Carlyle, however, he dropped the issue.”

The former marchese had set considerable store by history and lineage. Would he really have entrusted his daughter to Carlyle, no matter how promising the young man had seemed?

“And so, I'd like to ask you, Roa,” I continued, looking the frozen, orange-haired woman straight in the eye. “You attended school with Carlyle, and you knew Carlotta. Apart from your peers, Fossi Folonto, and a few old retainers, only you can tell me about them.”

Silence followed. Then the young woman let out a deep sigh and said, “Niche, I have some idea why meeting this fellow in the royal capital made such an impression on you. The Lady of Light was bad enough on her own, but the world must be bigger than I thought.”

Niche snorted and glared at me.

I'd better not bring up Cheryl, I thought, prompting Roa with a look.

“Carlyle was adopted by a noble from the commonwealth who fell from grace during a war with the Thirteen Free Cities,” she began slowly. “They fled here in utmost secrecy, so I doubt any records survive. I heard his adoptive father gave him a strict upbringing and beat him while repeating that he would ‘be the principe one day.’ Also that his father passed away around the time he entered the academy.”

“Principe?” I asked. “Not marchese?”

Then does Carlyle know something of the city’s secret history?

“I admit that I was closer to him than anyone else during part of our time at the school,” Roa admitted, staring at the floor. “But I don’t think he completely opened up to me. He—Carlyle—was always alone.”

The principi had once ruled the League of Principalities. Only three houses were now known to carry on their bloodline: the Pisanis, the Nittis, and one more family whose name had been lost to history.

“But he changed after marrying Donna Carlotta Carnien?” I asked, returning my thoughts to the conversation at hand.

Roa nodded with a fleeting smile. “They invited me to their house on a hill outside the city just once before Carlotta fell ill,” she said, squinting at the heated debate the girls had gotten into in the courtyard. “She gushed that it would be their ‘promised garden’ once they finished it, and he nestled close to her with such a tender look in his eyes. I almost didn’t recognize him. For the first time, I realized that he’d never shown me his real self. And at the same time, that I truly...”

Quiet sobs slipped into the room. Lydia gave my left sleeve a reproving tug.

“Thank you. You’ve told us enough,” I said to Roa. “Forgive me.”

“No need,” she murmured.

I felt a pang of guilt, but also newfound certainty. Carlyle Carnien was unfit to hold his title. Yet he did have courage. He wouldn’t hesitate to throw away his own life for the person who had saved him.

And a “promised garden,” huh?

I raised my hands slightly and turned to the blue-haired young man. “Niche, could I speak with Carlyle in person?”

“I already wrote to him,” Niche replied. “He’s no fool—there’s a nonzero chance that he’ll change his mind at the eleventh hour.” He hesitated. “I gave him your name to expedite negotiations. We’re done here.”

And with that, Niche made for the door.

Roa nodded to Lydia and me, murmured, “I’ll do all I can,” and followed him.

“One last thing,” I called after Niche as he opened the door, on the point of stepping out into the corridor. “Would you leave the country with Niccolò and Tuna? You still have time.”

The young man froze, then looked over his shoulder at me. “What did you do in the eastern capital, Allen of the wolf clan?” he asked, flashing a grin so slight I almost missed it. “You knew the odds were against you—no one better. But you still ran into the jaws of death with the royal guard, determined to save besieged beastfolk. There’s your answer!”

The door slammed shut.

He got the better of me that time. I didn’t expect Niche to know how I acted in the eastern capital. He’ll never run now.

“Niccolò, Tuna,” I called, watching Lydia’s smirk out of the corner of my eye.

“Y-Yes?!” the boy responded from his hiding spot behind a tree.

“W-We beg your pardon,” added the elven maid, hurrying into the room with him.

“Tomorrow, this city will become a war zone,” I said, unruffled. “Before the night is up, you should—”

“We’re staying,” Niccolò interrupted, meeting my gaze squarely, back straight and hand on his heart. His refusal left no room for doubt. The lovely elf waiting a pace behind him had tears in her eyes. “I may not amount to much, but my name is Niccolò Nitti. I have a duty to defend the city of water. So I’ll get back to working out that note. Let’s go, Tuna!”

“P-Please excuse us.”

The door closed again, and silence fell over the room.

“What am I going to do with those brothers?” I grumbled, hand on my head.
“Why do they have to be so stubborn?!”

“You’re the last person I want to hear complain about *that*. Show some self-awareness!” Lydia snapped, prodding my cheek.

I groaned.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the church wanted Niccolò. It fell to us to keep him out of their clutches.

“Sir!” Tina’s lively shout burst in on us. “Are you done talking?! We figured out something you’ll want to see!”

I exchanged nods with Lydia, then started walking toward the courtyard. I would give my all, no matter how many bloodcurdling monsters stood in our way.



“Ah, that feels *divine*. You’re so good at this, Lynne.”

“Don’t fall asleep now, Tina. We agreed to take turns,” I reminded the drowsy Miss First Place as I ran a brush through her pretty platinum tresses. We had taken a bath after dinner and returned to our room early in preparation for the morrow. Now Tina, Caren, Lily, and I were all dressed for bed and doing each other’s hair.

My dear sister sat by the window in her white nightgown, quietly flipping through the data we’d gathered earlier in the day. When I thought of what she’d been doing all this time, I couldn’t help feeling that she’d been rather unfair.

On a nearby sofa, Lily combed Caren’s lustrous silver-gray locks. “What silky hair you have, Miss Caren!” she giggled. “It feels so nice and smooth.”

“Thank y— Ah! L-Lily, not the ear— Eek! Only Allen gets to touch—”

I felt embarrassed just listening to them. And so, apparently, did Tina. She

covered her mouth with her hand and kept stealing quick glances at the pair. In Ellie's absence, it fell to me to protect her.

"That's quite enough, Lily!" I snapped.

"Okay!" My cousin released the breathless Caren and promptly set about preparing tea. The sheer material of her pale-scarlet nightgown seemed to emphasize the twin peaks of her breasts.

Someone ought to regulate those lethal weapons.

Tina glared vengefully at Lily's bosom. I passed her the brush and took my turn in the chair.

"Don't get carried away," my dear sister said without looking up from the papers she was reading. "Too much fooling around will come back to bite you tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," Tina and I responded together.

"I... I know," Caren gasped, still catching her breath.

"Just leave everything to me!" Lily chimed in.

A crescent moon and comet hung in the sky beyond the large windows. The city seemed at peace. I found it hard to believe that tomorrow, a battle fought here would sway the outcome of this Southern War.

While my cousin served us all tea, my dear sister laid her papers on a round table and said, "Lily, show me a map of the city."

"You got it!" Having placed the last teacup, my cousin climbed onto a bed and waved her left hand while clutching a cushion. A large projection of the city appeared in the center of the room.

"I'll go over the terrain," my dear sister continued. "Cram it into your heads before tonight is out."

"Right!" Tina, Caren, and I straightened our backs and nodded in unison.

In the north lay the old city, where the Nittis had kept their archive. Proceeding from there along the Grand Canal, which bisected the city from north to south, we came to the Isle of the Brave, the Grand Library, Seven

Dragons Plaza, Cat Alley, the Old Temple, the great assembly hall, The Cat Parting the Seas, and finally the Water Dragon Inn in the extreme south. My dear sister's dainty finger tapped a northerly district.

"We're currently here, on Cat Alley, home to the city's beastfolk," she said, light glinting off the brand-new pendant hanging from her neck. "And we'll settle this battle on the central island—the literal core of the league, where the Old Temple and the assembly hall stand. Keep hold of this island, and nothing else matters—is what I'd think if I were the enemy commander."

"And from our perspective, it's also an easy place to secure a foothold," Caren added, taking up the explanation. A fine silver chain circled her neck—my dear brother had given her a pendant too.

If only we could all be so lucky.

"The city of water is built of waterways and bridges, with few open spaces in between," the wolf-clan girl continued, oblivious to Tina's and my stares. "The largest are the Isle of the Brave in the north, the Plaza of Atonement in front of the Old Temple, and the massive bridge on the island just before the central one. We expect the enemy to easily outnumber us, so we want to hit them with some serious firepower. And I'd say this is just the place to do it."

My dear sister's lips curled in an icy grin. "We can ignore the league's forces—they've been reduced to an army in name only," the Lady of the Sword pronounced with all the overwhelming confidence her reputation merited. "It's those revolting minions of the church we have to worry about! And if we got our astronomical predictions right today..."

The map vanished in an instant, replaced by projections of a clock and the moon's path. At a certain time, it would overlap with the sun.

"Sunlight will fail completely at noon tomorrow. And they plan to do something in the Old Temple when it does. Old ritual magic, I suppose. An apostle let slip something about a 'sacrifice' during an attack, which would explain why they want Niccolò."

Lunar and solar eclipses often served as keys to ritual magic in fairy tales, but I'd never seen such a thing in reality.

“Dear sister, shouldn’t we spirit Niche and Niccolò out of the city?” I asked. “These so-called ‘apostles’ use blood to activate taboo spells in every battle they fight.”

“I agree with Lynne,” Tina said. “Helping them escape would at least throw a wrench in the church’s plans!”

If we acted now, we could still get the brothers out in time. But my dear sister shook her head and fixed Tina and me with a stern look.

“Allen suggested the same thing,” she said. “But we can’t. Never forget, Lynne and Tiny: anyone born into a house called ‘noble’ has a duty to save their people before themselves. The House of Nitti preserves the blood of the principi into the modern day. Suppose its sons flee the city just ahead of a looming disaster. Do *you* think the people would go on respecting a family like that? Cowardice can be a sin. So be bold. But not reckless—that never helps anyone.”

She wasn’t scolding us, yet my skin prickled with nervous tension. Tina must have felt the same because that lock of her hair was standing at attention.

“We understand!” we responded in unison, gripping the sleeves of our nightgowns with renewed determination.

“Where would we send them, anyway?” Lily chimed in, dishing out pastries onto small plates. “Black Blossom uses teleportation magic, so unless you can solve that problem, I bet getting them out of the city won’t do much good.”

“So they’ll be safest with us,” Caren mused. “Do you think Niche Nitti thought that far ahead?”

My dear sister ostentatiously fished a cookie out of a little cloth bag. If Saki and Cindy were to be believed, my dear brother had made the dough himself.

“Who knows?” she replied. “But Allen’s set on protecting them, so what choice do we have?”

“True,” we all admitted.

If that’s what my dear brother wants, who are we to argue?!

While I got myself fired up, Tina approached my dear sister. “Agreed on all

counts,” she said. “But that aside, Lydia, would you share those cookies with —?”

No sooner did Miss First Place come within arm’s reach than she suddenly fell silent.

“What’s wrong? Why the weird face?” my dear sister asked, puzzled.

“Tina?” I said.

“What is it?” added Caren.

Tina spun around and beckoned us with a serious look on her face. “Lynne, Caren, come here! Lily, you can stay where you are!”

“You mean you’re leaving me out?” my cousin whined.

My dear sister still looked nonplussed as she bit into her cookie. Then a look of joy spread across her face.

Caren and I approached Tina, still not sure what to make of all this. The platinum-haired girl motioned us even closer to my dear sister. What in the world did she—?

Caren and I stared hard into my dear sister’s face.

“Wh-What’s gotten into you all?” she asked.

I can’t help feeling that there’s something deeply unfair about how lovely even her confused face looks. But that hardly matters now!

The three of us huddled for a whispered conference.

“Well, Lynne?” Tina demanded.

“She smells like my dear brother,” I said. “Caren?”

“I smell Allen’s soap and shampoo,” Caren replied. “And if she washed with something different than she uses during the day...”

All together, we raised our voices to deliver our verdict:

“Guilty!”

It’s not fair. Why can’t I use his soap and shampoo too?!

I glared at my dear sister with all the force of my jealousy and protest. She

crossed her arms. Under normal circumstances, she would take offense. However...

“Don’t be silly. Have you forgotten he’s mine? We settled that a long time ago.”

She merely flaunted her overwhelming confidence.

Dear sister, did he give you more than a pendant?! Did he tell you something too?!

Tina glanced at me. “Lynne.”

“Yes,” I said. “Caren?”

“Once in a while couldn’t hurt,” she replied.

Icy blossoms, sparks of flame, and crackling electricity began to whirl through the room as we sank into fighting stances. Saki had erected quite a powerful barrier; we could let loose a little without fear of anything leaking out.

Yet my dear sister maintained her good humor. A taunting wave of her right hand seemed to say, “What are you waiting for? Do your worst.”

I’ll make her regret that!

We tensed to strike. Then our mana vanished in an instant as Lily intervened.

Was that my dear brother’s magical interference?!

“No fighting now, girls,” she lilted. “Oh, but you know...”

Lily was sitting on a bed, holding a cushion, but her smile had an edge to it.

I mustn’t forget—she’s a Leinster too. She can even make a fool of my dear sister sometimes. And worst of all, she gets along bizarrely well with my dear brother!

“Lady Tina got an azure ribbon,” my older cousin continued. “Lady Lynne got that fire-serpent dagger. Miss Caren got a dagger *and* a pendant. And Lady Lydia has her pocket watch. But except for her, my bracelet makes *me* the only one with a matching accessory I can keep on me all the time.”

“Guilty again!” Tina, Caren, and I shouted, declaring war on a new enemy.

No quarter for Lily!

But my dear sister, who would ordinarily join the fray, retained her composure. “I won’t get jealous over a little thing like that,” she said. “I have a generous disposition.”

All four of us fell silent in spite of ourselves. Was I imagining things, or had she achieved an unprecedented level of mental stability?

We were still grappling for a response when the door opened and a little girl with long white hair burst in. She made straight for a bed, clambered onto it, and launched into a cheerful song.

Tina and I let out gasps of surprise.

“What’s gotten into you?” asked my dear sister.

“Can I help you, Miss Atra?” Lily added.

Only Caren expressed no curiosity. But the child simply wagged her tail in delight.

Then came a reserved knock on the open door, and my dear brother’s gentle voice graced my ears: “Excuse me. Is Atra in there?”

I felt my blood turn hot as I hastily pulled on a jacket and tidied my hair with my hands.

Honestly, Tina! Could you have picked a worse time to stop in the middle of brushing it?!

And in the meantime...

“She sure is!” my cousin-turned-maid chirped, making for the door in nothing but her sheer nightgown.

“Lily!” my dear sister snapped.

“H-Have you no shame?!” Tina cried.

“I’ll strip you of your rank in the maid corps!” I shouted as the three of us restrained my cousin, pinioning her arms from behind.

Caren, who had *not* neglected to put on her jacket, picked up the child and carried her to the door. “We have Atra right here, Allen.”

My dear brother poked his head in. He wore faded black pajamas and had seemingly come fresh from the bath. My heart beat faster, and I felt too flustered to speak. Even my dear sister and Lily appeared similarly affected. Tina went without saying.

“Saki and Cindy gave her a bath, and Niccolò was nice enough to play with her afterward,” my dear brother explained, “but it looks like she got overexcited. She’s really taken to him.”

“Oh, so that’s what happened.” Caren nodded and gave him a casual shove on the back. “Let’s get going, then. Atra seems sleepy.”



“Good idea. Thank you all again for your help today, and don’t stay up too late. I’ll see you in the morning,” my dear brother said and closed the door—leaving us behind with our mouths hanging open. It had all played out so naturally.

“I hate to admit it,” Lily said brightly, filling her teacup to the brim, “but it looks like tonight’s victory goes to Caren!”

“Lily,” my dear sister growled.

“Guilty! That’s the third conviction tonight!” Tina and I cried, and all three of us pounced on my older cousin.



Midnight found me off to one side of my bedroom in the hideaway, still working out tactics to counter Crescent Moon. On the bed, the needy Caren and adorable Atra slept soundly in each other’s arms. Every so often, one of them would mumble what sounded like my name and let out a little giggle. I reached out and tousled their hair while I projected my estimates of the opposing forces in the air.

Our side had Lydia and me. I would also call on Caren, Tina, and Lynne, and not even I could measure up to Lily when it came to fighting solo. Saki and Cindy were not to be underestimated, and all the Leinster maids knew their way around a battlefield. But even if we all pooled our strength, we would be hard-pressed to stand against Crescent Moon’s might. And that failed to account for her fellow apostles Black Blossom and Edith, along with the inquisitors, spell-soldiers, and hawkish forces of the league. If we hoped to tip the scales in our favor, then...

“I guess I’ll have to take Linaria’s hint and turn to the great elementals for help,” I murmured, deploying an incomplete spell formula to ponder. In theory, it could work. The problem was that I would need to link my mana to Lydia’s *and* Tina’s on a profound level. And even that might not be enough.

I heard a faint knock. Pulling on my robe, I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

“Saki, Cindy,” I said, “is anything the matter?”

There stood the maids responsible for the hideout's security. Cindy wore her milk-white hair tied up on one side. Lily's handiwork, perhaps?

Both bowed slightly, and Saki said, "Mr. Allen, you have a visitor."

"Over there," Cindy added, gesturing farther down the hallway.

A white-haired and -bearded gentleman—Paolo Solevino, an old Nitti retainer—bowed deeply.

"You wanted to see me?" I asked. "Did Niche give you a message?"

"Marchesi Carnien and Folonto will agree to talks," Paolo replied, "on the condition that you offer your opinion on Carlotta Carnien's symptoms and treatment. If they find your advice effective, both of their principalities will withdraw from tomorrow's hostilities. They will also provide an ancient book in Old Imperial, which the House of Carnien has long kept under lock and key, and turn against the Church of the Holy Spirit."

So, Carnien and Folonto would go over to the doves at the crucial moment.

"Where and when?" I asked.

"A Carnien villa on the city's outskirts, and before tonight is out. Don Niche will attend as well."

It seemed that Carlyle really had joined forces with the church purely to save his ailing wife. Had he dragged his ally Folonto along with him?

"Mr. Allen, may I venture an opinion?" Saki asked.

Our eyes met. I saw pure concern in her gaze—and in Cindy's. I gestured for her to continue.

"I understand that you trust Don Niche," she said emphatically. "But please, don't go to this meeting tonight. It *must* be a trap! If anything were to happen to you..."

These two maids had done so much for me since I'd come to this city.

"Thank you," I said with a heavy heart. "But I plan to go. If their offer is genuine, it will tip the odds in our favor tomorrow. And Niche must have run considerable risks to arrange this meeting. I can't stand him up."

“But—”

“Okay, then! I’ll tag along as your bodyguard!” The milky-haired maid raised her hand, cutting off her bird-clan colleague. This pair was at least as close as any blood sisters. They must have already decided who would accompany me to the meeting if I decided to go.

“I’d really rather you both stay to keep this house safe,” I said.

“I cannot consent to your going without a guard,” replied Saki.

“Mr. Allen,” Cindy added, “you’re a ‘star,’ and we can’t let our stars fall!”

The maids held their ground.

Oh dear.

Sure enough, I sensed movement in the room. Caren emerged wearing a cape.

“I heard everything, Allen,” she said. “Your guard will be—”

“Us!”

We all gave a start as someone seized my shoulders from behind. A bracelet just like mine gleamed on their left wrist.

“Lily,” I groaned on behalf of the stunned Saki, Cindy, and Caren, “when did you—? Don’t tell me you learned Black Cat Promenade *already*?”

She laughed. “You bet I did!”

Apparently, the notes I’d entrusted to Celebrim just a few days earlier had been all Lily needed to get the hang of tactical teleportation. In terms of raw magical talent, she easily made the top five of the whole Leinster faction. And yet she’d set her heart on becoming a maid. I could only imagine the depths of the under-duke’s anxiety.

“Now, what do you say?” the maid pressed. “Don’t worry—your big sister will protect you.” She had already changed into everyday clothes and looked quite mature in profile.

“Allen?” my sister asked sharply, getting over her surprise.

“We all must bow to the inevitable sometimes, Caren,” I replied in my own

defense.

I heard light feet bounding across the floor. Then, “Allen!”

“Whoa there!” I exclaimed as the white-haired child scampered up to me, lamentably as wide awake as the rest of us.

I gave Lily a look, signaling her to let go of me so I could pick up Atra. The child nuzzled my cheek affectionately and twitched her ears and tail. The mood relaxed, and smiles spread over all of our faces.

Atra, meanwhile, stared all around...and then pointed down the hallway. With a clink of my bracelet, I dismantled a perception-blocking spell so well executed that I couldn't help admiring it. There stood a boy with pale-blue hair and a maid with elven blood, both looking strained.

No sooner had the boy run up to me than he cried, “Please, Allen! Take me with you! I think I can diagnose her symptoms!”

“I beg you as well!” the girl joined in, bowing alongside her master. “Please grant us your leave!”

“Well...” I wavered.

Paolo, who had been waiting patiently all this time, seemed taken aback by his adopted niece's behavior.

While I considered how to respond, a bold girl's voice rang out: “I'll go with you!” A platinum-haired young noblewoman peeked out of her hiding place in the hallway, then sprinted around in front of me and clasped her left hand to her chest. “I can read a little Old Imperial too, sir!”

“You too, Tina?” I groaned, at my wit's end. Then I suddenly recalled a lesson from my father's youthful travels all over the continent.

“Allen,” he had said, “never take all your goods into what might be the path of a raging flower dragon. Always remember to distribute risks.”

Negotiations would probably proceed more smoothly if Niche and I went to the meeting alone. But one look at everyone's faces told me that none of them would agree to any such thing. In which case...

“Lily, Caren, and Tina will go to the meeting,” a new voice interjected.

“Niccolò and Tuna too. Saki and Cindy, you stay here.”

We all turned to the far end of the corridor, where a young woman with short scarlet hair stood with her arms folded, wearing a cardigan. I had known she was listening, of course.

The mood changed completely. Saki and Cindy fell back, while Tina, Caren, and Lily bumped fists.

Lydia glanced at Niccolò and his maid, then strode up to me and held out her hand. Her unspoken demand was clear: “Deepen our mana link!” The flames of emotion blazing behind her eyes would brook no refusal.

I suppose I have no choice.

I passed Atra to Cindy—the child had fallen asleep again—and took Lydia’s hand. Powerful emotions flooded into me as my bond with the scarlet-haired young woman deepened, but she gave no sign of them as she instructed my companions.

“Caren, Lily, retreat the moment you detect danger, even if you have to knock him out to do it. Tiny, you’d better not get in the way.”

“I understand,” my sister said.

“You got it!” chirped the maid.

“O-Of course I won’t!” Tina fumed.

I would have liked to protest, but I held my tongue. Lydia was already making all the concessions she could stand.

I pulled out a sheet of notepaper and passed it to the bird-clan maid. “Saki, see that Zig gets this,” I said. “Tell him it’s urgent.”

“Certainly, sir,” the beauty replied. “Please, take care.”

I returned her slight bow, then addressed the milky-haired maid with a child on her back. “Cindy, please look after Atra for me.”

“You bet I will,” she answered. “And remember, Mr. Allen, don’t try anything reckless.”

I raised my left hand and nodded. I didn’t plan to push my luck.

Without warning, Lydia took out her pocket watch and pressed it into my hand. “Take this again. The amulet your father put in mine still works. I’ll hold on to yours instead.” Under her breath, she added, “If you do anything risky, I’m going to be *furios*.”

I handed her my own watch and whispered in her ear, “I promise I’ll clear this up by the day after tomorrow, in time for your birthday. Are we still going to the Old Temple?”

“Yes,” she murmured, and we exchanged nods.

Then I surveyed Tina, Caren, and Lily. “Hurry up and change your clothes. Paolo, I hope you’ll show us the way.”



The elderly hotel manager led us to a mansion on a hill just outside the city. Another old man, who introduced himself as a servant to the House of Carnien, met us at the door and showed us inside. No sooner had we crossed the threshold than we found a sour-faced young man leaning against a wall and waiting for us. He wore a wand at his hip.

“Thank you for waiting, Niche,” I said.

The young man in formal dress glanced at my companions. His frown deepened when he saw his younger brother standing frozen.

“Come with me,” he spat. “We haven’t much time. Paolo, secure the entrance.”

“Yes, sir!”

Niche turned and set off down the corridor without waiting for my answer. I signaled to my companions with my eyes, and we followed him. Just in case we were walking into an ambush, I kept in the lead. Lily brought up the rear.

Fortunately, we reached the room at the end of the passage unmolested.

The old retainer knocked softly and said, “Master, your guests have arrived.”

After a short pause, a voice answered from within the room. “Enter,” it said, exuding unmistakable anguish.

The old servant opened the door and motioned for us to enter, so I nodded and complied. The door closed behind us.

The room seemed plain. Its furnishings consisted almost entirely of a massive canopied bed and several wooden chairs. Large glass panes filled the window. A well-dressed young man with dirty-blond hair sat on a chair beside the bed, and a burly man in white armor with a longsword on his belt leaned against the wall by the window, glaring daggers at us.

“Fossi Folonto,” Niche murmured.

Lily, Caren, and Tuna assumed combat stances. Even Tina gripped her rod.

“I believe we met at the Water Dragon Inn,” I addressed the man in the chair. “I’m Allen of the wolf clan.”

“Carlyle Carnien,” he answered in a heavy, exhausted voice. “This man is my sworn friend, Marchese Fossi Folonto. The church’s agents will take no part in this discussion. They’re all in the Old Temple.”

He raised his head, and I heard Niccolò gasp behind me. The marchese’s cheeks were hollow, and large dark circles had formed under his eyes.

I nodded. “I hate to rush matters, but may we confirm your wife’s symptoms? Don Niccolò and I will approach her bed, and Tuna Solevino will take her pulse.”

“As you please. I’d also like you to consult my record of her illness. Here it is.” Carlyle placed a slim book on a table, making no attempt to conceal the pain that suffused his expression.

“Nick, if you would. Tuna, give Caren your dagger.”

“O-Of course,” the Nitti master and servant replied, their nerves strained to the breaking point.

I approached the bed with them, feeling the faint prickle of Carlyle’s and Fossi’s enmity on my back all the while. Under the light of the mana lamps and the moonbeams streaming through the window, a woman with pale-aqua hair lay sleeping. Niccolò started reading Carlyle’s notes, while the part-elven beauty touched the woman’s wrist.

“Her pulse is quite weak and slow,” she reported. “And I can hardly believe

how cold she feels. Almost like—”

I steadied Tuna’s nerves with a look before she could lose her composure. Then I probed the marchesa magically. A sinister, serpentine spell formula seemed to be eating away at her feeble mana.

An unknown spell has a hand in this disease.

Niccolò closed the book. “There can be no doubt,” he said as the color drained from his face. “Her symptoms closely resemble those that follow the tenth day of ten-day fever. According to the report I read, those afflicted with that disease suffer ten days of unimaginably high fever. Then on the eleventh day, their temperature begins to drop. Every patient passed away as though falling asleep. But...”

The boy faltered and gave me a confused look. Carlotta Carnien was wasting away, but she still lived. Could we be looking at a less virulent form of the disease?

“Well?” Carlyle demanded in a towering fury. “Do you know a way to cure my wife or don’t you? I insist on an immediate answer. Fossi and I are running considerable risks. I wouldn’t be surprised if a church apostle descended on us at any moment.”

“Excuse me,” I said, materializing Silver Bloom in my left hand without answering his question. Fossi gripped his sword hilt, and Carlyle reached for the sword leaning against his chair.

“Calm yourself, Marchese Carnien,” Niche said coolly.

“Mr. Allen is only trying to help,” Tina added, likewise leaping to my defense.

To demonstrate my sincerity, I waved the rod in a wide arc. Both marchesi, the younger Nitti, and his maid gave a start as pale-azure snow poured down on the sleeping lady. I had devised the compound purification spell Immaculate Snow-Gleam for Stella. If a curse lay at the bottom of this illness...

I halted my spell and gestured to Tuna. She touched the marchesa’s wrist again, then jerked her head up with a startled cry of “Mr. Allen!”

I gave a slight nod and turned back to Carlyle. “Marchese Carnien, please

touch your wife's hand."

"Very well," the marchese said slowly. He seemed incredulous as he took his lady's hand. Then his eyes snapped wide open, and he cried, "H-How?! What did you do?! What miracle did you invoke?!"

Niche scowled. Fossi showed no emotion. Niccolò and Tuna turned admiring gazes on me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Caren and Tina swell with pride, while Lily gave a thumbs-up.

"No miracle," I replied, shaking my head. "I cast a compound purification spell, although not one you'll find in any book."

"An unpublished compound purification spell?" Carlyle echoed, leaning on the window for support. "I can't believe it. I've tried every healing spell there is in the past year, and that includes purification. But none of them helped my wife! Only one thing had any effect: a medicine that one of the apostles made in imitation of their Saint. They call you the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, but I never dreamed..."

Marchese Carnien's shoulders shook for a little while. A cloud cut off the moonlight, plunging the room into darkness.

"You were right," he told Niche at last with an air of self-mockery. "'The Wainwright Kingdom's finest sorcerer.' I can't think of a more apt description."

Niche made no reply. He realized that anything he said would rub salt in the wound.

I was still analyzing the fragments of spell formula that I'd managed to detect during the purification. But while I pieced them together, I would share what I knew.

"I believe your wife suffers from an unknown curse. As for our ability to lift it completely, I can't give you an immediate answer. But I do know young ladies more skilled in purification than I am—although involving one of them may cause political difficulties."

To be frank, even Stella would be cutting it close. After all, she did stand to inherit the Dukedom of Howard. And as for the other young woman I had in mind...

“What?” said my mental image of my blonde former classmate—Her Royal Highness Princess Cheryl Wainwright. “If you want a favor, all you need to do is ask.” I could practically see the puzzled look on her face.

What a dilemma.

Carlyle stood and looked me full in the face. The flame of hope burned.

“That won’t be an issue,” he said. “I would give all I have to see my wife...to see Carlotta well again.”

“Tell me one thing, Carlyle Carnien,” Niche interjected without warning. He looked grave. “Why... Why would a man of your caliber cling to the Church of the Holy Spirit? There must have been other—”

“There was no other way!” Carlyle roared. His mana slipped its leash and rattled the windows. Then he dropped his gaze to his wife with an air of deep regret. “At least, I couldn’t find one. I had no other hope, Niche Nitti. We see different worlds, you and I. Attending the Wainwrights’ Royal Academy and discovering greatness in the likes of the Lady of Light, the Lady of the Sword, and her Brain broadened your horizons.”

Niche grimaced. He hadn’t meant to shame a man who already blamed himself.

Carlyle shrugged. “Knowing you, I assume you’ve already looked into the parts of my past that were wiped from the record,” he said, grinning feebly. “I don’t belong to the city of water or to a principality. I was born in the commonwealth. Although if we’re being precise, I believe my ancestors did hail from this city.”

The exhausted marchese rose slowly, opened a box on the table, and withdrew an antique volume with a deep-blue cover.

“My ancestors bore the surname ‘Primavera,’” he continued. “Centuries ago, the last prince supposedly called on someone known as the ‘Black Saint’ and attempted to claim the Great Tree’s power for his own selfish desires. He ultimately destroyed half the city, and its people sentenced him to *damnatio memoriae*. And I’m apparently descended from him.” He paused. “My adoptive father insisted on that to his dying day, and the previous Marchese Carnien

believed it too. How guilty he must have felt.”

The Black Saint and the final line of the principi’s descendants! Once we read the Carniens’ secret tome, the secrets of history will—

Niche’s eyes flashed sharply in my direction. Calming myself, I urged Carlyle to continue.

The marchese grinned and revealed a smidgen of his sword blade—then resheathed it with a clink. “We will consent to peace with the Ducal House of Leinster and surrender all information relating to the Church of the Holy Spirit. I request that you deal generously with my subordinates and the people of my principality and that you extend Fossi the same generosity. I bear all the blame. In token of which, I give you this record of the principi and their deeds.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “My wife read it avidly.”

The book was titled *Lives of the Principi*. Upon opening its timeworn cover, I found the impressions of two seals: the blue rose of the Nittis and eight flowers that might have represented the Glenbysidhes. Could this volume have come from Floral Heaven’s private collection?

Tina and Niccolò swiftly drew close and started perusing its contents.

“Old Imperial,” the girl murmured. “And in a northern dialect?”

“I think so,” the boy said. “But why?”

Yes, why is a chronicle of the principi who ruled the city of water written in a northern dialect of Old Imperial?

I felt a nagging sense that something didn’t quite fit. Still, I told Carlyle, “I swear in the name of the Great Tree and my parents that I will spare no effort to cleanse your wife. That said, we may end up treating her in the southern or even the royal capital.”

“So be it. I trust you and Niche Nitti,” Carlyle answered immediately, then made a deep bow. His voice shook as he pleaded, “Please. Please! Please save my wife, Carlotta Carnien—the woman who found me a mere puppet, incapable of trust, and made me into a person. I beg you. She means more than all the world to—”

A dreadful chill shot through me. I hastily sent Tina, Niccolò, and Tuna flying with a wind spell, then leapt backward myself. Caren and Lily shouted my name as they darted in front of me, dagger and greatsword drawn.

A fell gale raged, smashing part of the wall and all of the windowpanes to splinters. Carlyle was clinging desperately to the marchesa. Roots sharp as spears had impaled the floor where I'd been standing mere moments before.

Through the shattered skylight, I heard someone click their tongue.

"I missed? How tiresome. But I see the Saint and Alicia fixate on you for a reason."

The newcomer wore a white witch hat and sorcerer's robes. His hands gripped an ominous staff. Jet-black wings sprouted from his diminutive back.

"You," Caren groaned.

"Black Blossom," Lily muttered as both of their mana intensified.

This apparent demisprite youth was the second-ranked apostle, Io Lockfield. He must have deliberately forborne teleportation and used wards of concealment to get the drop on us.

I glanced at Carlyle and found him deathly pale. The marchese hadn't betrayed us.

Io glared down at us and snorted when he saw Caren and Lily. "Our reunion came sooner than I expected, but killing you can wait."

"Caren, Lily, forward!" I shouted. "Tina, you know what to do!"

"Yes, sir!" the young noblewoman answered.

"Right!" Caren and Lily responded in unison. Several spell-soldiers emerged, weaving through the black flowers that had sprung up in the garden, but the pair closed in on them without a moment's delay.

Caren roared as she reshaped her lightning spear's cruciform head.

"Not on my watch!" Lily shouted, doing likewise with the flames that wreathed her greatsword. Each of their now-massive blades scythed through a spell-soldier's torso, scattering great bolts of electricity and dancing fire flowers.

They've already recreated the techniques I showed them!

Keeping my astonishment to myself, I cast Heavenly Wind Bound and launched myself above Io, then conjured a blade of ice on my rod and swung it down. Metal clanged against metal. A girl in a crimson-trimmed white robe had appeared to stop my blow with her single-edged dagger.

Edith! She must have used a teleportation talisman!

I crossed blades with her in midair before landing.

"Take this!" Tina shouted as icy blossoms overran the battlefield. A staggering quantity of mana coalesced, then exploded within her barrier, whipping the air into a blinding indoor snowstorm.

Imperial Ice Blizzard is an advanced spell, and she quadruple-cast it! With a contained activation, no less!

I raised a defensive wall of fire flowers with a wave of my right hand, marveling all the while. My sister and student never failed to impress.

"Magnificent!" I exclaimed when they rejoined me.

"Well, I *do* have the world's greatest tutor!" Tina quipped.

"Please, keep the praise coming!" added Caren.

The number of fire flowers shielding us doubled. "We haven't won yet, Allen!" Lily yelled, still swinging her greatsword.

I quickly scanned our surroundings. Where was Niccolò? Tuna was guarding him, as were Niche, who had drawn his wand to weave defensive magic, and Paolo, who had rushed in from the corridor.

Carlyle stood by the bed, sword in hand. He seemed determined to stand his ground there at any cost. Fossi also had his hand on the hilt of his longsword. But in the midst of all this, why hadn't he drawn it?

"It's going to burst! Be careful!" Tina shouted before I could resolve my doubts. Her barrier shattered, and the blizzard raged more fiercely than ever. Lily and I were busy staving it off with more fire flowers when Io's icy voice reached our ears.

“So, Carlyle Carnien, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Dark winds blew away the rising icy mist, revealing the apostles standing on the ground. Behind them, two spell-soldiers remained unscathed. The powerful mana of Resurrection marked these as no watered-down models.

How had they discovered this secret meeting? We hadn’t communicated by magic. And if they’d known about our hiding place, they would have attacked it long before this. Carlyle hadn’t neglected precautions either.

Don’t tell me...

While my dark suspicions swirled, Carlyle shook his head. “Nothing!” he shouted, the force of hatred in his voice. “I cut ties with you of my own free will! No doubt the Saint’s power really does surpass mortal understanding. But she never deigned to save my wife!”

“You dare insult Her Holiness?!” Hellfire flashed in Edith’s hood-shadowed eyes. “I could kill you at any—”

“Know your place, least of us,” the demisprite sorcerer coldly interrupted. “Your mission is to recover the test subject Toni Solevino.”

“Yes, sir. I beg your pardon.”

“Toni!” Niche exclaimed. At almost the same moment, Paolo cried, “M-My brother?!” But although visibly shaken, neither of them could take action at this stage. Tuna simply went on weaving spells, determined to keep Niccolò from harm.

Io narrowed his golden eyes. “I believe I once mentioned that I regard you with a kind of respect and compassion,” he told the determined marchese. “The way you cast aside your country, your title, and even your subjects, clinging to the Saint’s power for your bedridden wife’s sake, struck a chord with me. But at the same time...”

My instincts sounded the alarm, screaming at me to brace for whatever was coming.

Io’s lips curled in a sneer. “The way you kept scurrying about on our errands was the height of comedy. You imagined yourself enlightened when you were

really the biggest fool of the lot. Who do you think informed us of your meeting tonight?”

Carlyle looked puzzled. Then realization dawned. “Impossible!” he cried, dumbfounded. And in that moment, I sprang into action.

My rod intercepted the flickering gray phantom that had just darted into the room. Before the cold metallic clang, bright slashes targeted my vitals with unbelievable speed.

I’ve never seen a single-edged sword like that! How can they draw it and strike in one motion?!

I grunted with exertion as the slashes gained speed. They were becoming more than I could manage, slicing through fire flowers one after an—

“Stop right there!” Caren and Lily yelled together, launching themselves at the gray-robed and hooded sword master.

The newcomer fended off every spear thrust and sword swing, landing on their feet beside Io. Tina unleashed the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances, hoping to exploit the opening. However...

“N-No way,” the young noblewoman gasped, her rod trembling. With another metallic clang, all dozen or so spears of ice disintegrated, sliced apart.

What skill! For sheer razor sharpness, those cuts even beat out Lydia’s.

“Viola?” the demisprite sorcerer muttered in evident annoyance. “Then I assume that loathsome vampiress is back in town.”

“Yes,” came the reply. “We slew all four southern marchesi.”

Of course! The woman who accompanied Crescent Moon!

Two apostles and a fearsome swordswoman, plus two proper spell-soldiers. I didn’t like our odds if we stood and fought. Making up my mind to retreat, I—

Carlyle, Niccolò, and Tuna all screamed at once.

“Niche Nitti!”

“Niche, look out!”

“Wait, Don Niccolò!”

The knight lunging toward Niche instantly changed his target. He drew his longsword...and Niccolò and Tuna cried out as the gray shadow it produced swallowed them whole.

Niche's barrage of watery spears broke harmlessly against the same ashen darkness.

"You little fool!" the blue blood roared, his face a mask of rage. His wand creaked in his white-knuckle grip as he began deploying massive balls of water.

A scream burst from Carlyle—no doubt he felt the shock more keenly than anyone else in the room.

"Fossi! You mean it really was you?!"

A look of sorrow entered the gaze of the traitor knight: Marchese Fossi Folonto. "Carlyle," he said slowly, "I did truly consider you a friend. I won't take your life here—I already have a 'Sinful Principe' to sacrifice. Oh! Praise be to Her Holiness, who foretold as much!"

Io snorted. "But can you call this what we were led to expect?" he demanded, with a scornful look at Edith. "No one mentioned a scion of the tree wardens to me. I know you met her, last-in-command. Don't tell me you failed to notice?"

"Forgive me, sir," the girl responded in alarm.

"A scion of the tree wardens"? Do they mean Tuna?!

"By way of a parting gift, allow me to enlighten you," Fossi continued before I could digest this barrage of fresh information. "Your wife, Carlotta Carnien, was surreptitiously prying into the business of my exalted liege, Her Holiness the Saint. I warned her to stop, you know. More times than I can count. The illness that struck her down was her inevitable punishment! Ah! Praise be to Her Holiness and the Holy Spirit!"

"C-Carlotta was...? B-But someone cast— D-Don't tell me *you* cursed her?!" The marchese's sword slipped from his hand and landed point-first in the floor as the truth hit home.

Carlyle is out of this fight, and Niche and Paolo have lost their cool.

Lily glanced at me. I nodded in answer. The great elemental Frigid Crane still

dwelt within Tina. We couldn't let the church take her. If worse came to worst, the two of us would need to guard her escape.

No sooner had I steeled myself than Io raised his staff slightly. "Fossi—no, Apostle Ifur," he said. "Well done. Your success will please the Saint."

"You honor me, sir," Fossi replied.

Three apostles! That settles it. I'll never get Tina and the others out of here unless I put my life on the line.

I adjusted my grip on my rod. But the movement didn't go unnoticed.

"Sir!" Tina shouted. "Don't forget about us!"

"Don't try to shoulder everything yourself, Allen!" Caren added.

Despite our desperate predicament, I couldn't suppress a grin. I would need to keep my pessimism in check.

I locked eyes with the floating Io. Mana thickened until the whole mansion shook. It was about to begin—or so I thought.

"Lady Alicia claims the defective key as her prey," Viola said calmly.

The demisprite sorcerer frowned. He appeared to consider, then, "I could crush the likes of you here, but you heard her. The vampiress wants to hunt you and the Leinsters' cursed child herself, and things will get a hundred kinds of tiresome if I spoil her fun. We have our sacrifice. I'll let that suffice for tonight. You'd better appreciate your good fortune!"

Black flowers sprang up and began enveloping the apostles.

Mass teleportation!

"Tomorrow, we'll take the Cornerstone from the Old Temple." Io's taunts resounded through the half-demolished room. "Try to stop us if you like. But I, Io Lockfield, apprentice to Floral Heaven and second among the apostles, won't be as gentle as the vampiress was!"

A darkly ominous gust swept the room, and our enemies were gone.

So, we weathered the storm. But we lost two.

Tina and Caren grabbed my sleeves. Even Lily gave me an uneasy look. All

three murmured my name.

I couldn't bring myself to answer as I picked up *Lives of the Principi* from the floor where it had fallen. When the next day came, could we really triumph over not only Crescent Moon and Black Blossom but the fearsome swordswoman Viola and the apostles Edith and Ifur to rescue Niccolò and Tuna?

Unable to bear his closest friend's betrayal, Carlyle knelt on the floor with his head in his hands. "It's not true," he muttered. "This... This can't be real."

While I watched somberly, Niche dismissed his spells and draped his own coat over Carlyle's shoulders. "Paolo, I'm going to see my father. Attend me," he commanded, struggling to contain his fury.

"Yes, sir."

"Niche!" I shouted. Events had moved far beyond quarrels over war or peace. In the worst case, they might seal the fate of the city itself.

My former schoolmate kept his back to me. "Do what you must," he said, holding his left arm out level. "But please, do what you can for Marchesa Carnien."

With that, Niche Nitti left the room, and Paolo Solevino followed him.

Oh dear. He honestly meant that. I squeezed Lydia's pocket watch. *That's that, then. Never forget what you owe. Right, dad?*

"Let's head back," I said, my mind made up. "Tina, Caren, Lily, please lend me your support."

Unease vanished from the trio's startled eyes. "Count on it!" they answered in unison as a whirl of icy blossoms, violet sparks, and fire flowers filled the air.

Seeing the joy and fighting spirit they radiated, I reached one more conclusion of my own.

I might just have to use that spell.

The ring on my right hand blinked as if to cheer me on.

Chapter 4

“That should do it,” I said, looking myself over in the full-length mirror. After returning to the hideout in Cat Alley, I had taken only a brief nap before breakfasting and dressing for the day. Niche had sent word of an urgent, early-morning conference with Deputy Nieto Nitti.

The solar eclipse would take place at noon on Darknessday—today. We needed to rescue Niccolò and Tuna before then.

I was just pocketing Lydia’s watch, which I’d left out on a table, when the scarlet-haired young woman poked her head through the open door. She had already finished changing into her battle gear, and Cresset Fox hung from her belt.

“Hmm...” She scrutinized me, then walked right up and reached for my chest. “Your collar’s crooked. We have a meeting with the doge’s deputy, remember? At least *try* to look presentable.”

“Are you *sure*?” I asked. The collar didn’t look crooked to me, but trying to stop Lydia at times like this never went well. I would gladly submit to her ministrations if doing so improved her mood even slightly.

I was still forcing myself to grin at Her Highness when her platinum-haired peer looked in on us, wearing white sorceress’s garb and carrying a rod slung on her back.

“Sir, would you tie this ribbon on my rod for—?” Tina’s blushing face turned abruptly dour. “Lydia, would you care to explain yourself? I thought you went back inside because you ‘forgot something.’”

“I did,” Lydia answered breezily, taking hold of my left arm.

“What?!” Tina gaped for a moment, then began to tremble as her platinum hair bristled. “Very well, then. If that’s how you want it, I won’t hold back ei—”

“Dear brother, I’d like to ask a favor of— Ah.”

A third young noblewoman peeked into the room. Her sword-fighting clothes resembled Lydia's. A one-handed sword and the Dagger of Fiery Serpents hung at her waist.

"Lynne? Not you too?" the platinum-haired girl demanded, glaring as her emotions provoked a burst of icy blossoms.

"Wh-Whatever do you mean?" the newcomer responded. "I... I wouldn't dream of asking my dear brother for a bit of extra encouragement."

"You just gave yourself away!"

Tina and Lynne launched into their usual antics. Lydia would normally take sides, but she only smiled and said, "They never learn." The phrase "my one and only partner" seemed to have done wonders for her mental stability.

While we watched Tina and Lynne go at it, my sister and the would-be maid arrived, along with Saki, who was carrying Atra, and Cindy, who wore her milk-white hair done up on one side.

"Suzu is here, Allen," Caren said. She wore her floral beret and her purple duplicate of Lily's outfit—she claimed it provided even better protection than her Royal Academy uniform. What a waste of effort must have gone into making it.

"Let's go!" added the offending maid. "The Water Dragon Inn awaits!"

"Let's," I answered briefly. Then, spying a truce between the young noblewomen, I said, "But first, I'd like to review one last time. We're up against powerful enemies: Crescent Moon, Black Blossom, Edith, and Fossi Folonto, who turned out to be an apostle as well. Then there are the church inquisitors, spell-soldiers, and even principality troops. We need to slip past them all and recapture Niccolò and Tuna by high noon. And since we can't expect reinforcements from the southern capital, retreat seems like an attractive option. I don't mind running the risk myself, but you shouldn't feel pressured to —"

"You're wasting your time, sir!"

"Tina is right, dear brother!"

“Really, Allen?” Lily added her voice to the girls’ firm refusal.

My sister casually grasped my hands. “Allen, don’t hesitate. We only want to hear one thing from you.” Standing on tiptoe, with tears welling in her eyes, she said, “I want you to join my fight! We’re sick of being left behind.”

“Caren, I...”

Beside me, Lydia muttered an exasperated, “Unbelievable.”

A child’s cheerful cry struck my ears. “Atra too!”

I need to keep growing if I ever hope to repay their trust, I admonished myself, then bowed to the group. “Please. I’d appreciate your help.”

“It would be our pleasure!” came the chorus of replies. Lydia’s “You have to ask?” sounded the only discordant note.

Our small fleet of gondolas advanced leisurely along the canals. A starry-eyed Tina joined Atra in staring at the buildings, flower beds, and enormous fish passing around us. She had drawn lots to win her seat beside mine, and I couldn’t help thinking of the sights I could have shown her in happier times.

Our destination soon loomed into view: the Water Dragon Inn, one of the most luxurious hotels that the city could offer. Deputy Nitti had apparently chosen it as our meeting spot himself. No doubt he had avoided his mansion on the central island for fear of attack.

“Suzu, we’ve come far enough,” I said.

“R-Right,” the otter-clan girl replied, and her gondola glided to a halt in the water. She looked at me as though she would have liked to say more.

Lydia leapt onto the bank before anyone else. “Saki, Cindy, guard Suzu and her fellow gondoliers on their return to Cat Alley,” she ordered calmly.

“Communicate by bird from now on. We’ll take Lily.”

“Lady Lydia! Mr. Allen! My ladies! Please take care!” the maids responded in unison. I listened to them as I entrusted Atra to Tina and sent both girls ahead of me to join Lydia on the bank.

“Thank you,” I told Suzu sincerely once we were alone. “Give my regards to

Zig. As for the particulars—”

“I already got them. Everything’s ready to go,” she replied and thumped her chest. I couldn’t thank the old otter enough.

The other gondolas were deftly shifting position for their return journey. I made to disembark as well when...

“E-Excuse me, Allen!”

Suzu’s cry arrested me.

“I bear a message from Zig, who speaks for the city’s beastfolk,” she continued, puffing up her ears and tail and pressing her left hand over her heart. ““Our ancestors arrived late to the Battle of Blood River. They allowed Shooting Star, our city’s savior, to go to his death. For two hundred years, the beastfolk of the city of water have passed down this legacy of regret—a secret shame we cannot wash away.””

My eyes widened. I had never heard of such a tradition.

Suzu drew in a deep breath and concluded, ““And so, we wish to take this chance to put our lives on the line in defense of the new Shooting Star.’ Allen, please be safe! And let me give you a tour of the city, okay?””

In spite of myself, I felt my chest tighten, and my vision blurred with tears. I couldn’t laugh at Lydia anymore—I was quite the crybaby myself.

I dried my eyes on my sleeve and said, “Thank you. You have my word.”



Tina and Lynne cried out in wonder as they gazed up from the waterside at the Water Dragon Inn. Although damage from the attack still marred its face, the hotel remained one of the most striking edifices in the city.

“Calm down, you two,” the student council vice president chided her juniors. “The Nittis seem friendly, but don’t let your guards down. If they try to make a move on Allen—”

“We’ll let them have it!” both girls supplied in unison.

“Exactly.”

With a sigh, I bopped the instigator on her beret. “Cut that out, Caren. Remember, we aren’t looking for a fight.” In a lower voice, I added, “Lydia, Lily.”

“I know.”

“Gotcha!”

Their responses confirmed that we were on the same page.

I sensed multiple sources of mana moving inside—more than Nitti troops could account for. Before the ruined entrance, I could see Niche Nitti fiddling impatiently with the arms of his spectacles while Paolo quietly awaited our arrival.

I considered briefly, then called, “Caren.”

“Here!” My sister immediately extended her hand.

So she saw this coming.

I grinned ruefully as I took her hand and established an extremely shallow mana link.

Caren gave her ears and tail a shake, then tapped her sheathed dagger. “Don’t worry, Allen. I’ll protect you!”

“Me too, sir,” Tina pressed calmly. She wasn’t asking to link mana on a whim—the enemy’s strength merited concern.

“Tina, you’re our final secret weapon,” I said, crouching to her level. “I’ll call on you when things look dangerous.”

“Me, your secret weapon?” the girl repeated. Then her eyes lit up, and she thumped her chest. “I understand! You can count on me!”

I felt a tug on my right sleeve.

“Dear brother,” whined a sulking redhead, “are you leaving me out *again*?”

I touched her dagger’s sheath and shook my head. “Of course not! I know you’ll come through for us.”

“C-Count on it!” The red-haired young noblewoman felt the spot where my hand had brushed her sheath and beamed.

Glancing at Lydia, I sensed, “Well, why should I care? I *am* your one and only partner, after all.” That was the trouble with linking mana too much—emotions got easier to read. I would need to watch myself.

“No wonder they say you ‘have a way with young ladies,’” I heard Lily grumble. “I’m the only older woman here, and you completely ignore—”

I let a water droplet fall on the nape of the maid’s neck, and her squeal alerted Niche.

“You’re late!” he snapped. “Hurry up!”

I waved my right hand and shot a look at Lydia, Caren, and Lily. The albatross and my sister took the lead. Tina and Lynne walked in the center. The maid brought up the rear. I, myself, stealthily deployed several spells, getting ready for anything.

“Allen.” Atra reached out her little hand.

“Hm? Is anything wrong?” I asked, crouching down again.

The child touched my cheek, and for a moment, she looked anything but childlike. “Remember, I’m here too,” she said, with a beautiful smile.

I couldn’t help smiling back. I would never let the church get their hands on her.

“What are you waiting for?” Lydia called.

“Let’s get going, sir,” added Tina.

“All right,” I answered the noblewomen before winking at Niche, who looked primed to explode at any moment.

The hotel’s interior was in better shape than I’d imagined. Doubtless we had Paolo to thank for that. Still, my heart ached to see the grisly scars that remained on the stairs, walls, and floor tiles.

We had spent the past little while climbing the magnificent staircase toward the rooftop terrace, where we were to have our interview. I kept Atra floating with a levitation spell. She seemed to be enjoying herself clinging to Tina’s shoulders.

“So, who’s here?” Lydia asked Niche and Paolo, who were leading the way. “And give us the latest news.”

“Doge Pirro Pisani and my father, Nieto,” Niche replied. “An evacuation order just went out in the doge’s name, commanding residents of the central island and its surroundings to withdraw to the Isle of the Brave.”

“We have lost contact with all representatives of the southern marchesi except for Donna Rondoiro,” Paolo added.

Meaning the city is down to a scant few marchesi, acting or otherwise.

We reached the top of the stairs and emerged into a long passage. We were making our way toward the massive doors at its far end when without warning, Niche stopped in his tracks and let out a groan. Then, disregarding his own safety, he turned his grim face to us and shouted, “Careful! It’s an ambush!”

The great doors burst open, and a volley of Divine Water Arrows sped toward us.

Lydia shot forward without apparent concern. One lightning-quick chop of her hand cut through the missiles, and she showed their source no mercy, retaliating with a brutal wave of fire. Several dozen fire-resistant barriers shredded like paper, and a chorus of screams ensued. The whole building shook.

Caren drew her dagger and armored herself in lightning. Tina and Lynne looked tense as they readied their rod and sword for combat. Lily had already placed an array of fire flowers and now drew her greatsword from thin air.

“They’re coming from behind too, Allen,” she warned as I heard feet running up the stairs.

“Lydia, Caren, subdue the enemy ahead,” I said. “They have only a motley crew of league troops—about a hundred in all.”

“Got it!” the Lady of the Sword and the lightning wolf shouted, shoulder to shoulder, then took off in a flash. Crashes, screams, bellows, and squeals echoed down the passage while their source drew ever farther from us.

I materialized Silver Bloom and gave the enchanted rod a twirl. “May I take

this as the will of the league?" I nonchalantly asked Niche, who was busy weaving water spells on his wand to hold the soldiers at bay.

"I don't know!" he snapped. "But they must be mad to turn on you in this situation!"

"I see. That clarifies things," I replied. "Tina! Lynne!"

"Right!"

"I won't let you down!"

Tina swung down her rod, casting multiple Divine Ice Mirrors so large that they hid the ceiling. She had completely sealed off the passage. I could just barely hear soldiers shouting—followed by a thunderous roar. Lynne's massive fireballs had smashed the stairs and floor.

"Excellent work!" I said. "Lily, if you would?"

"Coming right up!" The maid waved her left hand, setting fire-flower traps all over the hallway.

That ought to delay pursuit long enough.

I was just about to set off myself, when...

"Oh no you don't, sir!" Tina shouted.

"Dear brother, consider your position," Lynne added.

Even Niche chimed in. "You walk in the rear."

I hardly call that nice.

"Allow me to lead," said Paolo, ever courteous even under these circumstances.

"And me," Lily lilted, joining him at the head of our group. Before I could protest, they marched outside with barely a glance at the great doors blown off their hinges.

Lydia and Caren had almost finished subduing our attackers. What a pity they had wrecked so many tables and chairs in the process.

The remaining dozen or so guards had been driven back nearly to the railing

overlooking the Grand Canal, along with the man past middle age they defended and an aristocratic-looking fellow wielding a sword. The older man and his guard all wore blue robes and held timeworn staves.

Niche froze in shock. “Impossible,” he murmured. “Why would my father and Marchese Atlas stoop to this?!”

Paolo’s face contorted in silent sorrow.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” the elder man said more calmly than the situation seemed to merit. “I am Deputy Nieto Nitti of the League of Principalities.”

Being diplomatic contacts, we responded in kind.

“Allen of the wolf clan, at your service.”

“Lydia Leinster.”

I could sense that Nieto meant us no harm whatsoever, although the man I took for Marchese Atlas seemed liable to fire a panicked spell at any moment.

“I don’t see Doge Pirro Pisani,” I said, phrasing it as a question even though I could guess the answer. “And we came to exchange words with you, not blows.”

“The doge won’t come,” Nieto replied. “We’ve parted ways. Everyone here sides with the Church of the Holy Spirit.”

“What?!” Tina and Lynne gasped in shock.

Caren scowled.

The coolheaded future Marchese Nitti exhibited a surprising loss of composure. “Father?! Would you abandon Niccolò and Tuna?! The whole city of water?!”

“Don Niche, no!” the elderly manager cried, struggling to restrain his young lord.

The deputy raised his staff, and his guards held theirs across it.

“Niche,” he said, “the time for words has passed. You wagered on the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, and I, on the church. What more is there to say? All I do,

I do for the league, and for the city!”

“Father!”

Massive quantities of mana converged on the tip of the deputy’s staff. The flood of blue magic swirled as it built up a form. Relief spread over Marchese Atlas’s face, and with it, contempt.

Why would Niche and Niccolò’s father betray his longtime friend and ally, Doge Pisani? Where had the doge gone? And most significantly, I saw profound sorrow in Paolo’s eyes.

Lydia and Caren were poised to charge. I stayed them with my left hand and shook my head at Nieto.

“Is *this* the conclusion you reached? Both of you?” I asked. “Your heart isn’t in it.”

The old sorcerer’s face split into a grin as his mana continued to stabilize. “I see you’re as clever as young Carlotta,” he said. “My son was reborn after meeting you. You have my gratitude. In token of which, let me at least show you the pinnacle of Nitti sorcery!”

Clearest blue. A lizard-like head, its long jaws lined with innumerable teeth. Four flippers dwarfed by a colossal tail fin.

With great sadness, I murmured, “The supreme water spell.”

“Water-Fang Whale, the pride of the Nittis!” Nieto roared. “Consider it a parting gift!”

“Caren! Lily!” I shouted.

“Right!”

“Sure thing!”

My sister and the maid joined Lydia, who had already spotted that the spell was encrypted and drawn her enchanted sword to meet it. I moved to follow suit—but then a smiling Atra darted in front of me and planted a kiss on my forehead.

“Atra guard Allen!” she chirped as I gasped in surprise.

Tina and Lynne cried out, “Sir?!” and “Dear brother?!” in almost perfect sync. But while they reeled, a flurry of white lightning bolts came crashing down on the rooftop.

The old sorcerer brought his rod down, heedless of the former marchese’s screams. The gigantic blue whale opened its jaws wide and lunged toward us. Then a flowerlike spell formula covered the entire rooftop, and a blinding flash followed!



When the light subsided, we were standing in a half-ruined garden.

A single-use mass-teleportation spell?!

Ignoring my physical discomfort, I surveyed my surroundings. “Isn’t this...?”

“Marchese Carnien’s villa, sir.”

We all assumed combat stances. I readied a spell for instant activation—and stopped. Paolo wasn’t our enemy.

“Floral Heaven and Marchesa Carlotta Carnien knew each other, didn’t they?” I asked the elderly hotel manager, my back to the deserted mansion. “That explains the flower insignia in *Lives of the Principi*. Did they leave the teleportation spell as a parting gift?”

“Don Nieto called it the ‘fee’ that the House of Nitti charged Floral Heaven for the use of its archive,” he replied. “I believe the destination reflects a promise to Marchesa Carnien.”

“M-My father...” Niche spluttered. “Paolo, you wretch! You knew about this?!” I sympathized with his confusion.

I walked out into the garden, clutching my ears, which were still struggling to adjust, and looked out over the city. The city of water, the Millennial Capital, was burning. An army of miniature skeletal dragons flitted through the sky above, and dark smoke rose from every quarter.

I sighed and turned to Paolo, whom Niche had seized by the collar. “Are Doge Pisani and his people on the Isle of the Brave? I assume Deputy Nitti gave instructions to that effect.”

“I believe so, sir,” the aged manager replied.

Niche’s eyes widened. “Th-Then, my father—”

“Wait... Wait just a minute!” Tina shouted, panting heavily. She could no longer contain herself. The other girls also focused their gazes on me, and I detected a slight blush in all of their cheeks.

The platinum-haired young noblewoman cleared her throat. “Lynne, if you would?”

“Of course, Tina,” her peer replied.

The pair nodded to each other, then shot straight to my side. I let my eyes wander but saw nowhere to run.

“Sir...”

“Dear brother...”

Then, in unison, “You grew beast ears and a tail!”

I touched my own fluffy ears and said, with some hesitation, “I did, didn’t I?”

Why had this happened? I knew the reason. I could hear her singing. Atra was inside me. A mark appeared on the back of my right hand, and Linaria’s ring flashed once.

Atra was the Thunder Fox, one of the great elementals. And since Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin were already cohabitating, as it were, with Tina and Lydia, this really shouldn’t have surprised me. Of course, I hadn’t anticipated the change in appearance.

Tina and Lynne gushed in their excitement.

“You look adorable, sir!”

“Dear brother, they suit you to a T!”

Lydia, meanwhile, appeared to keep her cool. But I could see her stealing glances at me—and blushing every time.

The most dramatic reaction came from Caren. She wagged her tail with deliberate slowness, wearing a vacant expression I’d rarely seen on her.

As for Lily, she had planted her greatsword in the ground and happily started recording to a video orb. Once this business ended, I would need to confiscate it at any cost.

Calming myself, I raised my rod and returned to the matter at hand. “Niche, Doge Pisani and Deputy Nitti divided their risks. ‘When you meet a wrathful flower dragon, don’t keep your wares in one place.’ If we win and you and Niccolò survive, so much the better. But even if we lose, one of them will keep the city safe. They don’t take chances.”

“Father,” Niche murmured, removing his spectacles and placing a hand over his eyes.

Silver Bloom let out a flash. The light raced through the air, then scattered. A shining rain began falling on the city, mana covering the whole metropolis. This unbelievable power belonged to Atra.

With a wave of my rod, I conjured a map of the city area in midair. Countless red dots swarmed across it.

“The advanced detection spell Light-Field War Chart,” Niche grumbled, shaking his head. “On *this* scale? Have you no common sense?!”

I didn’t know what to tell him, so I studied the map and asked Lydia, “What do you think? We have until noon to— Hm?”

“What?” she demanded. “Why are you looking at me like— Ah.”

Tina and Lynne gave us questioning looks.

“Sir?”

“Dear sister?”

Caren kept silent, while Lily let out a suspicious “Hmmm?”

I had opened Lydia’s pocket watch and, for the first time, noticed the numbers engraved inside its lid: the date of our Royal Academy entrance exam, the date she’d cast her first spell, and my birthday. Shaken in spite of myself, I stared at the scarlet-haired young woman, who studiously avoided my gaze.

“Er...”

“What?” she demanded, sounding as inexplicably embarrassed as I felt. Neither of us knew quite what to do.

What am I going to do about her birthday present? I still haven’t settled on something.

“Ah! Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” Lydia suddenly protested. While we refused to face reality, Tina, Lynne, and Caren had pulled the watch out of her pocket and swapped it with the one in my hand.

They’ve certainly improved. Does this call for a compliment?

“All else aside!” I said, clapping my hands to get us back on track. “We have until noon to reach the Old Temple on the central island and recapture Niccolò and Tuna. We must thwart the church. Isn’t that right, Lydia?”

“Naturally.” The Lady of the Sword brushed her scarlet hair out of her face and flashed a dauntless smile. “We’ll annihilate them. They won’t beat us. Will they, Caren?”

“Of course not,” Caren said, her eyes turning violet as she straightened her beret. “Nothing scares me as long as I have Allen. Right, Tina? Lynne?”

“I couldn’t agree more!” The platinum-haired noblewoman threw out her chest.

“I can fight too, dear brother!” her red-haired peer added, patting her sheathed dagger.

If only Stella and Ellie were here. They would have kept things a little more peaceful.

“Allen,” a cheerful voice chimed in, “I think that’s what they call a ‘fleeting dream.’”

“Don’t read my mind, Li— Lily!”

“I’m on it!” the maid chirped, launching a Firebird into the small skeletal dragon suddenly diving straight down at us.

Its hooded, gray-robed riders—church inquisitors—leapt high moments before impact. The chains the men conjured gave them footholds in midair. Then the flaming bird of ill omen struck the skeletal dragon head-on, and a

voiceless scream arose.

“Try to keep up, Caren,” Lydia called.

“Worry about yourself!” the lightning wolf shot back as she and the Lady of the Sword crossed paths in midair.

With both wings severed, the grotesque monstrosity plummeted earthward. Lily raced through the air so swiftly that I could hardly believe she was carrying a greatsword and laid into it with a terrific yell. The skeleton’s head flew off its body.

“Activate barriers!” barked a man with his single-edged dagger drawn—the enemy commander, Lagat.

A chorus of “Yes, sir!” followed as the other men unfurled scrolls, instantly invoking potent military-grade barriers before dropping toward the ground.

What a disagreeable formula. It uses part of the strategic binding spell that hurt Atra.

Before Niche could wave his wand, Tina and Lynne both shouted, “Oh no you don’t!” and slammed a volley of ice and fire spears into Lagat’s inquisitors. Quantity trumped quality, and one man after another sustained hits. But their writhing spell formulae flickered, healing every wound in time for them to land on their feet.

So they use shoddy counterfeits of Resurrection.

I motioned for the girls to hold their fire and stepped forward myself. Tina and Lynne stopped casting despite their apparent confusion.

“Sir?”

“Dear brother?”

Lydia and Caren picked up on my feelings but said nothing. Niche still looked stern.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions,” I said. “Did Black Blossom tell you where to find us?”

“What good will knowing do you?” Lagat scoffed. “You’re all about to die!”

“Praise be to Her Holiness and the Holy Spirit!” the inquisitors chorused, all moving to strike at once. Then...

“What in—?!”

A series of strangled grunts ensued as every last spell destroyed itself. Try as they might, nothing would activate.

“I believe I already told you once,” I explained calmly. “I’ve seen all the dregs of Resurrection and Radiant Shield that I can stomach. That magic might as well be a curse, the way it eats away at people. Anyone could guess what would happen when I turned it back on the caster. Second question: did the apostle Edith summon these skeletal dragons?”

Lagat chuckled. “And what if she did?! Behold!” he cried, thrusting his dagger at the sky. At least a dozen of the creatures tore through the clouds and into view. Edith must have taken the drubbing that Lydia and I had given her on the Isle of the Brave personally.

Tina and Lynne tightened their grip on their weapons. Caren and Lily braced themselves to intercept. Only Lydia remained unruffled.

“Third question,” I said. “Are Crescent Moon, Black Blossom, and the swordswoman Viola in the Old Temple?”

“That’s right!” Lagat crowed. “But you don’t need to worry about—”

The fearless inquisitors’ faces contorted in terror. They retreated first one step, then two.

“That will do,” I declared, brandishing Silver Bloom. “But for your information...”

Atra’s song became audible as heaven and earth shook with a peal of thunder that seemed not of this world.

“I-Impossible!” Lagat screamed, while the flock of miniature dragon skeletons beat a panicked retreat. “You don’t believe in the Holy Spirit! Th-The likes of you could never wield mana of this—”

“I don’t have the maturity to let you parade your spells in front of Atra and get away with it!”

Pure-white lightning coursed through the whole city, concentrating in my rod. Lagat and his inquisitors steeled themselves and deployed formulae for a suicide attack. Then they roared and charged, screaming, “For Her Holiness!”

“Lightning Flash,” I responded.

A deafening roar and blinding light dominated the space. The shock wave and its attendant gusts scattered beds of flowers in full bloom. Tina and Lynne shrieked as they clung to me, while Lily shielded Lydia and Caren.

Soon, both light and wind ceased. I could feel the mana fading from my body. Looking down at my right hand, I saw that the mark was vanishing with it. Atra, it seemed, had fallen asleep.

“It’s all right now, Tina, Lynne,” I said.

“O-Okay. S-Sir?!”

“Dear brother, where have your charming ears and tail gone?!”

Both girls goggled, then looked crestfallen.

Lydia sheathed her enchanted sword. “You must wish you’d touched them while you had the chance,” she teased Caren, although she looked rather torn herself.

“What?!” my sister exclaimed. “N-No. You’re... You’re slandering me with false charges. Yes, entirely false.”

“Allen!” Lily chimed in. “Can I pet them next time?”

“No,” I replied stiffly. “Anyway, that put a dent in their numbers.”

The skeletal swarm that had dominated the city’s skies had vanished without a trace. If not for Atra’s help, I would have had to drain Lydia’s and Caren’s mana to deal with them.

“Unbelievable,” Niche murmured, impressed or awestruck—I couldn’t tell which.

I surmised that summoning the skeletal dragons en masse made use of the tactical taboo Reverie of Restless Revenants. Now that we had wiped the creatures out, our enemies would find it difficult to conjure them again in a

hurry. After all, Twin Heavens had devised that spell.

The time to strike is now!

Having reached that conclusion, I shifted my gaze to the blue-haired young man.

“What?” he asked, looking thoroughly annoyed. “You’re about to say something outrageous, aren’t you?”

“I’d just like to ask a favor,” I said. “It’ll be a piece of cake for you.”

Onerous tasks were best foisted on the competent, and Niche Nitti numbered among the city’s most capable residents.



“So, only the Atlasian troops in the city and miscellaneous forces that sided with the church are taking action. Folonto is keeping his army on the central island, but not a knight or spell-soldier in sight,” I mused, traversing the rooftops with a combination of strength enhancement and Heavenly Wind Bound.

Minor skirmishes were breaking out everywhere, sending up plumes of black smoke. Between the results of my earlier detection spell and reports from Saki’s reconnaissance birds, I could piece together an almost complete picture of the enemy forces. I only hoped it would help Niche reach the Isle of the Brave in one piece—we had parted ways at the villa.

Crossing a canal in a single bound, I landed on a sky-blue roof, then turned back to issue instructions. “We’ll keep to— What’s gotten into you all? You’ve been fuming for a little while now.”

Lydia and Caren had matched my pace with ease. Lynne lagged a little behind them but still managed to keep up on her own. And Tina brought up the rear, cradled in Lily’s arms. All of them gave me cold stares.

“I was just thinking that you must trust Niche an awful lot, sir,” Tina grumbled.

“You finally decided to call on our help, for the first time since we fought in the eastern capital! Or so I *thought*,” Lynne whined.

“You never change,” Caren grouched. “You counted on Richard and Sui for a lot too.”

Apparently, my entrusting Niche with a difficult job had offended their sensibilities. At my wit’s end, I turned to our older companions.

“Lydia, Lily, would—?”

“Give up,” interrupted the scarlet-haired noblewoman. “You made your own bed.”

“Once the fighting is over, your trial will be a real treat!” Lily added.

Out of options, I let my shoulders droop with a groan. Still, I felt glad that we were close enough to banter before a tough battle.

We advanced northward through the chaotic metropolis, dispatching the occasional enemy assault as we went. As we cut a straight path toward the Old Temple...

“Stop!” Lydia and I shouted in unison, halting our startled companions on Traveling Cat Bridge, which spanned the gap to an island just shy of our destination.

A black flower bloomed in the heavens.

“So you shot down the skeletons in one fell swoop. Not half bad. I enjoyed watching our conceited last-in-command grimace in shame while she begged forgiveness. Allow me to compliment you.”

White witch hat and robes, sinister staff in hand, and black wings—the apostles’ second-in-command, Io “Black Blossom” Lockfield. At the head of our group, Lydia and I gripped our sword and rod tighter.

He must have come to stall us!

The apostle swept his staff to one side. “But this is as far as you go,” he continued as another black flower bloomed. “I can’t let you interfere now, and I wouldn’t mind snatching that loathsome vampiress’s prey. So die.”

With a roar, a colossal grotesquerie descended on the bridge. A helmet hid its face, but it wore armor only on the left side of its body. A writhing mass of black plants covered its right.

“Toni Slevino,” Lydia muttered, grimacing.

The old steward had betrayed the Nittis out of lust for revenge on the “Headhunter,” Celebrim Ceynoth. Now it had cost him even his human form. The eyes glinting within his helmet knew nothing but hatred.

“I couldn’t spare the time for delicacy when I operated on him,” the dreadful sorcerer sneered down at us from the air. “He won’t live long. But on the other hand...”

The monster swung its right arm, and to our astonishment, the resulting shock wave gouged a hole in the surface of the bridge.

You must be kidding me!

“He is fairly strong. I let you go last night, but this is a day for celebration. I’ll crush every last one of you.”

The apostle’s mana swelled at an explosive rate, looming menacingly over us. We couldn’t afford to let appearances deceive us—the demisprites produced truly the mightiest sorcerers of our age.

“Allen,” Lydia called, raising her sword.

“I know.”

He isn’t the enemy we came to defeat, I chided myself.

“Lynne, Caren, Lily,” I called, swinging my rod and multi-casting Divine Ice Vines around Io and Toni. As the elementary spells broke a hole in their magical defenses, I broke into a run with Lydia, shouting, “He’s all yours! Lily, if you would?!”

“You can count on us!” Lynne and Caren responded immediately, although they sounded surprised. Spears of fire and lightning pelted Io to cover our escape.

“Sure thing!” Lily answered, upbeat as ever, and flung a shrieking Tina. I caught her on my back with a combination of levitation and wind spells and raced over the bridge in Lydia’s wake as fast as my legs would carry me.

“Ha!” Io scoffed, sweeping aside both vines and spears together. “Did you think I’d let you go that ea—”

I hijacked the shattered spells drifting on the breeze and reactivated them.

“You’ll pay for this!” Io screamed as chains of ice, fire, and lightning bound him hand and foot.

“I think you might have gotten a little too cocky,” I said.

“Now get out of our way!” Lydia added as we sped past the irate apostle and took aim at Toni’s right arm. One bright flash and bellow of pain later, we had severed the vegetable appendage and reached the far end of the bridge without stopping.

Glancing back, I could see Toni’s arm regrow even as fire and lightning scored direct hits on it. No ordinary magic had made that thing. But Lynne’s, Caren’s, and Lily’s voices carried over the din of their magical attacks, assuaging my fears.

“Dear brother and sister!”

“Keep going!”

“I’ll take my reward in romantic trysts, if you please!”

I sensed Tina clench her fists on my back as she murmured their names. I met Lydia’s gaze, and we both nodded.

To the Old Temple!



“Would you mind explaining yourself, Lily?” I asked. Now that my dear brother and sister were out of sight, I stopped casting for a moment and narrowed my eyes so as to better grill my cousin. “Tryst” was not a word I could simply ignore.

Clouds of shattered stone blocked our view of the enemy, but I doubted that we’d done any real damage.

“You’re going after the wrong target, Lynne. Tell me, who here has a mana link to Allen?” Lily countered nonchalantly and drew a second greatsword from thin air.

“I’m the only sister he’s got,” Caren said flatly, brandishing a cross-headed

lightning spear while her hair and eyes turned an ever deeper shade of violet.



Debris splashed into the waterway below as visibility improved. Was I seeing things, or was this bridge built on wood?

“That settles it,” I said, weaving a Firebird on my sword point. “I’ll ask him to link mana with me as a reward for this battle!”

Lily gave her massive blades an effortless swing, smashing a blast of wind into the cloud ahead of us. Io and the monstrosity hadn’t gone anywhere.

“How insulting,” the apostle grumbled, leveling his staff at us with displeasure in his golden eyes. “I hope you realize that fighting me means death. The defective key has a cruel streak. Still, his tactics are sound. Sacrificing a few pawns to slow me down isn’t a bad trade-off.”

The three of us exchanged looks, then burst out laughing. He had no idea what he was talking about.

“What’s so funny?” Io demanded. “Has fear addled your wits?”

“Not at all,” I replied.

“You just got things so backward we couldn’t help ourselves,” said Caren.

“I’ll lead the charge!” Lily shouted, shooting forward at a speed that belied her massive weapons. We followed close on her heels. Toni swung his right arm to intercept us with a repulsive mass of rotten branches, but fire flowers incinerated every tendril, burning far more fiercely than usual. Our charge continued.

“Damn you all!” the apostle screamed from his perch in midair, poised to unleash a spell. But before he got the chance, Caren and I leapt, swiping at him with our lightning spear and fire-serpent dagger! Our magical blades instantly extended in a blaze of violet and scarlet, slicing into Io’s mighty defenses.

“My barrier?! How—?!”

“Don’t forget about me!” Lily yelled as her twin greatswords launched the shocked apostle all the way to the edge of the massive bridge.

Meanwhile, Caren and I used wind magic to pivot in midair. Toni tried to intercept us with more razor-sharp branches, but I threw a Firebird at him and landed on a railing. I felt the heat of the flames on my back as I looked forward

at the floating apostle and snapped, “My dear brother wouldn’t dream of sacrificing us!”

“Allen trusts us to take care of you,” Caren added. Our combined emotions filled the air with a whirl of burning and crackling sparks.

“When they fight for someone they love, girls rise to the occasion,” Lily taunted, looking prim in profile as she held her greatswords wide apart. “I do hope you’ll remember that, Mr. Apostle—brains are all you have going for you.”

Io’s small body shook with rage. He took a few angry swipes with his staff before shouting, “Don’t talk like my teacher! It makes my skin crawl! Toni!”

The monstrosity let out a tremendous bellow. It emerged from the flames, regrowing its damaged body parts—only to be knocked off-balance by black birds.

Magical creatures?!

A maid with long milky-white hair done up on one side leapt off a military wyvern overhead, shouting a battle cry as her pair of plain black knives cleaved through Toni’s right arm.

I distinctly heard a man murmur sorrowfully, “Oh, brother, what have you become?” Then the advanced spell Ocean Orb smashed straight into Toni, driving him back.

“Saki! Cindy!” I cried in astonishment.

“I remember you!” Caren exclaimed, equally wide-eyed.

The two maids landed on the paving stones without making so much as a sound. And with them came a gentleman past middle age, carrying a longsword. All three made their introductions.

“Leinster Maid Corps number six, Saki, at your service by Mr. Allen’s command.”

“With her fellow number six, Cindy!”

“Paolo Solevino. Don Niche Nitti has graciously permitted me to join the fray.”

Does that mean my dear brother and Niche Nitti predicted Io would use Toni?!

While I struggled to pick my jaw up off the ground, Saki and Cindy readied their whip and daggers and shot the three of us a look. I nodded. Leaving Toni to the new arrivals, Caren, Lily, and I turned to face the apostle.

“Insects,” he menaced us, emitting so much mana that the very air trembled. “I’d try not to anger me if I were you. Or are you that eager for a grisly death?!”

“What a dolt.” I crossed my sword and dagger, then audibly slid them apart, swathing the blades in fire. Just like my dear sister would, I declared boldly, “We have *you* trapped here, not the other way around! You won’t go anywhere near the Old Temple on our watch!”



While Lynne’s group kept lo pinned down, we reached the timeworn Old Temple at the heart of the city’s central island. Although several banners streamed over the grounds of the great white assembly hall beside it, whose fourteen pillars stood for the city of water and the original principalities...

“Where are Folonto’s troops?” I wondered aloud, surreptitiously casting a detection spell. But it bounced off the edifice, telling me nothing of the situation within. I sensed nothing from rows of nearby buildings either.

Tina poked her head over my shoulder and looked around nervously. “C- Could they be hiding around here?” she asked.

Lydia was acting as our vanguard. “I don’t sense them,” she answered, deliberately planting her feet on the paving stones and looking back at us. “And get down already! Where’s your sense of decency?!”

“Oh, all right.” The platinum-haired young noblewoman reluctantly climbed down off my back, heeding a reprimand that I couldn’t help feeling had been less than impartial. Then she gripped the rod slung on her back, and her expression turned serious.

Just what I like to see.

“A trap, do you think?” I asked our disgruntled, scarlet-haired companion.

“Maybe. But does it matter?” Lydia caught my eye and added haughtily, “If anyone interferes, we’ll slice them up, burn them to a crisp, then slice some

more! Am I wrong?"

My partner, the Lady of the Sword, never wavered.

"I really am no match for you," I muttered.

"Of course not. And don't you forget it."

That fearsome vampiress awaited us within the Old Temple. Nevertheless, we crossed our sword and rods.

I nodded to my companions. "Let's put an end to this!"

"Yes, let's."

"Yes, sir!"

We opened a set of massive stone doors embossed with a sword and shield and set foot in the Old Temple. Though the sun was up, mana lamps flickered on columns engraved with delicate roses. A gentle slope continued into the structure, which comprised a dozen-odd levels, on the lowest of which the sun's rays illuminated a large central platform. Speakers must once have delivered addresses from it. A hole gaped in the platform's center, and the wreckage of a stone monument lay on either side of it. I recalled what a librarian in the Grand Library had told me: all rare and dangerous books were put beneath the Old Temple.

A single wooden chair sat at the head of the stairs.

"My, here already? You made awfully good time," said the beauty in a black dress and black hat who had been reading an old book in the shade of a black parasol. Her lovely tarnished-silver tresses swayed as she rose quietly to her feet. A girl in a hooded gray robe stood respectfully behind her.

Alicia "Crescent Moon" Coalfield, a legend of the War of the Dark Lord, now descended into vampirism.

She closed her book and twirled her parasol, head cocked in puzzlement. "Little Io tries, but he gets careless in the final stretch. He'll need to do better if he wants to steal a march on me. Still, that does add to his charm. Viola, dear, what do you think?"

“I have no opinion,” the swordswoman replied.

“You can be so cold. Oh, very well. I’ll tell you an old story to reward you for making it this far.”

The black-clad beauty gave an artless little laugh, yet I felt nothing but fear. My hand tightened on my rod in spite of itself.

The vampiress left her seat, and I glimpsed the old book’s title: *The Secret History of the War of the Dark Lord, Volume Two*. So, she had retrieved the second part during her stop at the Grand Library.

“Long ago, a principe united the marchesi of the league, and he dwelt in the city of water,” Alicia began with all the eloquence of an actress, sauntering across the stage. “The first of them was famed throughout the continent, or so I’m told. And for centuries, the line of principi ruled wisely.”

I gestured to Lydia and Tina, then started weaving spells. Marchese Folonto’s knights and men-at-arms must have been below, along with the spell-soldiers. I could faintly sense many people’s mana, but from deep underground.

“But then”—Alicia changed her inflection, adding a doleful note—“the title passed to a principe whose talent for magic rivaled the first, and whose greed knew no limits. He believed he could do anything! All too common, I think you’ll agree. And what did the man history would come to know as the last principe covet most? Why, everlasting life.”

“‘Everlasting life’?” Tina echoed, while Lydia watched the stage with a glare as keen as her sword.

“This city had the blessing of the water and flower dragons in those days,” Alicia continued, hiding her face with her parasol. “And what’s more, a scion of the World Tree had taken root here—what you would call a ‘Great Tree.’ The man attempted to harness its power. All so that he could live forever with the Marine Crocodile, a lonesome great elemental.” She giggled. “As if any human ever could.”

The great elemental Marine Crocodile?! Th-Then, the Old Temple’s “Cornerstone” must be...

“Ambition beyond one’s station never ends well,” the vampiress sneered,

letting only her mouth peek into view. “The scion of the World Tree fell under a curse and consumed the old city in its frenzy. The prince begged aid from a monster said to have parted the seas and a white-haired champion. Together, they felled the tree.” Alicia lowered her parasol, obscuring her expression once more.

“But the rampage went on,” she said in a colder voice. “The people pressed the prince to call on the Marine Crocodile’s power. In the end, he spurned their petitions, trapped the curse within himself, and hurled himself into the black gate in the city’s innermost depths. The people he left behind lamented their sin, but all too late. They had already damned his memory, you see.”

My brain couldn’t keep up with this unknown and unwritten history. The last prince had sealed a mad offspring of the Great Tree inside himself, then thrown himself into a “black gate” to protect Marine Crocodile. Then, were we standing above one of the mysterious doors I’d encountered on the Four Heroes Sea?

“After that, the people begged the dragons’ aid to erect a barrier and ended up sealing him away—*along with the Marine Crocodile*, which the people of this land once revered as a god. They must have taken to calling this place the ‘Old Temple’ out of guilt.”

Alicia stopped and looked down at the shattered stone monument. “It seems breaking this was quite a challenge. Little Edith was in tears. They say some nameless Tijerina sorcerer left it here, you know. The dragons’ barrier goes without saying, and that trick Twin Heavens rigged up with the water dragon’s corpse proved troublesome as well. What an unpleasant woman she *must have been*. I mean, enshrining a dead dragon under here just to reinforce the wards? She could easily have turned this into sacred ground.”

The dots were linking up and forming lines. Was Carlotta Carnien eliminated for delving into this history, then made into a “snare” to control Carlyle? At the same time, if they hadn’t gotten past all the wards yet, then we still had a chance to stop them.

But “must have been”? Alicia should have met Linaria beneath that islet on the Four Heroes Sea.

“Where are Niccolò Nitti and Tuna Slevino?” I asked the vampiress softly. I felt Lydia and Tina tense.

The black-clad beauty touched a finger to her lips and flashed a glimpse of her pointed canines. “They haven’t met a fate like you’re imagining. She and I don’t do well with child corpses—they remind us of one from a long time ago. We only took a little blood.” Alicia turned her silver eyes on us for the first time that day. “To open the black gate at the very bottom of this place, we need the blood of a prince—a throwback loved by the elementals. Finding a scion of the tree wardens with him was a stroke of good luck.”

She wasn’t necessarily lying. But if not, why couldn’t I sense the pair’s mana?

Brushing aside my doubts, Lydia thrust her enchanted sword at Alicia. “Are you done talking?” she demanded. “Once we cut our way through you and go down there, we’ll see the truth for—”

“A-An earthquake?” Tina murmured, nervously clutching her rod as the whole temple suddenly began to shake.

I shuddered with it. A terrible chill ran down my spine, and I hastily multi-cast the elementary spell Divine Ice Wall. “Lydia! Tina!” I shouted. “Put everything you have into defense!”

“On it.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Cracks webbed the stairs in front of the platform, and countless flashes of venomous dusky-crimson light burst through them. The eruption demolished not only the floor but at least half of the temple’s levels and even pierced the ceiling. It was bringing the building down around us. Looking down while I braced against the impact, I could see a hazy magic circle below ground level.

Lydia, Tina, and I all gasped as a titanic mass slowly ascended toward us. Empty sockets gaped where seven eyes had once been—three on either side of a central one. Sharp fangs lined a long, narrow maw like rows of longswords. Vast wings hung in tatters. No skin covered the body, which had turned that noxious shade of dark crimson, and an orb filled with inky-black water sat at its heart.

Faintly—ever so faintly—I sensed Niccolò's and Tuna's mana. Had they used the pair as a core to animate and control the water dragon's corpse?!

"A d-dragon?" Tina murmured, staring dazedly upward.

"No," I said. "Dragons are nowhere...*nowhere* near this hideous."

Dragons were the most beautiful living creatures in existence. While they admittedly far surpassed mortal understanding and sometimes brought about disaster, that fact remained indisputable.

As the flashes subsided, the light of teleportation shone amid the sun's feeble rays. An apostle in a pure-white robe trimmed with crimson appeared and knelt before Alicia.

"Edith, dear, I wish you would have waited a few more moments," the vampiress reproached her.

"Forgive me," the apostle responded. "My control slipped. And the dragons' wards remain in place. Allow me to humbly apologize for that as well." For an instant, our eyes met, and I saw biting scorn. Meanwhile, disquieting mana continued to writhe below. "But with the aid of dragon bones, the sacrifice of a cursed prince, a descendant of the tree wardens, and one hundred martyrs, I have succeeded in raising this corpse dragon fashioned from the water dragon's remains. It falls short of a living specimen, but I believe it should prove sufficient."

"I suppose so. That aside..." The black-clad beauty nodded and leapt to the pinnacle of the rubble heap. Viola followed suit, and together, they looked down at us.

"Martyrs"? Did they sacrifice Folonto's troops?!

Noxious miasma filled the temple itself as the floor shook again and I sensed something squirming beneath it.

Lydia clicked her tongue and launched all-encompassing waves of fire in rapid succession.

"Sir!" Tina shrieked, pouring even more power into her magical defenses. "There's something underground!"

With a resounding crash, fetid pitch-black tree limbs burst from the walls and floor.

“Branches of the cursed Great Tree?” I gasped, eyes widening as hellfire consumed the Old Temple. “Th-Then...!”

“I see *she* has set about dispelling the dragons’ barrier in earnest,” the vampiress remarked casually from atop the debris, shading herself with her parasol while Viola and the corpse dragon awaited her command. And innumerable fresh boughs continued to pollute the space all the while. “The prince spent centuries purifying it, of course. But with the corpse dragon, even these dregs should be enough to stamp out the city of water—maybe even twice over. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“How could you think of such a thing?!” I demanded.

“Not on our watch,” Lydia said, just as Tina shouted, “We’ll stop you!”

We can’t let beings like these out of the city. We must stop them here!

Another teleportation circle appeared in midair, and yet another apostle, Fossi Folonto, emerged. “Lady Alicia, all stands ready for activation,” he reported.

“Thank you, Ifur, dear,” the vampiress replied. “You and Edith may go.”

“Many thanks.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The two apostles brandished teleportation talismans and disappeared. Alicia watched them depart.

“Now, then,” she said, closing her parasol and giving the top of the rubble heap a light poke. To our consternation, seven bloodred pillars towered upward...then vanished.

While we hesitated, a shadow fell across the room.

“L-Look, sir!” Tina shouted, pointing at the sky through a hole in the roof.

Little by little, the sun was waning.

“Impossible!” I exclaimed. “Noon isn’t for another— Th-This spell formula.

Then, I was right. We couldn't find any spell-soldiers or Fossi's forces because... Did you sacrifice them to activate another spell along with the corpse dragon?!"

Alicia touched her hat. "You cast the Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend at Avasiek, I believe," she said, looking through the flames at Lydia. "Then you must have wondered: 'If tactical taboo spells exist, surely they had a strategic counterpart.' Well..." The hue of Alicia's hair and eyes began to shift. "I just cast the strategic taboo Everlasting Scarlet Dream. It drives the stars off their courses to manifest a moonlit crimson night that knows no dawn."

Moonlight flooded into the Old Temple, staining the whole edifice bloodred. The black branches kept gaining momentum.

Did they break the dragons' wards?!

"S-Sir," Tina cried fearfully, "I see a red crescent...a red crescent moon in the sky!"



I shot Lydia a look, resisting the urge to shout myself. Alicia, Viola, the corpse dragon, the rampaging scion of the Great Tree... Fighting them all in these cramped quarters put us at a disadvantage.

“Twin Heavens was a genuine freak of nature. Not even transcendental beings could match her,” the vampiress recounted admiringly. “But even her exceptional quality would struggle in the face of overwhelming quantity. So she came to a conclusion. If her foes swarmed her with numbers, she would simply rewrite the world so that she could make the absolute most of her own power—a witch’s power. Not only vampires gain newfound strength on the night of a crimson moon; certain witch bloodlines exhibited the same peculiarity. Isn’t that interesting? Of course...” Alicia’s hair took on a bloody shade of silver-red, and her eyes turned crimson. “You’re about to meet gruesome deaths, so nothing you learn will do you any good.”

All three of us started. Her mana had reached a different level. “Awesome” was the only word for it. This went far beyond anything she’d shown in our fight at Seven Dragons Plaza!

“Now, no more chitchat,” Alicia purred, languidly lowering her black parasol like a sword. “Shooting Star’s one and only lieutenant, Alicia Coalfield, will nip the new Shooting Star in the bud.” A chuckle passed her lips. “How simply thrilling. Make a good show of your last stand, now? Not that it will help.”



“Thus, I invest my authority in you, Niche Nitti. I shall bear full responsibility, so command as you see fit. Nieto endorsed this course as well...before he sacrificed himself for the league.”

“Of course. If you’ll excuse me,” I said with a bow to Doge Pirro Pisani, who could no longer conceal his exhaustion, and then left the pavilion serving as an emergency command center. Throngs of soldiers and civilian evacuees were nervously pitching tents of their own.

Pisani and Nitti troops guarded the Isle of the Brave here in the north of the city, and the forces of Carnien and Rondoiro were joining them. I had expected evacuating tens of thousands of residents to prove a challenge, but thanks to the beastfolk assembling usable boats ahead of time, it seemed to have come

off without any major incidents. I hadn't seen old Zig of the otter clan in a long time.

"Allen's orders," he had said. "Best show some gratitude, Niche boy."

Gratitude, Zig? He makes it nearly impossible to repay a favor.

Shaking free of these trifling reflections, I pulled out my communication orb to check in with Roa, who was overseeing the evacuation on the island's pier. No jamming interfered. I supposed the enemy sorcerers must have their hands full fighting. But before I could speak, a frosty voice struck my ears.

"I hear you've been given carte blanche. Are congratulations in order, Don Niche Nitti?"

"Carlyle."

"But you hardly need to *use* that power for much, do you?" Marchese Carnien continued offhandedly. Fossi Folonto's betrayal had hit him hard. "The terrible lightning that struck down all of those strange bone dragons must have been 'the Brain's' handiwork. As long as you fortify this island, then—"

We both looked up, startled by a change in the sky.

Although it was not yet noon, the solar eclipse had begun. Then a crescent moon appeared, staining the isle in its deep crimson rays.

Severe unrest spread through both soldiers and civilians.

"I... I don't believe it!"

"It's... It's the end of the world."

"Pray to the water and flower dragons."

"My mom and dad are still back in the city!"

"Wh-What on earth is happening?"

Amid the turmoil, Roa's voice blared from my orb.

"Niche! Carlyle! Black tree branches are attacking the whole city! Other districts will suffer casualties unless we act!"

More of the church's handiwork, I had no doubt. But what should I do about

it? What would Allen of the wolf clan do?

I closed my eyes and then responded, “Understood. Donna Rondoiro, take charge here alongside Zig of the otter clan. I will take some of the boats and return to the city to bring more residents—”

“Don’t bother,” Marchese Carnien interrupted. “You’d be wasting your time.”

“Carlyle?! Do you realize what you’re saying?!” Roa snapped.

The marchese shrugged. “The enemy just turned day to night, and now they’re trying to sink the whole city,” he stated flatly. “Leave fighting monsters to that legend in the making and shower him in honors and riches if he survives. We should focus on getting everyone here to safety before we worry about anything else. I’m no hero. My wife’s and my followers’ safety comes first.”

He had a point. Going back might simply create more victims. Nevertheless...

I calmly strode up to Carlyle and punched the marchese with all my might.

“Wh-What was that?!” Roa’s voice demanded as he fell with a loud grunt. “Hey! Tell me what’s going on!”

The nearby crowd that had been nervously eyeing the sky froze too, still as statues. I let out a ragged breath, then roared at the dazed nobleman.

“You... You insufferable idiot!”

Everyone on the isle or carrying a communication orb drew in their collective breath. I ignored them, seizing Carlyle by the collar and hauling him to his feet.

“I won’t give up!” I shouted. “I’m not *allowed* to give up! I won’t turn my back on a single person in this city! I may be thoroughly unremarkable, but that softhearted fool, Allen of the wolf clan, put his faith in *me*, Niche Nitti! And as we speak...” The isle itself started trembling as the dreadful mana continued to grow. I glared at Carlyle. “He’s using himself as a shield to buy us time. Even though he could escape whenever he likes!”

I shoved Carlyle’s chest, putting distance between us. “Honors? Riches? Ha!” I spat. “Spare me your drivel! Do you know how much simpler things would be if he took any interest in such things?! He acts out of pure conviction that he’s doing the right thing. We’ve been praised to high heaven as nobles of the

league, descendants of the principi, men of wisdom.”

I recalled his words to me at the Carnien villa: “I’m counting on you to take charge of the evacuation. I already put in a word with Zig. The rest is in your hands.”

I gritted my teeth and yelled, “But a wolf-clan adoptee proved far nobler, purer, and braver than either of us! That’s the simple truth! Do you understand what it means, Carlyle? Now—*now*—is our chance to prove our worth by our own will and deeds, not the blue blood in our veins! And if we don’t take it, then...then...!”

Fury raged within me. I had never been this sort of man. Heir to the renowned House of Nitti. Hope of the league’s next generation. A sorcerer brimming with talent. If I had kept to that course, I could have died without waking from my doze. But at the Royal Academy, I had met *him*: one who walked ahead of the Lady of the Sword and the Lady of Light, legends in the making; who reminded me of Shooting Star, the idol of my youth.

I shook it all off and finished:

“Then how will we ever take even a single step forward?!”

Those familiar with my usual self stared in disbelief.

I lowered my gaze. “I have no talent. I can’t begin to guess what he can see. However...” I seized the still-dazed Carlyle by the shoulders. “I do know that the fates of those we swore to protect—the people of the city of water, our homeland—rest on our shoulders! I understand that much! So I’ll say this one more time.”

The crowd had ceased clamoring, although I couldn’t say when. Mana lamps lit up one after another as soldiers formed ranks.

“If he lives, Allen of the wolf clan will change the destiny of our whole continent! And he put his trust in me, then smiled as he set out for a battle he has little hope of winning.”

The Lady of the Sword and her Brain were formidable. But they faced opponents that were at least equally exceptional. I could only pray to the dragons that they’d win.

“I—we—must live up to that trust!” I declared, striking the wand at my hip. “We must, even if it kills us. Otherwise, even if we survive, what will we say to our ancestors? To my parents and brother? To your wife? I may not have much of a brain, but I’d like to think I haven’t lost my spine!”

Carlyle dropped his gaze. His shoulders heaved. I recalled Paolo, who had returned to the battlefield to strike down his own brother. Some things, a person had to do, even when their strength came up short.

“Yes, I know. Oh, I know. We’re not the stuff of legends. But even so!” I tightened my grip and bellowed, “We have a duty! One we’ve been trusted with! He’s fighting right now, even as we speak! Fighting on with the faith that we won’t fail in our mission! Even though I never offered a helping hand when others shunned him in the royal capital!”

The Royal Academy had lived up to its reputation as an elite institute of learning. But abhorrent discrimination against the beastfolk had lingered even more strongly there than in the city of water. And I, Niche Nitti, had pretended not to see it. I had never tried to help Allen.

I must redeem myself.

“You’re a marchese, and I’m the son of one. We aren’t allowed to lose heart while others fight. Even if we can’t aspire to heroism, we can will ourselves to keep doing the right thing. I learned that in the royal capital!”

I gave the nobleman a shove. “Well, Marchese Carnien?” I demanded mockingly, neatening my clothes. “Has Your Lordship begun to remember who you are?”

“Yes,” the marchese answered slowly, touching the scabbard of his ornate, one-handed sword. “Yes! You’re right. Quite right! I *am* Marchese Carnien, husband of Carlotta Carnien, the most caring woman living. I don’t mind my own reputation, but I could never stain hers.”

“Humph.” We stuck out our fists, pressed them to each other’s hearts, and nodded. “Good enough. Now, go do your duty. If the worst should happen, get at least the women and children out to sea.”

Every Nitti and Carnien soldier ready for immediate action had formed up in

front of us. I saw determination in every eye. The city of water was our capital.

“Of course, *we’ll* stay to guard their escape,” I added offhandedly. “Let Donna Rondoiro sort out all the messy aftermath.”

“I concur,” Carlyle replied. “Roa, we’re counting on you. Would you like this in writing?”

“H-Hold on! Niche?! Carlyyyyle!”

Roa’s frantic shouting via my orb provoked a chuckle from the nearby troops that rippled through the whole formation.

Abruptly, an old Carnien servant in the front rank struck his breastplate and shouted, “All present, salute Don Niche Nitti and Marchese Carlyle Carnien!”

I heard a clank of metal not only from the assembled troops but from my orb as well.

“We stand with you!” they chorused in unison. “The city of water is *our* city!”

Alarm shook me. A mistake on my part could get these people killed.

“Fools, every one of you,” I cursed in a trembling voice. Looking skyward, I saw two magnificent griffins in flight. A sudden flash of hope brought an awkward smile to my face. “But I thank you.”



Beneath an eerie bloodred crescent, our deadly struggle against Io Lockfield on Traveling Cat Bridge continued. Tree branches were tearing down buildings all around us. We had no time to lose.

In the face of this fearsome master of tactical taboo magic, we had adopted a clear and simple strategy: close combat at all costs.

“How tiresome!” The airborne Io clicked his tongue, scattering blades of dark wind in an effort to gain distance. “Don’t you realize who—?”

“I couldn’t care less!” Lily broke through with the tri-elemental spell Scarlet Blossom Shield to augment her usual complement of fire flowers. “Lynne!” she called as her greatswords tore through the sorcerer’s defenses.

“Right!” A quick flick of my Fire Dragon Dagger sent a merciless blade of flame

hurtling at the falling Io. But the apostle regained his balance and blocked the slash.

“Child’s play!” he snapped.

Caren shot across the broad bridge—which still showed no sign of breaking—to flank him. Her lightning took on the shape of a wolf’s head, its jaws poised to rend Io! Yet they merely glanced off his masterful barrier.

We had been repeating this pattern for some time, only holding our own because Saki, Cindy, and Paolo were occupying Toni. To be frank, we had reached an impasse.

“Three kinds of tiresome,” Io griped bitterly from midair. “I didn’t expect such control of the Fire Dragon Dagger. And you! You’ve linked mana with the defective key, haven’t you? You’ll regret ceding your power to another one of these days.”

He knows about my dear brother’s ability?

Beside us, Caren’s cloak of lightning crackled to life. “Regret? Never,” she retorted, unfazed. “And anyway, Allen refuses to use even a drop of my mana.”

“You mean you’re only receiving the benefits of his finesse? Impossible!”

My dear sister and Tina had said much the same thing—my dear brother seemed loath to use anyone else’s mana. I could only imagine his reasons, but gaining ever easier access no doubt alarmed him.

The roof blew off a nearby building, and a plant-covered monstrosity crashed into the stone bridge. Numerous wounds covered his body, but they were healing before my eyes. Two maids and an elderly gentleman landed soon after.

“Saki! Cindy!” I cried.

The joint number sixes gave me a look that told me they were safe.

“What a stubborn fellow,” Saki sighed, her whip at the ready.

“He heals a whole lot faster than when we fought him in the archive,” added her knife-wielding sister.

A grim-faced Paolo raised his longsword. “I’ll cut a path. Use it to—”

We all stared up at the sky in alarm. Something colossal, an inconceivable creature, was soaring over the central island.

Caren and I faltered, and our voices shook.

“Is... Is that...?”

“No, i-it can’t be.”

“A dragon,” Lily said, squinting. “But it doesn’t seem quite right.”

Even the stoic Saki and sprightly Cindy looked aghast. Paolo gaped, at a loss for words.

“Damn,” Io spat bitterly, floating above us. “Edith and Ifur rushed it out. But what a shame for you! The defective key and the Leinsters’ cursed child will die.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Though the Howards’ cursed child will probably survive.”

Instantly, my rage flared. “What?! How dare you—”

“Lynne, keep cool,” Caren interrupted, bringing me back to my senses. Against a superior opponent, a loss on the psychological front guaranteed defeat.

But why does he say only Tina will survive?

Before I could dispel my doubts, dark winds began gathering around Io’s staff. He was preparing a tactical taboo!

“Consider this a thank-you for providing me some slight entertainment,” he said. “I’ll end your lives as well.”

“Don’t let him fire!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

We all charged at Io—but then Toni brought his right arm around in a broad sweep. Countless rotted branches sprang up, barring our path.

“This might be real trouble!” Cindy cried, slashing at them with her knives.

“Lady Lynne, permission to use my secret weapon?!”

“*What* secret weapon?!” I demanded.

“Cindy, no!” Saki shouted fiercely before I could make sense of the question, plying her whip all the while.

Er, what should I—?

“I don’t know who she is, but I think your lovely maid has the right idea,” a girl’s voice called down to us. “Allen would give you a stern talking-to, guaranteed. He may seem gentle, but he can be terrifying when he loses his temper!”

We all looked up in shock to behold two griffins darting overhead.

Reinforcements?! Could it be?!

A whirl of talismans followed. No sooner had they encircled Io than a storm of blades assailed him. Caught off guard, the apostle halted his taboo spell.

“Tijerina sorcery?!” he yelled, using his barrier to weather the onslaught. “Who did this?!”

“I don’t make a habit of talking with strangers. It upsets my roommate,” the girl replied boldly. She wore a witch hat, held a wooden staff, and carried a black-cat familiar on her left shoulder. I recognized Teto Tijerina.

She shot me a glance, and immediately I shouted, “Caren! Lily! Change targets!”

“Okay!”

“Sure thing!”

We all three launched our strongest spells at Toni. Two Firebirds, a tempest of fire flowers, and a tremendous lightning spear swept branches from the bridge. The way was clear!

Cindy led the charge, followed shortly by Saki and then Paolo. Black blood sprayed as two vegetable arms tumbled through the air.

While the roaring monstrosity attempted to regrow its lost limbs, Caren and Lily called my name.

“I know!” I answered, crossing my sword and dagger...then swiftly pulling them apart!

Blades of hellfire annihilated what remained of Toni’s arms. Even so, he tried to regenerate. However...

“Brace yourself, brother!”

The elderly gentleman’s longsword drove deep into his heart, and his helmet tumbled to the ground. Fresh blood dripped onto the stones of the bridge as humanity returned to the grotesque face. Its eyes widened.

Then, brokenly... “Paolo?”

“Yes, I’m here,” the old gentleman answered after a moment. I couldn’t see his face—not at all. And yet, I felt certain...

The Nittis’ old steward turned avenger smiled faintly. “Forgive me the trouble I’ve caused,” he murmured. “I leave the House of Nitti and Tuna in your—”

Toni’s body disintegrated into ash. The longsword fell and lodged itself in the bridge, ringing a lonesome note.

“Toni,” Paolo said hoarsely. “Farewell, brother. Farewell.”

While he said his goodbyes, Teto dropped lightly onto the bridge. She had been holding off Io with a constant stream of blades from her talismans all this time. Above us, the apostle looked as though he had swallowed a bitter pill indeed.

The girl who would doubtless be my upperclassman one day stroked Anko and sighed. “What a sorcerer! Allen makes way too many powerful enemies. How is a normal girl like me supposed to survive them all? On the other hand, Gil’s screwup reflects badly on all of us, so I need to make up for that soon. And Princess Cheryl must be furious too.” She groaned.

“A ‘normal girl’?” the rest of us repeated incredulously.

What monsters must lurk in the professor’s classes?

Io brought a hand to his forehead and shook his head. Then he glared at Caren, Lily, and me and clicked his tongue. “No, that’s enough!” he declared. “I’ve lost interest. And I’m not foolhardy enough to challenge the night cat under a crimson moon. But mark my words! You won’t get so lucky a third time!”

Black flowers materialized, and the apostle vanished from sight. He seemed to have withdrawn.

“We should move on at once,” I suggested, listening to the black branches consume a brick building. “My dear brother could use our—”

“Please wait,” Teto interrupted. “I doubt we’ll reach them in time if we leave now. And if Allen were here, I’m sure he’d tell you to help the townspeople before you worry about him.”

She made a good point. The uncanny branches weren’t attacking this bridge, but they must have left many residents still stranded in the city. But still...

“Very well,” I said at last. “We’ll prioritize rescuing the townspeople.”

“Right.”

“You got it!”

Caren’s and Lily’s agreement took a weight off my heart. The two maids and the old gentleman bowed courteously and added their voices.

“Lady Lynne, allow Cindy and me to clear your way.”

“You can count on us!”

“I know every nook and cranny of this city. I believe I can be of assistance.”

I nodded and calmed my mind. It would be all right. Quite all right. My dear brother and sister were a match for anyone. And my best friend Tina Howard was a genuine prodigy. Spending so much time with her had left me in no doubt about that.

“Teto, please tell me!” I asked the witchy girl, who had already started deploying fresh talismans. “Who’s riding that pair of griffins?”



Viola’s blade cleaved the thick stone doors like butter. Tina shrieked as I hastily grabbed her hand, evaded the blow, and retreated out of the Old Temple.

The moon hardly seemed real as it shone eerily down, staining the Plaza of Atonement in deepest crimson. A mass of black branches burst through the temple roof, and the corpse dragon revealed its hideous form. Lydia had been fending off Alicia alone, but now she leapt clear as well and landed beside us. At

the same moment, Viola leaned forward and broke into a dash, thrusting her sword ahead of her.

What speed!

I shielded Tina, conjured a lightning blade on the tip of my rod, and just barely fended off the deadly strike. The swordswoman moved her lips ever so slightly, then turned her back and spun around, as though running on air. Her blade plunged toward me. I sensed death thick in the air.

“You won’t get past me that easily!” Lydia roared, stopping the blow with her enchanted blade. Piercing metallic notes and flashes of light followed in rapid succession.

The young woman exchanged nearly a hundred slashes in the space of an instant. Then Viola fell back, making a wide turn, and Lydia slammed several dozen massive fireballs into her. The whole plaza before the Old Temple went up in flames, forming a barrier against the branches’ incursions.

“Don’t just stand there gawking, Tina! Make yourself useful!” the scarlet-haired noblewoman snapped at her platinum-haired peer without turning her head.

“I... I don’t need you to tell me that!” the girl retorted. Once she’d slapped her own cheeks and pulled herself together, the azure ribbon tied to her rod sparkled.

“Now, what will you do? Shooting Star’s heir should be able to overcome a little trouble like this without breaking a sweat,” Alicia taunted, sweeping aside the flames with her black parasol as she, Viola, and the corpse dragon entered our safe zone.

We couldn’t afford to hold back in this fight. And since we had no idea how to dispel strategic taboo magic, a drawn-out battle would work to our disadvantage.

I held out my left hand and called, “Tina!”

“Yes, sir!” My platinum-haired student quickly seized it and held on tight. I felt our mana connect. She let out a faint moan, and icy petals suddenly began falling around us.

Alicia's twirling parasol came to a halt. "Ah, a mana link," she said, furrowing her brows. "But that won't—"

Before she could finish speaking, I activated the spells that I'd set during my retreat: Scarlet Burning Field and Imperial Wind Tornado. A massive fiery whirlwind swallowed Alicia and her servants, turning the whole area into a towering inferno.

Tina's eyes widened, and that lock of her hair stood on end. "Twenty-four simultaneous advanced spells, some of them experimental," she murmured. "Amazing. Almost unbelievable."

"You'll learn to do it yourself before long," I assured her. "And anyway, it isn't working."

Strings sliced my tornado apart, and the sneering vampiress emerged unscathed with the swordswoman at her heels. Even the wounded corpse dragon flickered with gray light and started regenerating. It came equipped with Resurrection.

I started weaving fresh spells on my rod.

"What now, Lydia? They seem like awfully tough customers," I said, trying to sound flippant despite the strain in my voice.

"Think for yourself. I'm here to slash and burn—everything else is your job!" the young woman retorted. Her lovely face looked tenser than usual too.

"Sir, Lydia!" Tina shouted. "The dragon!"

The reanimated corpse was opening its jaws wide.

Poison breath?!

Viola rested her longsword on her shoulder and charged, flickering with pale-red mana. Lydia clicked her tongue and entered another fierce clash with the swordswoman.

"Oh no you don't!" Tina shouted, slamming a massive chunk of ice into the corpse dragon's head. I swung my rod wide to add a spell of my own...when Alicia snapped her parasol shut and stamped, shattering paving stones and launching herself like a javelin. Her crimson eyes blazed.

So, she was after me all along!

I rapidly cast the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances, but it didn't so much as graze her shadow.

"And now," Alicia sneered, "it's all over!"

"Allen!" Lydia and Tina screamed.

Time seemed strangely slow as the black parasol tore through fire flowers on its way to impale me and—

"Mm-mm. Not really."

"For the star always enters last!"

This rejoinder from two new combatants drew startled cries from friend and foe alike. A long spear deflected the parasol. Alicia herself took a kick to the stomach and crashed into Viola. A bare-handed chop shredded the thick barrier with which the corpse dragon had been blocking Tina's ice and sent the creature itself plummeting into the Old Temple.

A military griffin and a pure-white sea-green griffin wheeled in the sky above. On the ground, a lovely platinum-blond girl with a timeworn sword hanging from her belt and an elven beauty with jade-green hair and a spear in her hand landed and grinned at us.

"Mm. We made it," said the Hero, Alice Alvern.

"And with perfect timing. Would you not agree?" added Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale.



These two, of all people?

Before I could get over my surprise, the petite girl approached me and spread her arms.

“Allen, I request a reunion hug,” she said. “I came here to work, so I expect consideration.”

“A-Alice, how—? No.” So many questions filled my mind, but I brushed them all aside. Dropping to one knee, I took her left hand and bowed to my saviors. “It’s an honor to see you again, my lady Hero, Alice Alvern.”

The girl’s expression didn’t change. Only her eyes moved slightly. “That was mean. How lamentable. The crybaby and my comrade bring it out in you. I’ll have words with them later.”

“Oh, will you, now?” Lydia responded, fiery plumes of rage flaring to menace Alice.

“M-Me too?!” Tina exclaimed, pointing at herself in confusion.

I watched them go at it as I stood and bowed slightly to the elven beauty. “Duchess Letty.”

“The foe calls herself ‘Crescent Moon.’ How could I fail to meet her?!”

The battle-hardened legend pointed her spear at the vampiress, who had discarded her bent parasol and started dusting off her black dress. “Still, ’tis odd,” she continued with sorrow and conviction. “My sworn friend Alicia Coalheart perished at Blood River with Shooting Star.”

The corpse dragon returned to the sky, reducing the Old Temple to rubble in its wake. Alice glared at it and muttered, “Blasphemy. Utterly impermissible.” I shivered as her mana rose to what I could only describe as another order of magnitude.

The elven champion fixed her blade-sharp gaze on Alicia. “Thus, I must ask you, vampire.”

The black-clad beauty froze. We all held our breath.

Duchess Letty gave her spear a twirl, thrust it into the ground in irritation, and

demanded: “Who are you to call yourself ‘Alicia Coalfield’?”

Lydia and Tina gasped.

So, I guessed right.

We had identified the vampire before us as Crescent Moon. Yet not all the pieces fit. If she were really Duchess Letty’s equal, that surprise attack wouldn’t have caught her off guard.

“How awful,” Alicia whined, toying with her crescent earring. “I remember your face. Have you really forgotten mine?”

“True,” the former duchess admitted. “You are the spitting image of Alicia, and you speak as she did.”

“Of course I do. I mean, I *am* Alicia herse—”

“And yet!” Duchess Letty interrupted, taking a broad swipe with her spear. Angry gusts buffeted us. “Yet Alicia—my dearest friend—would never stoop to vampirism, not even if the sky fell! Not even if she lost Allen before her very eyes! Her heart was not so frail.” Every word rang with the strength of her feelings for Shooting Star and Crescent Moon.

“And most damning, there’s your hair. Hers was purest silver,” the elven beauty declared, pointing with her spear again. “Do you expect me to believe vampirism changed it? Spare me such nonsense. Alicia was a potential White Saint as well as a cursed child. It would take more than mere vampirism to wipe the lingering scent of *that* away!”

“What are you saying, Letty?” the vampiress asked, floating lightly off the ground with a bewildered expression. Behind her, Viola leaned forward and started focusing mana.

“I knew you couldn’t be Alicia!” Duchess Letty shouted, gripping her spear with a trembling hand. “She never called me ‘Letty’ in all the days of her life! Only ever ‘Cia’! You’re naught but an impostor!”

A long moment passed. Then Alicia let out a giggle, and bat-like jet-black wings emerged from her back.

Cursing myself, I shot meaningful looks at Lydia and Tina. The true battle had

yet to begin.

“You break my heart,” the vampiress complained, rubbing her eyes—and baring her fangs all the while. “I don’t know when I’ve felt so wretched. Hearing my best friend say such things is more than I can bear.”

With the crimson moon at her back, the airborne beauty lowered her hands. I read seething hatred in her eyes. Her mana loomed domineeringly over us, seeming to shroud the entire city. A blizzard of crimson blossoms danced through the air.

“So,” she said, “I think I’ll kill you now.”

A gray figure sprinted across the ground, leaving sound in its dust. What a peculiar technique, drawing and striking in the same motion. I couldn’t help admiring its beauty—although death hung thick about it.

But the elven champion’s spear easily deflected Viola’s slash at her neck. At the same time, she hurled the supreme spell Gale Dragon at Alicia—a miraculous display of skill.

“The sharpest blade of the eastern lands, forged in days of yore,” she mused. “To think it remains in use.”

Viola swung her sword free without replying, then leapt like a dancer, twirling as she pelted the lovely elf with a rain of slashes to gain distance.

“Duchess Letty!” I shouted, scrambling to provide magical support—when a girl’s fair left hand brought me up short.

“The Lady of Wind will handle the mystery swordswoman,” Alice said matter-of-factly, her intimidating gaze on the vampiress, who was fending off the wind dragon bare-handed. “I’ll—”

With an earsplitting roar, the corpse dragon dived toward us.

“Not on my watch!” Tina shouted, only to be checked by Alice.

“Don’t worry, comrade. Hup.” The platinum-blonde jumped and casually drove her lightning-charged little fist into the towering corpse dragon’s jaws. A massive fang snapped off and embedded itself in the paving stones.

Tina’s expression stiffened as she watched the girl land boldly atop a stone

pillar. Trying to judge the Hero by our standards was a fool's errand.

"I'll fight the sham dragon," she finished, hair fluttering in a fiery breeze. "I won't kill the scions of the principe or the tree wardens. Allen, you take the poor vampire."

After a moment, I said only, "Okay," then looked to Lydia and Tina. Despite our unlooked-for reinforcements, we would need to stop Alicia ourselves.

"Don't worry, Allen. You can do it," the girl reassured me while the corpse dragon filled the cage of flames with its furious roar.

All of a sudden, my heart grew lighter. And now that I thought about it, I'd felt much the same when fighting the black dragon.

"Thank you, Alice," I told the youthful Hero. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You stole my line," she replied. "But I'll take a handmade cake. The crybaby can't have any."

"Hey! L-Listen, you—"

Before Lydia could finish, Alice kicked effortlessly off the stone pillar. Slamming another blow into the corpse dragon's head just after it righted itself, she punched through the fire and followed it down toward the assembly hall. I caught a glimpse of black branches twining around the chalk-white edifice before the barrier closed behind them.

I swept my rod sideways, listening to the clash between Duchess Letty and Viola demolishing what buildings remained within the walls of flame. The most potent Swift Ice Lances I could manage shot skyward, checking Alicia's movements after she dispatched the Gale Dragon. Meanwhile, I mentally communicated my plan to Lydia and Tina. I could feel it lift their morale sky-high.

In midair, Alicia shredded my ice lances bare-handed with an air of annoyance. I met her crimson eyes and saw loathing.

"I find that look in your eyes so...irritating," she said. "Just like that person who came to see us, who stole my sister away: clear eyes gazing straight ahead,

with no notion of giving up or— Oh? Whatever did I just say?” Alicia faltered and froze, bewildered by her own words.

As shards of ice and light glittered in the air, I shouted:

“Tina!”

“Yes, sir!” The platinum-haired young noblewoman multi-cast the advanced spell Imperial Ice Blizzard.

Alicia sneered. “Such paltry magic won’t work on— Oh?”

The ice and light that had just shattered formed mirrors, reflecting the fierce blizzards at wild angles.

Lydia vanished and reappeared above the vampiress—using the tactical teleportation spell Black Cat Promenade. Raising her left hand high, she drew forth the flaming sword True Scarlet in one smooth motion!

Alicia’s eyes widened. “That’s the Leinsters’ —”

“See how you like *this*!”

Alicia’s barrier had been weathering the blizzards, but now a Firebird tore into it, scattering blazing feathers and hellfire. Lydia followed the supreme spell with a midair charge, activating her house’s secret Scarlet Sword with both blades and bringing them down together.

Alicia gathered inky mana around her right hand and blocked, seemingly overwhelmed by Lydia’s piercing war cry. Mystical forces collided, the ice mirrors splintered, and cracks ran through the ground and pillars.

“Not a bad effort. Still...” Alicia’s mana surged, and she finally knocked Lydia back. The Lady of the Sword grunted, and I heard the *ping* of snapping metal. My dad’s amulet must have taken the impact for her.

“We’re not done yet!” Tina shouted, drawing a startled “Oh?” from Alicia as, without waiting for my signal, she imprisoned the vampiress in massive icicles.

Silver-snow?!

Wanting to keep us all on the same page, I reviewed the situation with Lydia. “The enhanced Firebird works. So do Cresset Fox and True Scarlet when you go

all out. But we've yet to leave so much as a scratch on Alicia herself."

"And even worse, if she hurts us, her lingering mana will get in the way of healing," she added grimly, swords thrust in the ground.

Tina looked up from undoing her snow-white ribbon and tying it to her rod. "But you haven't tried your best yet, have you, sir?" she asked, beaming.

I guess she saw through me.

I struck the ground with my rod, reinforcing the rapidly crumbling icicles as I answered, "No, although I'd hoped to avoid using it. I mean—"

"You'll need to forge a deeper link with us and draw on the great elementals' power. Well, what are you waiting for?! She's as ready as I am!" Lydia gleefully interrupted, sidling up to me with the back of her right hand on full display. Blazing Qilin's mark showed, clear and pulsing.

"Me too, sir!" Tina insisted, staying where she was but pressing her right hand to her heart. Frigid Crane's mark flickered dimly.

I could feel Atra sing merrily within me.

I suppose I have no choice.

"Lydia, Tina," I said.

"Mm."

"Yes, sir?"

The pair lowered their eyes with a hint of embarrassment—a far cry from their excitement of a moment ago. I pressed my lips to each of their foreheads in turn, connecting our mana on a deeper level.

A world of white spread out before me. I noticed Atra first, as she hugged me. Then two nearby girls, one with long blazing-scarlet hair and the other with bird feathers mingled in her azure-gold tresses—the great elementals Blazing Qilin and Frigid Crane. All three wore matching white outfits.

"I can't protect everyone the way I am now," I said, stroking the child's head. "So..."

Was this really the right thing to do? I'd sworn to guard these girls.

The child wagged her tail in delight.

I closed my eyes and pleaded, "Please... Please lend me your help. To save the girls who mean so much to me."

Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin looked at each other for a moment, then gave a slight nod and smiled. I watched Atra hug the scarlet-haired girl while her companion with azure-gold locks narrowed her eyes as if in pain.

"We'll help," she said. "But Marine Crocodile no longer dwells in this land. She loved a kind human king with all her heart. Now she wanders the world in inconsolable grief. Please, save her."

"She's not here?" I repeated. "Then—"

The white world crumbled away. When I opened my eyes, I was staring two daughters of dukes right in the face. Both had flushed cheeks and seemed bashful.

"Um...Lydia? Tina? Is anything the matter?" I asked, listening to the shrieks of the corpse dragon and the noise of Duchess Letty's fierce clash with Viola.

"Y-Yes?!" they both responded awkwardly, standing to attention.

Could they have felt my exchange with the great elementals?

The next moment, all the icicles went flying at once, and Alicia roared with fury.

"How irritating! I simply can't stand it!" she fumed. "I've had enough. I'll end every! Last! One of you!"

Beneath the crimson moon, mana on a new order of magnitude concentrated in the vampiress's right hand. A flickering jet-black longsword materialized. The ring on my own right hand shone, and I heard Linaria's voice intone, "The Dark Lord's black blade: Song of the Bygone Moon."

Fighting back fear, I held Silver Bloom aloft and called, "Lydia, Tina, I need time!"

"And I'll make certain you get it!"

"Focus on your spell, sir!"

Firebird and Blizzard Wolf charged Alicia and crashed into her barrier. The vampiress lost her black hat, but her left hand conjured a small battle-axe from mana. She split the fell bird's and ice wolf's skulls, scattering inferno and snowstorm alike as she screamed:

"Stop wasting my time and die! You could never defeat me!"

Lydia and Tina took the full brunt of Alicia's crimson glare.

Now!

All at once, our mana link intensified. Lydia instantly closed the distance with Black Cat Promenade, bringing her enchanted and flaming swords down on Alicia with all her might. They struck the single-handed axe, then pale fire and dark mana vied for supremacy.

Eight wings of purest white shone on the young woman's back. Was this Blazing Qilin's influence? More flames streamed from her short scarlet hair, making it appear longer.

"Tomorrow, I turn eighteen, and Allen's going to celebrate with me, just the two of us!" she boasted, wearing a daredevil grin. "You think I'd die with the time of my life right around the corner?!"

Alicia's face was contorting even further as she lost the upper hand. Then snowy gusts roared within a barrier, and the largest Blizzard Wolf I'd yet seen took shape. Were those six wings on its back?!

Eight wings appeared behind Tina as well, and as with Lydia, strands of ice stretched from the tips of her hair.

"Allen asked for my help too!" she yelled. "Nothing can stop me now!"

White and black mana entered the supreme spell, and it raced through the air, descending on Alicia with an ice storm.

"Th-This can't...!" The vampiress faltered as her defenses cracked. Then, at last, we broke through. Fire and ice combined to bind the fearsome creature.

"Allen!" my companions called in unison.

"Thank you, Lydia, Tina," I replied. "I'll take it from here!"

The orbs on my enchanted rod shone. Seven pillars of light rose skyward and disappeared. Meanwhile, Alicia's sword hacked through both fire and ice. She glanced out at the moonlit night—and gave a start.

“What?!” she cried, barely articulate. “Wh-What have you done?!”

“Th-The sky just...!” Tina gaped as well, hugging her rod.

“Now that's more like it.” Lydia chuckled, grinning from ear to ear.

Vampires had no weaknesses. The Hero and the Dark Lord were their only natural enemies. And for better or worse, I'd seen spells belonging to both—although I lacked the vast stores of mana they required. Only after forging deep links with Lydia and Tina, calling on Blazing Qilin, Frigid Crane, and Atra, and incorporating Linaria's formulae had I at last achieved activation.

“Duchess Rosa Howard knew what she was talking about,” I told the girls staring dazedly up at the crimson moon. “Remember? ‘Always save the best for last.’” In one breath, I swung my rod down and softly intoned the spell's name:

“Shooting Star.”

Myriad stars tore through the Everlasting Scarlet Dream and rained down on the Old Temple and its surroundings.

“Don't imagine you've won!” Alicia snapped, focusing dusky-crimson mana into the sword in her right hand. “A little spell like this won't—”

A dark-emerald breeze hurtled at the vampiress alongside a jet-black spear—Flicker of the Dying Moon, the weapon Duchess Letty had wrested from the Dark Lord. Alicia deflected it, but it had drawn the lion's share of her attention. The opening would prove decisive.

The rain of stars engulfed Alicia. A blinding flash and a massive impact followed.

“Sir!”

“Allen!”

Tina and Lydia caught me in their arms as I slumped defenseless, my mana exhausted. All their power went into defenses to weather the blast.

Oh dear, friendly fire. That could use some work, I thought, but my exhausted brain refused to function. I merely leaned on my companions.

It's gone quiet.

I lost my mana links to Tina, Lydia, and Caren—no doubt the price of pushing beyond my limits. Panting, I fell to one knee and looked around.

The eerie crimson moon of mere moments before had given way to blue sky. I could barely recognize the Old Temple. Its pillars had fallen, and holes gaped in the stones of its floor. Even the branches of the rampaging Great Tree were splintering and crumbling to ash.

With a thunderous crash, the corpse dragon fell limply before my eyes. It gave off an odor of decay as its black sphere tumbled to the ground. Then white lightning leapt, splitting the dark orb and revealing Niccolò and Tuna—alive. While relief swept through me, Alice and Duchess Letty landed beside us, unscathed.

“Bad boy,” the Hero said, hand on her left hip. “You stole spells from me, the Dark Lord, and the witch. This calls for payment. Join my retinue at once and—”

“Comrade or not, that’s going too far!” Tina shouted, clapping her hands over the Hero’s mouth.

“Good work for once, Tiny,” said Lydia.

Duchess Letty grinned too, resting her spear on her shoulder. “I see you pilfered my Stellar Spears as well. How the Dark Lord would laugh.”

“I overreached. I doubt I could cast it again,” I said in all honesty, staggering to my feet. “And besides...”

A sudden gust revealed Alicia and Viola standing before the ruins of the Old Temple. The stone-faced vampiress’s black dress hung in tatters, but she bore no visible wounds. The swordswoman seemed equally unhurt.

“It still failed to bring her do—”

Before I could finish, the click of feet climbing the stairs struck my ears, and the sunlight dimmed.

High noon!

A young sorcerer came into view first, dressed in a hooded white robe trimmed in azure and holding a wooden staff. Next, a gray-robed figure, also hooded and armed with a long spear. This one stood no taller than Caren. The final hooded figure to appear wore a robe of pristine white and carried a stone tablet. It was a girl.

An indescribable shock shot through us.

The church's...Saint?

The young man raised his staff, and mana to rival Alicia's began congregating to it. Not only the air but the city itself quaked. Cracks spread, and the darkness grew.

"Allen," the Hero called by way of warning as she slowly drew her sword.

The gigantic mass of black ice that had just materialized in the sky rivaled the central island for size. Trembling, Tina murmured its name:

"Th-The great spell Falling Star?"

"Lady of Wind, Lydia," Alice called curtly.

"I know!" Duchess Letty shouted, voice straining as she materialized Flicker of the Dying Moon in her left hand.

"You can count on me!" yelled Lydia.

The Hero thrust out her sword and fired a dazzling flash. "Hundred Bolts."

A tremendous burst of lightning bounded through space, striking the ice with unerring precision—and splitting the mass in two!

Duchess Letty gathered shadowy winds behind her. "I humbly present to you this strike!" she roared, wielding one of her secret Stellar Spears in each hand. Innumerable thrusts reduced the right-hand chunk of ice to a glittering mist.

"My turn!" Lydia shouted, kicking off the ground with all her might. Invoking the Scarlet Sword with both her blades, she slammed them into the left-hand ice mass. Engulfed in flames, it shattered, the surviving chunks raining destruction on a wide stretch of the Grand Canal and the surrounding cityscape.

I heard the faintest of applause, and a pitch-black world spread out before

me. Only the church's Saint shared the space with me. We were quite alone.

The lips of the girl clutching the stone tablet moved beneath her hood.

"Hello, my Allen."

"You know my name?" I asked, startled.

"Of course," the girl said. "I know you better than you know yourself. I'm so glad to finally meet you." She laughed like a child—innocently, purely, happily. And for that very reason, her soft chuckle chilled me to my core.

"What is the church—no, what are *you* thinking?!" I demanded, pointing my rod at her. "This string of plots has turned every great power in the west of the continent against you!"

"As if they matter." The Saint's lips curled in a sneer. Ashen serpents issued forth, and I soon lost count of the writhing creatures. "The kingdom, the empire, the league... How many years will it take any of the three great powers to quell internal turmoil and take action? Every single one of their brightest minds *danced just as I predicted*. Self-sacrifice and noblesse oblige are so predictable. You know, I got everything I wanted from the eastern capital, the royal capital, and the city of water. You realize, don't you, Allen? Even if no one else does? I've won. Fighting off poor Alicia, foolish Io, and darling Edith won't change that fact. Here. Look."

While the snakes converged into a single massive, blade-winged serpent, the Saint pointed to the stone tablet. "I'm holding the last prince's testament. He wrote down the spell formula that drove the scion of the World Tree mad and sealed it within the black gate, just in case it was ever needed. What a kind fellow he must have been—kind enough to give his own life in place of the great elemental Marine Crocodile and free her from her yoke."

I gasped, struck speechless. At the same time, I felt an intense foreboding. This didn't match what Alicia had said. She'd seemed to think that Marine Crocodile was here.

The Saint lifted her hood and looked at me. Her eyes gleamed crimson.

"He promised to make a flower garden in the Old Temple, and he couldn't even keep his word to Marine Crocodile about that," she continued. "Even that

pathetic side is just like you. How utterly precious. So sweet it makes me long for death.”

I hesitated. “Are you—?”

The pitch-black world crumbled, and the sights and sounds of the Old Temple plaza returned.

“We’ll meet again somewhere, someday soon,” I seemed to hear. *“My dearest Allen—mine, and mine alone.”*



The next thing I knew, a teleportation circle modeled on a black flower appeared behind the girl, and she vanished. I felt for her mana but sensed nothing out of place. Who in the world could she—?

“Oh?”

“Allen!” Lydia and Tina cried, propping me up as my strength failed me and I nearly fell.

“Thank you both,” I told the anxious, teary-eyed girls. Then I chuckled. “Pretty pathetic, huh?”

Tina and Lydia buried their faces in my chest, muttering almost too softly to hear.

“Sir, you idiot.”

“You’re in for the scolding of your life later, you hear?”

Was Caren’s group all right? They seemed to have joined the rescue effort after driving off Io.

I looked down. The flowing water was gaining speed and growing in purity.

“S-Sir,” Tina murmured.

“Is it coming here?” Lydia gasped.

Both young noblewomen stared at the sky. Duchess Letty dropped to one knee, and Alice sheathed her sword. A vast shape blocked out the sunlight, and I looked up with them—into a single, central eye flanked by three on either side.

A sublime dragon descended on four blue wings and landed, gazing down at me. The water dragon, guardian of the city of water.

Tina clung tight to my right arm and squeezed her eyes shut. Lydia gripped my left sleeve nervously.

“It’s all right,” I told them both and took a step forward.

Gazing into limpid blue eyes, I bowed deeply and said with all my heart, “For defiling a deceased dragon, I offer my most sincere apologies. I cannot deny that mortals bear the blame in this matter. I hope you will believe me when I

swear that we shall redeem ourselves.”

The battered water dragon corpse floated gently off the ground. I looked up and made eye contact. For a fleeting moment that seemed an eternity, the dragon watched me. Then it unfurled its great, beautiful wings. Water droplets danced as though with a life of their own on a sudden, buffeting wind, cleansing everything around us.

“Brave child of wolves,” the dragon intoned quietly, although its rumbling voice reached every corner of the city, **“I shall forge no compact with the humans who slew the gentle prince. My covenant is with you alone. May you redeem all shame and loose the great elementals from their yokes. The gentle lord had eyes like yours, child of the key. You recall fond memories. I would hear your name.”**

“I am called Allen,” I said, gripping my pocket watch. “Allen, son of the most compassionate Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan.”

“Allen. A fine name.”

The dragon beat its blue wings, kicking up another sharp gust. The purification proceeded apace.



I heard singing high in the heavens, and the pressure I felt began to dissipate. Looking over my shoulder, I managed to smile at the rigid, platinum-haired noblewoman.

“Do you feel all right, Tina?”

“Y-Yes, sir,” she answered slowly, looking strained. And who could blame her? If the water dragon had taken offense, we would have been hard-pressed to survive. Alice wouldn’t fight a dragon for almost any reason, so— Lydia hugged me from behind.

“Listen,” she murmured.

“You can’t blame me this— Oh?”

Another new mana source appeared in the sky ahead. A massive white flower blossomed. Immediately, Lydia and Tina darted in front of me.

What now?

A young woman in white sorceress’s garb sprang out of the teleportation circle, staff in hand and white wolf at her side. One couldn’t help but remark on her long blonde tresses. A force of elven guards followed. No sooner had their feet touched the ground than she shouted, “Allen! I’ve come to help! Just point me at the enemy!”

Lydia and I exchanged a silent look.

“U-Um...” Tina faltered.

Duchess Letty roared with laughter. “A stout heart you have there!”

“Schemer,” Alice grumbled.

Her Royal Highness Princess Cheryl Wainwright, the Lady of Light. A member of the royal family had called on Glenbysidhe strategic teleportation magic to storm into the capital of an enemy nation. As usual, her recklessness knew no bounds. I felt a weight on my left shoulder.

“Anko,” I muttered, waving to Caren, Lynne, and Lily as they ran toward me, “why does everything I get involved in turn into a crisis?”

The esteemed black-cat familiar meowed that I brought it on myself.

Epilogue

Cleansing magic light showered a sleeping woman—Carlotta Carnien, still bedridden. We had narrowly fended off the fearsome Crescent Moon and the Church of the Holy Spirit, and the following day had passed in the blink of an eye. Now four people were working magic here in a chamber of the Nitti mansion on the central island, which had escaped destruction.

Lady Stella Howard had come to the city of water before I even sent for her. Princess Cheryl Wainwright had mastered the element of light. The demisprite chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe, called the Flower Sage, and my student Ellie Walker were assisting to amplify and channel their purification spells.

The warm light ceased. Carlyle, who had been waiting at the bedside, teetering between hope and fear, touched his wife's hand.

Slowly, the woman opened her eyes and called, "Carlyle, dear?"

The marchese shook, clasped his wife's hand in both of his, and burst into tears. "Yes," he sobbed. "Yes! Oh, Carlotta! Carlotta! *Carlotta!*"

"What's wrong? Did you have a bad day? No one bullies *my* husband and gets away with it."

I left Carlyle with his wife and made my exit. He would never get involved with the church again.

Stars twinkled outside the windows.

"Thank you," I told the white-clad Stella. "How do you feel?"

Her power over the element of light had clearly grown since the eastern capital. I couldn't help worrying.

"I think I should be asking you that," she replied. "Tina and the others told me that you pushed your limits *again*. I'd appreciate a moment of your time tomorrow—Ellie and I want to give you a piece of our minds."

"A b-big piece!" Ellie chimed in, wearing a matching white outfit.

“I surrender,” I said. What chance did I have against our saint and her angel?
Just as peace settled over the three of us...

“Well, Allen?” A certain princess who had overcome all obstacles to reach the city of water applied pressure. Her Royal Highness looked as though she wanted me to say something, but I refused. Her visit, and Stella’s, would become a major scandal down the—

Oh, yes. I must write to Duke Walter and Mr. Walker.

While I lost myself in thought, Stella and Ellie blushed.

“Ooh... That look is cheating,” Cheryl grumbled and turned her head away.

I cocked my head, puzzled, as I took out a note from Niche, who was managing a murderous workload, and checked its contents.

The previous day’s battle had inflicted astronomical damage on the city. No one still championed the cause of war, and Doge Pisani was supposed to depart for the southern capital on the morrow. The string of conflicts that had begun with the Algren rebellion would finally come to an end. But the league had lost many core personnel.

Nieto Nitti had stepped down as deputy. And amid the previous day’s chaos, Marchese Atlas had perished along with other aristocrats and assemblymen who had tried to side with the church—the former marchesi of Etna and Zana among them. Three of the six southern marchesi had fallen at Viola’s hand. Fossi Folonto had sacrificed every single person under his command and disappeared. Carlyle Carnien remained but could not escape punishment. Marchesa Regina Rondoiro had survived, according to an urgent message, but she seemed to be hinting at retirement. I didn’t envy Roa.

The only silver lining was that Niccolò and Tuna had come through their time as the corpse dragon’s core unscathed, while civilian casualties had been kept to a minimum, thanks in part to beastfolk aid.

“Hm... Ill tidings,” Duchess Letty remarked as she read the reports by a window with Chieftain Chise.

“‘Ill’ doesn’t begin to describe them,” her companion replied. “Allen.”

“Direct all demands on the league to Niche Nitti. Regarding the terms of peace following reorganization, please see this.” I levitated a document to the pair. “I’ve also summarized my conjecture about the church’s goals—including the matter of their Saint.”

The two leaders frowned, and the girls touched their foreheads.

“O Stella, Ellie!” the elven legend barked. “Leticia Lebufera commands you: see that he rests once tonight’s business is done. Sorting out the aftermath will drag on for months, in any case. A certain private tutor distinguished himself to such an absurd degree that calculating his reward will prove a challenge.”

“Chise Glenbysidhe seconds the order,” the great demisprite added sternly. “Let me handle the Nitti brothers. And you’d better brace yourself. How does a promotion straight to margrave sound?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Stella and Ellie responded with vigor.

“Please tell me that last bit was a joke,” I pleaded, grimacing in horror. I would happily content myself with the many perspectives and wealth of knowledge I’d gained.

“How could we let one who forged a covenant with the water dragon go without rank or title? Don’t you agree, Chise?”

“Humph. Children like him need a harsh lesson in facing facts.”

The pair set off for a separate room, looking positively wicked.

“Do you recall the silver pins the Royal Academy awards to the first and second in each class?” Duchess Letty murmured with her back turned. “A crescent moon and a shooting star. We decided on those after the War of the Dark Lord so...so that at least their memory would live on. I shall investigate the vampire as well. The church won’t make its move at once either. See that you mind your health.”

Crescent Moon, Black Blossom, the sorcerer who had cast the great spell Falling Star...and the Saint, who had finally revealed herself. The church had played a hand in the Algren rebellion and the string of conflicts that followed, sowing discord in the kingdom, the empire, and the league. Their machinations had left the three greatest powers in the west of the continent, for all practical

purposes, incapable of taking action beyond their own borders. If the Saint had planned all that, then...

I abandoned that train of thought and made my students another slight bow. “Stella, Ellie, thank you. I’ll be counting on you for more help going forward.”

“Oh no, I’m just glad I could be of assistance,” Stella replied.

Ellie matched her with a “Y-Yessir!”

Meeting my students’ gazes, I was beginning to feel comforted when the blonde princess took offense. “Excuse me?” she said, while the white wolf Chiffon sat at her feet. “Don’t you have anything to say to *me*, Allen?”

“I do appreciate you, Cheryl,” I replied. “It’s just—”

“Allen!” A shout of protest from my former underclassman rattled my communication orb.

I shrugged to Cheryl and responded, “Good to hear from you, Teto. How goes deciphering *Lives of the Principi* and *The Secret History of the War of the Dark Lord, Volume Two*?”

When the dust settled, I had made Niche the following request: “I’d like you to provide me with all ancient documents and information about the city in Nieto Nitti’s possession.” The collection had included the invaluable second half of the *Secret History*, among other precious tomes. They, along with Duchess Rosa’s note, constituted our “spoils” from this war.

“Oh, it’s coming along,” Teto replied. “Niccolò really knows his stuff. Like you predicted, it seems the last principe wasn’t such a bad guy. He wanted to show the ‘lady’ under the Old Temple a flower garden aboveground and walk through it with her. To make that happen, he was researching angels and devils for— Hey, not so fast! Why am I stuck translating old books?!”

“What do you mean? Everything will go swimmingly with you in charge. I have every faith in the professor’s finest student, Lady Teto Tijerina. How are the others doing?”

My witchy underclassman kept silent. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Her Royal Highness and my students begin a whispered conversation.

(“Hey, did you hear that?”)

(“That’s Mr. Allen for you.”)

(“I w-wish he’d ‘have every faith’ in me too!”)

Teto heaved a long sigh. “Allen, I’m just a normal person. And everyone’s fine. I had such a hard time rigging the lots to beat them all. Yen wouldn’t stop grumbling to the very end.”

“Business as usual, then. Invite me to the wedding. Well, till later.”

“Wha—?! A-Allen!”

I ended the transmission to find Her Royal Highness watching me from her hiding place behind Chiffon. “Fine,” she grumbled. “Be that way. I know you can’t stand me. Even at the Royal Academy, you only ever doted on Lydia. Glance.”

Stella and Ellie didn’t know what to make of her. His Majesty would weep if he could see his daughter in this state. Actually—and frighteningly—he would probably try to turn it to his own ends.

“I really do owe you,” I told my former classmate, forcing a grin. “I was racking my brain for a way to get your help.”

Cheryl’s face brightened till it shone—the light mana escaping her notwithstanding. “F-For you, Allen, I’d—”

“And most importantly, I missed Chiffon.”

Her Royal Highness froze. Her eyes lowered. She shook. Then...

“Allen, how could you?! I swear, I won’t hold back this time! I’ll have you for my retinue if it’s the last thing I do!”

She ran off down the corridor, wailing at the top of her lungs.

Just like our school days. This really takes me back.

The boundlessly loyal white wolf rubbed its head against my legs, then took off after the princess. My students and I were still basking in the wholesome glow when a pale shape darted past outside the window. Stella let out a cry as a lovely girl soared in and clung to her. Alice had returned from exploring the

ruins of the Old Temple with Tina and Lynne.

“You’ve grown, Saint Wolf,” she muttered bitterly. “A grave offense. And you’ve been guilty since we met, enemy.”

Stella lowered her gaze and moaned in embarrassment.

“Y-You’re awful!” Ellie half sobbed.

I averted my gaze and took out my pocket watch. It was almost time.

“One question, Alice: is Marine Crocodile in the city?” I asked the Hero, who was still accosting Stella.

“Not since the Great Tree went berserk,” she replied. “She’s been crying her eyes out at the bottom of the sea all this time.”

“Has she, now? Thank you.”

The Saint had told the truth. Which made Alicia...

“Coalfield” and “Coalheart.” One more thing to investigate once I get back to the royal capital.

Alice released Stella, so I handed the Hero a small bag. “Fresh-baked pastry. I take it you’ll be leaving soon? Till we meet again.”

“Mm-hmm. Thanks. Give my comrades my best. See you.” With a faint smile, the Hero leapt out the window, mounted a pure-white sea-green griffin, and vanished into the night. I wondered when I would see her next.

“Stella, Ellie, would you take over for me here?” I asked, distributing more baked treats to my jealous-looking students. “I have a promise to keep. Lady Lydia Leinster has been looking forward to her birthday, even if she tries to hide it.”



“Sir!”

“This way, dear brother.”

Tina and Lynne called to me, waving frantically from where they waited outside the Old Temple. Tina’s hair remained somewhat longer than before—Frigid Crane’s influence, I supposed. She looked as though she’d grown up just a

little.

I returned my students' waves as I approached. "The water dragon left this?"

Just ahead of the girls, impossibly intricate wards stretched over the path leading to the Old Temple.

"Yes!" Tina replied. "Niche Nitti says it's already sanctified, and except for Atra and the other great elementals, no one can enter the heart of it without your permission!"

"Dear brother, did you know the townspeople have started calling you 'the water dragon's emissary'?"

I did my best to laugh. Almost everyone in the city seemed to have seen or heard the water dragon's advent the day before, and I had found myself an object of reverence even at the Nitti mansion.

This calls for a dedicated disinformation campaign. I'll ask Niche to whip one up later.

While I hardened my resolve, Caren and Lily arrived.

"Thanks for waiting, Allen."

"Now get ready to greet today's leading lady!"

"W-Wait!" cried the scarlet-haired young woman cowering behind them.

"Caren! Lily! I... I'm not ready ye—"

The pair thrust Lydia forward. She'd kept her hair long and wore a casual yet trim ensemble in pristine white and scarlet.

"Gorgeous," Tina and Lynne gasped, spellbound, while the maids raised a cheer.

I stared at the scarlet-haired noblewoman. In spite of myself, words failed me.

"Wh-What?" Lydia toyed bashfully with her hair, eyes upturned.

Something dashed out of the temple's center and struck my legs.

"Allen!" two little girls cried. One had white hair, the other, scarlet, and both twitched their beast ears in delight. Atra and Blazing Qilin—Lia. Apparently, she had been lying beside Atra when they woke up that morning. Lydia had named

her. Perhaps her manifestation reflected their growing affinity?

“We didn’t find anything to worry about nearby, but please be careful,” Caren reported while I rubbed the children’s fox-and lionlike ears, respectively. Under her breath, she added, “And you’d better not forget *my* birthday.”

“I know. Thank you,” I replied. The world’s most adorable little sister could be needy as well as kind.

“I’ll step aside, just for today,” Tina said, showing the mark on her right hand. “*She* says I need to go, anyway.”

Lily and Lynne brought their hands together.

“Dear brother and sister, take care.”

“I’ll be counting on you when my turn comes around, Allen!”

Lily’s remark drew a strangled cry from the two younger girls and a sharp “Never!” from Caren. Soon, they were all play-fighting.

Ah. It’s all finally over.

Calming myself, I held out my hand to the platinum-haired young noblewoman. “Tina, if you would.”

“Yes, sir!”

Once the shallowest of mana links allowed me to sense Frigid Crane, all of my preparations were complete. I clasped the hand of the eighteen-year-old young woman who had grown up a step ahead of me for another year in a row.

“Well then,” I said, “shall we, Lydia?”

A moment passed. Then she replied, “Yes, Allen.”

The burble of running water became the first sound to reach my ears in the sanctified zone. Clear rivulets dotted the landscape. What little architecture remained was swiftly vanishing. The blessings of dragons surpassed mortal comprehension.

The children hopped merrily from stone to stone, and we two followed in their wake. Lydia said not a word as we went. Was she nervous?

The heart of the Old Temple had already shed all signs of human presence. It held only a gushing spring and a single slender, radiant sapling—a new Great Tree.

I released the young woman's hand and leapt into the very center.

"Once, a principe lived in this city," I said, reciting the truth I'd pieced together from Nieto's information. "He was strong, capable, a friend to the elementals. Above all, he had a kind heart. And unfortunately, he came up with an idea. He wanted to walk with a great elemental."

The city of water—the Millennial Capital—had possessed more magical expertise than any other land. And as a result...

"He coveted the Great Tree's power and sought eternal youth...never guessing that he'd walked into a trap."

"A trap?" Lydia repeated slowly.

"Set by the 'Black Saint.' She planned to steal the Marine Crocodile, one of the Eight Great Elementals—and the 'Cornerstone' that shielded the city of water. She tricked the principe and sent the World Tree on a rampage. A superhuman team defeated it, but they failed to subdue it."

Atra and Lia began to sing. Myriad drifting lights lent a dreamlike cast to our surroundings.

"The enemy waited for the principe to call on the great elemental's aid. But his sense of duty ran deep. Grasping the full picture, he sacrificed himself without a word of excuse to his furious subjects. He hurled himself into the black gate that stood in the Old Temple's innermost sanctum and stopped the Great Tree's rampage. At the same time, he freed the Marine Crocodile from her yoke"—Lydia held her hair down against a sudden breeze—"and inherited her role. All while accepting ignominy and damning his own memory, a sentence heavier than death. Maybe his resolve was what convinced two dragons and Linaria to lend him a hand."

I recalled Niche's note. The last principe had shown unparalleled courage. In the aftermath of his mistake, he had still striven to defend his people—even at the cost of his good name and everything else he had to give. The ultimate self-

sacrifice. He had been a true ruler. And for the great elementals...

I closed my eyes and called, “Lydia.”

“Y-Yes?!” The scarlet-haired noblewoman stood to nervous attention, blushing as she hung on my words.

“I racked my brain, but I couldn’t think of anything,” I confessed, scratching my cheek. “Then the last principle told me the answer.”

I spread my arms wide, and a burst of scarlet, azure, and violet mana increased the Great Tree sapling’s light. Atra, Lia, and Frigid Crane sang a blessing, although the latter couldn’t manifest physically. The fountain of mana glimmered—and I unleashed my spell formulae.

I could sense Lydia gasp.

A many-colored wave of flowers spread out from the sapling, blanketing the temple’s watery floor. A cool, clear wind picked up, and countless petals danced beneath the light of moon and stars.

I smiled at the young woman standing frozen, both hands clasped to her chest. “I’ve found my present to you this year: this promised garden I made just for Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword. Happy birthday. I guess this makes you older than me again.”

Lydia remained dead silent, eyes downcast.

U-Um...? Did that not go over well?

My confidence shook—a moment before Lydia wrapped me in a tight, tight hug. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a tearful blue-haired girl holding hands with Atra and Lia.

Oh, I see.

“This isn’t playing fair,” Lydia grumbled, pressing her head against my chest.

“Does it strike your fancy?” I asked.

“Unbelievable. Don’t ask questions with such obvious answers. Thank you, Allen.” The scarlet-haired noblewoman buried her face in my chest and whispered something I couldn’t make out. (““A couple that spends a birthday

together in the Old Temple will never part.' I hope that charm grandmother taught me really works.")

While I slowly stroked her head, Lydia looked up. Demanding tears welled in her eyes. Softly, I leaned down for a kiss.

A gentle breeze stirred innumerable flower petals into another moonlit ball. The lights danced in merry delight, showering unmingled blessings on the joyful young woman.





Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been another four months. Volume twelve! You know, I really thought I'd miss my deadline on this one.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although I've made my usual revisions. Excuse me? What do I even think "revisions" are, you ask? As long as I keep even a single letter, it counts as a revision (he declares with certainty). I recognize that others may disagree.

Now, on to the story. First, congratulations, Your Royal Highness. I cut around ninety pages between the first and final drafts, but you rode out that tempest and made your first appearance in the main plot since volume seven's epilogue. I couldn't be happier for you. Saint Wolf might have run off with most of your page time, but you survived, and that's what counts! Can't we call this a victory, practically speaking? No, more than that! You've won a shining triumph!

But unfortunately...you've sided against me, the author. My only allies in this book are Io and the false Saint. I hope they both keep up the good work next volume.

Announcement time: volume six of *Henkyō Toshi no Ikuseisha* (*The Mentor in a Frontier City*) hits Japanese store shelves on the same day as this book. This volume concludes the series, so please, give it a look!

I also plan to launch a new series this fall. This one will have cura providing illustrations again. The leading lady couldn't look better!

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. Once again, I gave you *so many* headaches this volume. I promise I'll shape up for the next one.

The illustrator, cura. The cover, the color and interior art—all perfect! The final illustration blew me away. I look forward to working with you on my new series too.

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look

forward to seeing you again. In the next volume: a new season comes to the royal capital.

Riku Nanano



“Sir!”

“Dear brother!”

“We came
to help you!”

Duke Howard's second daughter

Tina

Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen's tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.

Duke Leinster's second daughter

Lynne

Lydia's younger sister.

Lynne is a prodigy who learned to cast the supreme spell Firebird—albeit imperfectly—and placed second in the Royal Academy entrance exams.

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Promised Garden

12



“Heh heh heh...”

Lily

“S-Sir, um...”

“D-Dear brother,
well...”

Lynne

Tina

“Now, Allen,
tell me what
you think.”

Allen's younger sister

Caren

This wolf-clan girl achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits. She acts as a second tutor to the younger girls.

Faithful servant of the false Saint

Viola Kokonoe

A mysterious girl who calmly executes the false Saint's orders. She wields an antique sword forged in a vanished country.

"No more chitchat. Make a good show of your last stand, now? Not that it will help."

Crescent Moon
Alicia Coalfield
The legendary Shooting Star's lieutenant, long believed dead. She has fallen into vampirism.

"How insulting. I hope you realize that fighting me means death."

Black Blossom, apprentice of Floral Heaven
Io Lockfield
Among the Church of the Holy Spirit's apostles, he wields power second only to Alicia. He assassinated Robson Atlas at the Fortress of Seven Towers.





“Happy birthday.
I guess this makes
you older than
me again.”

“Unbelievable...
Thank you,
Allen.”

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Author

Riku Nanano

Illustrator

cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Promised Garden



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“We came
to help you!”

“Dear brother!”

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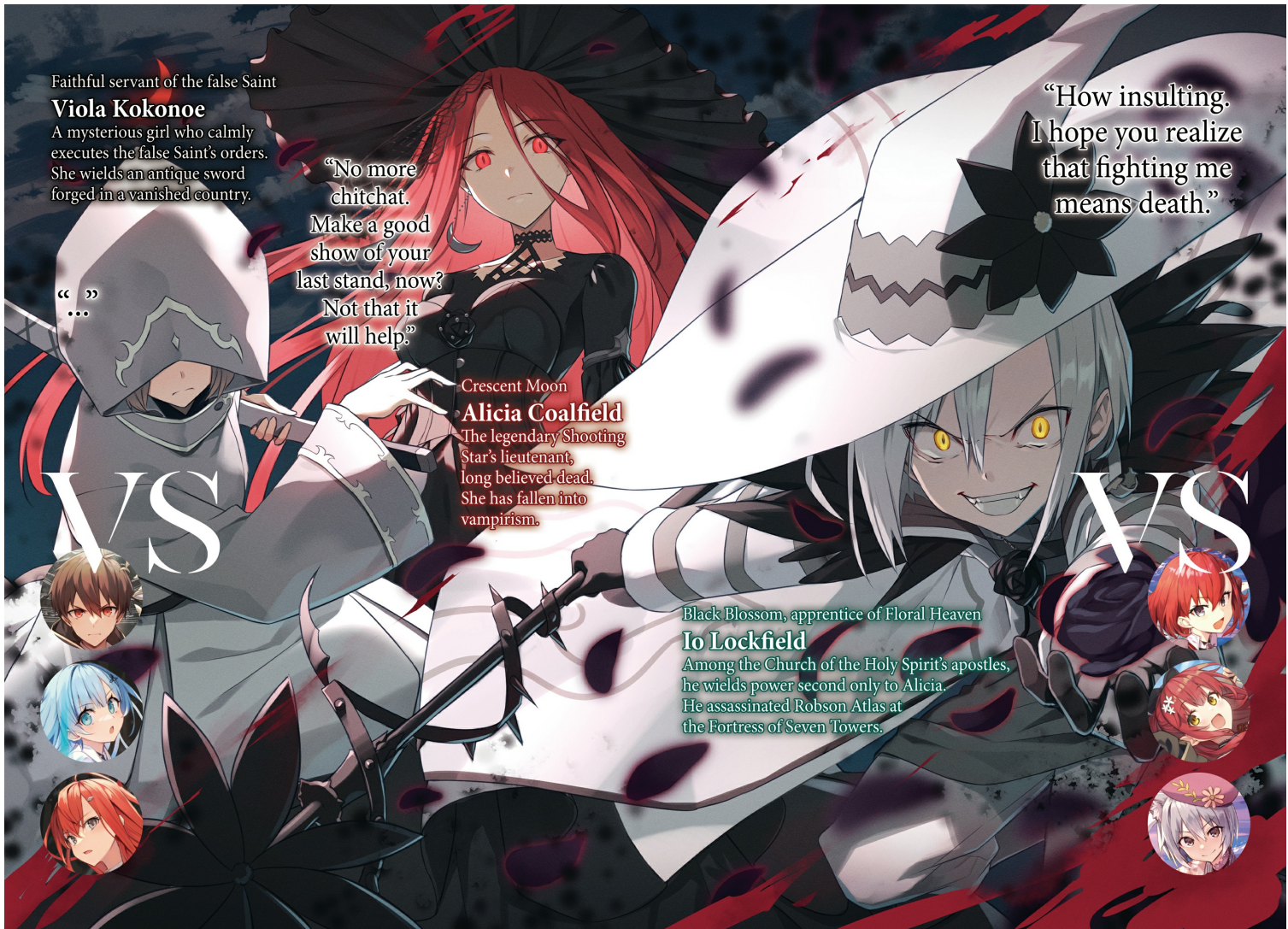
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Private Tutor to the
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“I... I mean,
I *am* Lady
Tina's maid.”



Tina's personal maid

Ellie

Tina's maid is the granddaughter of the Walkers,
hereditary servants of the House of Howard.
Her talents blossomed while she received lessons
from Allen alongside her mistress.

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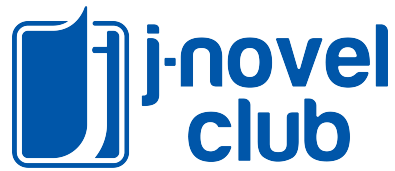
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by Riku Nanano

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